

# Solange De Santis

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Documentary film traces the stories of Irish Jews

By Solange De Santis

Amherst, Mass.

"Who knew?" – that Yiddish-inflected phrase, usually accompanied by an amazed look and a shrug, well describes just about any film in the Yiddish Book Center's 2006 Winter Film Festival, *Jews in the Diaspora*, which features Jewish communities in such unlikely places as Tunisia, China and India.

The initial documentary, *Shalom Ireland*, is a charming, one-hour look at the small Jewish community of an island nation far better known for its conflicts between Protestants and Catholics.

*Shalom Ireland*, released in 2003, was made by Pacifica, Calif.-based filmmaker Valerie Lapin Ganley, who married an Irish-American, stumbled across the Irish Jewish Museum on a visit to Dublin and discovered her heritage included great-grandparents who were the first Jews married in Waterford.

The film opens at the museum, where guide Joe Morrison is explaining in his musical brogue to a small group of visitors that "no matter where you are, a Jew is a brother to another Jew."

Joe and his wife, Cleo, keep a kosher household, just like the two generations before them, shop for special foods such as matzoh at the few remaining Jewish shops and worship at the oldest synagogue in Dublin, on Adelaide Road.

Jews have been in Ireland since at least 1200, according to written records, and possibly before. In the 1700s, Spanish Jews fleeing the Inquisition arrived, but the major migration occurred from the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century when Russian and Eastern European Jews fled persecution.

We also see another elderly man, Joe Briscoe, making challah (egg bread) for the Friday night Sabbath supper, but his calm baking pastime contrasts the tumultuous history of his family and its involvement with the founding of both Ireland and Israel.

As a young man, his father, Robert Briscoe, was deeply affected by the plight of poverty-stricken Irish Catholics, oppressed by British rule. As Morrison commented, many Irish Jews "had a similar sense of Irish Catholics being victimized by their history."

In the 1920s, the elder Briscoe was a close colleague of Irish rebel leaders Eamon De Valera and Michael Collins and ran guns from Germany to the Irish Republican Army. "From 1922 to 1924, there was a price on his head," related his son. He was arrested, but released since the authorities weren't sure who this shadowy Briscoe fellow was and "they couldn't visualize a Jew" as an Irish revolutionary, he said.

When the Irish Parliament, the Dail, was established, Robert Briscoe was elected in 1927 and served as a legislator until 1965. In 1956, he was the first Jew elected Lord Mayor of Dublin and one of the most amusing parts of the film is newsreel footage of his visit to New York City. A clueless newsman asked Briscoe, who radiated warmth, dignity and a vibrant personality, whether he realized some Americans thought it was "amusing" that a Jew was Lord Mayor of Dublin. "Why should it be amusing for a man of the Jewish faith to hold office in Ireland? The Irish people are civilized and fair," he responded.

Joe Morrison's Polish forebears settled in Limerick in 1914 - an odd choice, he thought, since it was the site in 1904 of the most serious outbreak of anti-Semitism in Ireland. A Catholic priest stirred up anti-Jewish feelings with a sermon containing racist rumors and some shops were attacked – but also defended by some members of the priest's congregation. It was an isolated incident, apparently. Growing up in the 1920s, Morrison said, "I never experienced any anti-Semitism among my friends."

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However, Ireland's record on accepting Jewish refugees during World War II was "very poor," according to historian Dermot Keogh - only about 100 were allowed to enter. So Robert Briscoe and Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky smuggled hundreds of Jews into British-controlled Palestine, flouting quota laws. Jabotinsky also travelled to Ireland to learn intelligence-gathering and guerrilla tactics from the Irish Republican Army that he could use against the British in the drive for a Jewish homeland.

At its peak, after World War II, the Jewish community in Ireland numbered about 5,000. In the 1990s, it had declined to 1,200 and the two Joes took divergent views of its chance for survival. Morrison, who died in 2002, saw the community dying out in 50 years; Briscoe saw a possibility of renaissance.

In 1999, the Adelaide Road synagogue was deconsecrated as its dwindling congregation merged with another. The film documents the emotional service as the Torah scrolls are carried for the last time past worshippers who reach out to touch and kiss the velvet covers.

But hope emerges with the profile of a young couple, Carl Nelkin, from Ireland, and Judy Charry, from New York, who hope to raise their baby daughter, Jessica, in an Irish Jewish environment. In the last few years, international companies have brought Jewish employees and their families to Ireland and efforts by Irish Jews to encourage immigration have borne some fruit. The 2002 census for the Republic of Ireland reported an increase in the Jewish population to 1,700.

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