

The new Research Fellow in Russian-Jewish History

DR FRANÇOIS GUESNET, who has just joined the Centre as a Research Fellow in Russian-Jewish History, grew up near Cologne. European history was a live issue in his family – his father was from Normandy, and his mother an ethnic German who had lost her home in Pomerania when it became part of Poland. The fact that several relatives are distinguished historians – one of them, Gottfried Schramm, being a historian of Eastern Europe – encouraged François to study Romance and Slavic Languages and East European History and specifically to learn Russian, first at the University of Cologne and then at Freiburg. He spent a year in Warsaw in 1984, when the country was politically stagnant after the fall of Solidarity, to learn Polish and carry out research. It was while consulting archives in Warsaw that he identified Jewish history as a natural growth area for a young historian such as himself. Most Jewish historians had left Poland in 1968, and very little had been done in the field for forty years. He wrote an undergraduate dissertation on Jewish acculturation in nineteenth-century Poland based on his archival findings.

On graduating in 1990 he immediately went on to write a PhD thesis on ‘The Polish-Jewish Community in the Kingdom of Poland During the Nineteenth Century’, complementing his earlier work by examining communal structures and asking why so little acculturation – or at least assimilation – had in fact taken place. Eighteen months in archives produced enough material concerning traditional organizations – *hevrot* – and modern forms of self-organization devoted to various fields of communal life, to explain why Polish Jewry might have been so admired by Western European Jews for its confidence and stability.

The traditional leadership of Jewish communities in Poland, the *kahal*, was outlawed in 1822, but an informal community leadership emerged, often gravitating around the local *Hevrah Kadishah* – ‘holy fraternity’ or burial society, a pattern quite common also in Russia. This arrangement was apparently accepted by general consent, due to the traditionally high probity of their members. Some burial societies had been denounced in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for corruption, but such behaviour cannot have been the norm in view of the central role they later played. This system was outgrown only when city communities found themselves with too many people for so ad-hoc an arrangement: Lublin was home to 15,000 Jews, Lodz to 100,000 and Warsaw to 300,000. This research appeared in book-form in 1998.

Between 1996 and 2002 Dr Guesnet held a post in Leipzig, where he helped to set up the Simon Dubnow Institute for Jewish History and Culture. But he spent 1998-9 in Jerusalem studying *Shtadlanut* in Poland, Germany and France – Jewish communal leaders’ intercession with non-Jewish authorities. This institution was central to the Jewish political tradition

throughout Europe. During 2002 he was at the Centre for Advanced Judaic Studies in Philadelphia, in 2003 at University College London, and in 2004-7 at the University of Potsdam, where the Jewish Studies programme has, astonishingly, some 350 registered students.

In Oxford Dr Guesnet plans to carry out research on three key questions relating to Russian Jewry. The first is the extent of Jewish reliance on the highest administrative court in Russia – the Governing Senate – whose predominantly favourable decisions in matters involving Jews may have inspired the institutional trust that led Jews to invest in the legal representation necessary to appeal to this body.

The second question is the development of Jewish political networks in late Tsarist Russia, and the extent of their interaction with equivalent bodies in Central and Western Europe. Communications were opened in particular after the violence of 1881-2 between lay leaders and journalists in East and West, which lasted until the Russian Revolution. These can be traced in particular through correspondence in the press, exemplified in Britain by the work of spokesmen such as Israel Zangwill (the Anglo-Jewish novelist) and Lucien Wolf (the historian and political activist).

Lastly, Dr Guesnet plans to explore the image of Eastern Europe among the Western European public, and to ask what motivated Jewish leaders such as Sir Moses Montefiore, engaging in communal service on an international scale from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, to turn their attention to Jews in Russia as well as in the Maghreb and other Oriental lands. There seems to have been friction between the reality and the Western image of Jews in the European peripheries. Community leaders and intellectuals both in the East and in the South became suspicious and even resentful of what they perceived as paternalism.



Dr François Guesnet

A Governor's New Year's Honour – and a Holocaust Memorial

THE CENTRE CONGRATULATES long-standing Governor Michael Garston on receiving an OBE 'for charitable services' in the 2008 New Year's Honours List. As Chairman of the Trustees of the estate of Leopold Muller he has been involved in channelling some £30 million to charities in this country over the past twenty years. The Centre's library was named the Leopold Muller Memorial Library following a £1 million donation from this fund.

Leopold Muller arrived in Britain from Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1938. His wife and two daughters perished in the Holocaust and he never remarried. Being a caterer he soon embarked on establishing restaurants in London including the Czech Restaurant in Edgware Road in London (part of Portsea Hall). His entire business career was devoted over a period of fifty years to creating successive chains of hotels and restaurants, finally with the De Vere Hotel and Restaurant chain floated on the London Stock Exchange in 1964 and ultimately taken over by Greenall Whitley in 1984. Mr Muller died in 1988 leaving his fortune, apart from some personal bequests, to UK charities selected by his Trustees at their discretion. He was concerned that his wealth created in England should be given to UK charities in recognition of the opportunity given to him in his adoptive country.

The roughly 300 charities which received help from his estate are devoted to medical research and clinical treatment, projects for youth, the aged and education, including museums and national heritage. There was a substantial donation to the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich.

Projects at Oxford, besides the Centre's library, have included new student accommodation at Oriel College, the funding of the director's post at the Refugee Studies Centre, and support for research at the Electrophysiological Laboratory of the John Radcliffe Hospital, including the computerization of its medical records at the hospital's library.

Michael Garston, who has been involved in Jewish communal activities since he was at school, continues to be active in a number of important charities (including the Foundation at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and the Brain Research Trust supporting the Institute of Neurology) and has been appointed to the Chancellor's Court of Benefactors of the University of Oxford for his work as a Trustee.



Michael Garston, OBE

A recent conference at the Centre



THE INTRIGUING figure of Elijah Levita (1469-1549) was the subject of a conference held at the Centre on 17-18 December 2007. It was organized by Dr Joanna Weinberg with assistance from Dr Jean Baumgarten, a former visiting scholar of the Centre and Director of Research at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris.

Elijah Levita (in his Yiddish guise Elie Bocher, Latinized by Christian readers as Elias Germanus) was arguably the most influential Jewish scholar of the sixteenth century. Born in Germany, he spent most of his life in Italy, mainly in Rome in the home of Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo, whom he taught Hebrew and for whom he transcribed mystical writings of the Jewish tradition. Later he went to Isny in Bavaria where he worked with the Protestant Christian Hebraist Paulus Fagius. Apparently at home in different religious and geographical settings, Levita finally returned to Venice where he died and was buried in the Jewish cemetery on the Lido. Levita was practically a household name among Christian scholars. In his own lifetime his works were translated into Latin by a host of Protestant followers including Paulus Fagius and Sebastian Muenster. Jews too read his grammatical treatises, and debated his ideas about the late invention of the Hebrew vowel-points, a controversy which

Peter Da Costa's fifteen years as Bursar

I MET DAVID PATTERSON in the summer of 1992 for an interview and thought the post of Bursar at the Centre sounded interesting. I seemed to have the relevant financial and management experience, having worked in the accounting and life-insurance industry, and I was attracted by the challenge of becoming involved in both education and charity activities. In addition, David was so charming and persuasive, how could I resist?

The past fifteen years at the Centre have been far from dull. As I mentioned to Peter Oppenheimer at a leaving-reception, every one of my files tells a story.

I have tried to see my role as one of support and guidance to the Governors, President, Fellows and Staff in achieving the academic and financial goals of the Centre. Quite a lot has happened since I arrived, and it is worth recalling a few of the changes.

The Centre has gained hugely in academic status and recognition. It is now a Recognized Independent Centre of Oxford University, with its particular one-year Master's course in Jewish Studies entirely taught and administered by the Centre. It has been a special pleasure to support the growth of the Library over the past fifteen years and to see its research facilities increase in quantity and quality, with the acquisition of several collections.

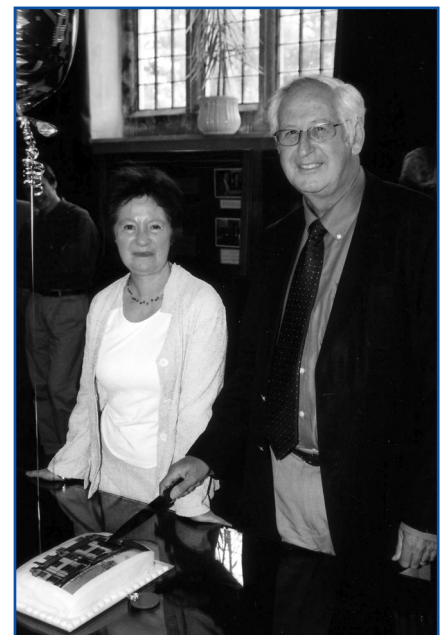
The properties and accommodation of the Centre have been transformed. We now have secure space at the Oriental Institute for our Fellows in central Oxford, replacing the former offices in St Giles'. The Yarnton campus is in good shape, ready to house hopefully increasingly numerous students and visiting academics. I was delighted to be present at the handover of the completed Manor Farm buildings on 4 June 2007: the idea of converting these derelict buildings was first mooted some ten years ago, and both building phases were completed to budget and on time, itself a cause for pride.

Despite our share of financial worries (my hair turned white during these years) the Centre has both survived and flourished financially. Detailed changes have been addressed over the years, ranging from mainly computer-linked technological ones to those related to new legislation, especially concerning finance, accounting, charity, employment and health and safety regulations. In addition, proper pension arrangements are now in place for all employees. The Centre has some substantial assets, though it still faces the perennial challenge of raising income to meet its annual budget.

I am grateful to the President and Governors for their counsel and support particularly on financial matters; to the Fellows – both permanent and visiting – for their lectures and seminars; and to all the Staff for their help and for making my role so worthwhile.

I look forward to retirement and wish the Centre every success under its new President, when Peter Oppenheimer retires, and the dual Bursars Stuart Carroll and Simon Ryde who share that role from 1 July 2007.'

Peter and Moira Da Costa



resounded among Jews and Christians for centuries.

The conference brought together a team of distinguished scholars from Britain, America, Israel, France and Germany, each of whom shed light on the many diverse fields of literature and scholarship of which Levita was a master. He was a grammarian of Hebrew and Aramaic, a lexicographer of Hebrew, Aramaic and Yiddish, a poet and an expert in the transmission of the text of the Hebrew Bible (Masorah). This is the first time since the publication of Gérard E. Weil's *Élie Lévitte: Humaniste et Massorète 1469 – 1549* in 1963 that an attempt has been made to probe the *persona* of this highly gifted Jew and to examine his literary output in a comprehensive manner.

The papers given at the conference were innovative and yielded fascinating, hitherto unknown information and assessments of Levita's work and personality. Proceedings of the conference will be published. The organizers of the conference are indebted to the James Mew Trust, the Pusey and Ellerton Trust, the Oxford Unit for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, the sub-Faculty of the Oriental Faculty, the Fondation pour la mémoire de la Shoah, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, and the Valmadonna Trust for their financial support of this most successful event.

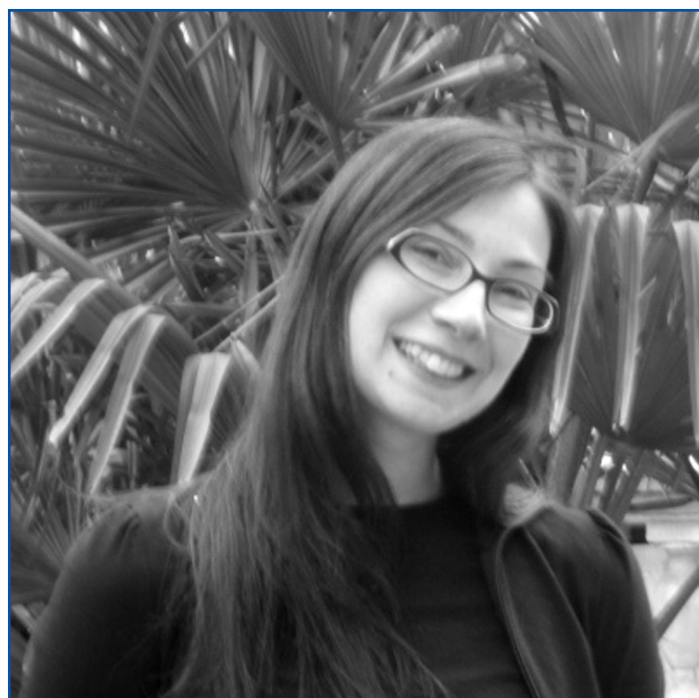
Dr Francesca Bregoli joins the Centre

THE CENTRE'S NEW JUNIOR RESEARCH FELLOW brings with her a formidable range of skills. Dr Bregoli grew up in Modena and became interested in the history of religions after studying Latin and Greek at school. Her focus was initially linguistic, and she mastered Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic as part of a course on Hebrew and Jewish Studies in the faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Venice.

Her third undergraduate year was spent at University College London on an Erasmus Scholarship, and there her horizons were widened by studying Midrashic literature under Dr Joanna Weinberg, now a Fellow of the Centre, and Jewish historiography under Dr Ada Rapoport-Albert. She also happened to be a contemporary of the Centre's Deputy Librarian, Dr César Merchan-Hamann, who was then beginning his PhD. Her undergraduate dissertation consisted of an annotated Italian translation of an early-thirteenth-century mystic classic, *Ma'asei Bereshit* by Ele'azar of Worms, a leading figure in the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* group of Rhineland mystics, which has since been published in 2002 in Genoa. The work contains descriptions of creation, including angelology and texts related to earlier Heikhalot literature, as well as an account of the 'ascent of the soul', interwoven with meditations on the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet seen as the agents of divine power.

For her Master's degree Dr Bregoli moved to the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York. She initially intended to focus on the art and material culture of Ashkenazi Jewry in order to prepare her for museum curatorial work, and accordingly spent time in the Judaica Museum of the Hebrew Home for the Aged in Riverdale, Bronx. Here she curated exhibits on Jewish amulets, synagogue textiles and ceremonial art. However, at JTS itself she was encouraged to use her special knowledge of Italian Jewry to organize an exhibition of Jewish decorated wedding poems from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italy at the Jewish Theological Seminary Library. This proved a turning point.

By the time she went to the University of Pennsylvania for



Dr Francesca Bregoli

her PhD, she had resolved to concentrate on Italian Jewish history, exploiting her knowledge of the background and her linguistic skills. In her thesis she examined the impact of the Enlightenment on the Jewish community of Livorno in Tuscany during the eighteenth century. This was then the largest Western European Jewish community outside Amsterdam, representing 10 per cent of the city's population, almost the highest proportion known outside Eastern Europe. She looked in particular at attitudes of members of the Jewish lay elite towards Enlightenment thought and culture, and towards the state's absolutist policies regarding the Jewish community.

Jews, it was previously assumed, were well integrated into general society. Dr Bregoli's research showed that some scholars, such as the bibliophile Joseph Attias or the physicians Mordechai de Soria and Joseph Vita Castelli, aspired to be part of a neutral cultural sphere animated by humanistic and universalistic values inspired by the Enlightenment tradition. Jewish merchants, for their part, sought to enter into a neutral socio-political sphere by reason of their wealth, property ownership and refined taste. But in practice both the Tuscan state and Jewish communal leaders preferred to maintain national separation. Paradoxically, although the Enlightenment tended to influence European powers to release Jews from discriminatory laws, Jews in this case continued to be associated with an *Ancien Régime* corporate system.

Dr Bregoli traced the complex relationship between Jews, Tuscan authorities and Jewish leaders through Jewish communal records and court cases, as well as through the dedications and approbations found in Hebrew printed books. These documents suggest that debates about Jewish integration in Italy were coloured by the fact that Tuscan Jews were sufficiently acculturated not to need the 'improvements' urged, for instance, on French and Prussian Jewry. Livornese Jewish leaders themselves saw little reason to espouse change for its own sake and rarely supported the reformist efforts of individual members of the community. The state, for its part, preferred the Jewish community to remain corporate in structure, since granting individual rights to Jews would make them collectively extremely powerful.

In Oxford Dr Bregoli is now teaching early-modern European Jewish history from the Spanish expulsion to the *Haskalah*, and looks forward to teaching Jewish-Christian relations from the early Middle Ages to the late eighteenth century. Her interests also include a course on Mediterranean Jewries, especially their links with the Western Sephardi diaspora in Europe – such as Amsterdam and London – and with the New World, including both North and South America and the Caribbean. Her long-term research plans include a study of the networks of communication and cultural links between Livornese Jews and Sephardi communities in the Mediterranean and England.

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