

## Jewish Historical Studies

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### Book review:

*Perlzweig: Pioneer of British Zionism*

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Perlzweig: *Pioneer of British Zionism*, Maurice L. Perlzweig, edited by David Caute (Elstree: Vallentine Mitchell, 2019), ISBN 978-1-910-38395-7, pp. 224, £40.

On Thursday, 17 January 1985, in an over-cluttered Manhattan apartment, alone but surrounded by the accumulated paperwork that represented a lifetime of service to world Jewry, there died Rabbi Dr. Maurice Louis Perlzweig, sometime Director of International Affairs at the World Jewish Congress (WJC), before that minister of the North-Western Reform Synagogue (Alyth Gardens, London), and before that minister at London's Liberal Jewish Synagogue.

These appointments alone would surely entitle their holder to a place in the history of the Jewish people. But when we also remember that Perlzweig was that rarest of "Liberal" Jewish clergymen (or women) in the first half of the twentieth century – a pronounced, unashamed, and vocal Zionist – it is more than a little surprising that no biographical study of him has yet appeared in the quarter-century and more since his death. It is this gap that David Caute's study of his uncle – Maurice Perlzweig – is designed to fill.

Perlzweig's birth ought to have taken place in London, where his Austrian-Galician Yiddish-speaking father, Asher, held a succession of posts in Orthodox synagogues. His Yiddish-speaking mother, Sara, did not trust English maternity arrangements and insisted on returning temporarily to Poland, where Perlzweig was born in 1895. As a young man, Perlzweig excelled in his studies, reading history at University College London and later studying Hebrew and Aramaic at Christ's College, Cambridge. He had already come to the attention of Claude Montefiore, a founder of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue (LJS), and it seems that it was due to Montefiore's patronage that he was appointed a minister at that establishment (1924) and at its North London affiliate, serving in both until 1938.

The three "M"s who founded and helped nurture the LJS (Claude Montefiore, Lily Montagu, and Israel Mattuck) were all completely unapologetic anti-Zionists, and we tend in consequence – perhaps too easily – to label the LJS as a bastion of anti-Zionism. In one sense that is certainly what it was. But then we must factor Perlzweig into the equation. Early in life, Perlzweig had turned his back on what he regarded as the over-ritualized Orthodoxy of his father but embraced the left-wing Zionism

then rampant in London's East End. At some point during the Great War, Perlzweig had joined the Labour Party of Ramsay MacDonald and Sidney and Beatrice Webb. What attracted him was not the prospect of a political career (he reportedly turned down several offers to stand for Labour in the elections) but – as he saw it – Labour's commitment to social justice. And that also was how he saw Zionism: as a movement to achieve a measure of justice for the Jews.

It was this same passion that fired his interest in the World Jewish Congress, of which he may quite rightly be regarded as a founder (1936). In 1940, Perlzweig resigned the pulpit to become involved full-time in the work of the WJC in New York, from where (initially as head of the WJC's British section) he launched himself into a remarkable if exhausting series of international initiatives focused primarily on Holocaust rescue efforts. After the war, he served as the WJC representative on the United Nations' Human Rights Commission and, in the 1950s, as a WJC vice-president. All this work brought him into contact with some of the international celebrities of the mid-twentieth century: Churchill, Einstein, Weizmann, Lawrence of Arabia, even the British fascist leader Oswald Mosley.

Perlzweig left no memoir but in 1981 and 1982, he recorded fifteen interviews with Dr. Peter Jessup of Columbia University's Oral History department. David Cate has edited the abridged transcripts and now presents them with a short, pungent biographical introduction. So while this is not a full-length biography, as an erudite and unpretentious account of Maurice Perlzweig's outstanding career it is the next best thing.

*Geoffrey Alderman*