Obituary: Professor Sigbert Prais 1928 - 2014

The economist and social scientist of British Jewry Professor Sigbert Prais died on 22 February 2014, aged 85. In the 1960s and 70s he had produced demographic studies of the British Jewish community and thereafter maintained his interest in Jewish sociology as a member of the Advisory Board of the Jewish Journal of Sociology and as a Trustee of the Maurice Freedman Research Unit until 2006.

Professor Prais was born in the Eastend (Ostend) of Frankfurt-am-Main in 1928, the eldest of four sons, but left Germany in 1934 and settled in Birmingham. There the family set up a successful business in the metal working industry and also made a significant contribution to Jewish life in Birmingham.

Having obtained a first degree at the University of Birmingham in Commerce, Prais gained a PhD at the University of Cambridge. In his twenties he made enduring contributions to econometrics: the modelling of economic data which displays dependent and independent variables, the analysis of the size of business, the measurements and shape of household expenditure, the reference points for the cost of living. He went on to hold positions in the University of Chicago, the IMF in Washington and the National Institute of Economic and Social Research in London. He also spent a year in Jerusalem under a United Nations technical assistance programme, advising the Government of Israel on statistical techniques.

In his early thirties, Prais returned to Birmingham for ten years to work in his family’s factory as finance director. It was during this period that he began to apply his economics skills to the benefit of Jewish statistics and demography. Beginning with an (unpublished) survey of Birmingham Jewry, he made a major contribution to professionalizing the collection and analysis of Jewish demographic statistics for Britain.

At the seminal two-day conference ‘Jewish Life in Modern Britain’ in April 1962, he had lamented that ‘there is hardly a single figure that can be quoted with any firmness for the Jewish community of Great Britain today’. In November 1965, as a direct response to the 1962 conference, the Board of Deputies of British Jews set up the Statistical and Demographic Research Unit (later renamed the Community Research Unit), where Prais became a member of the supervising committee, and honorary director and then consultant for the following nine years. In that time he determined the direction of research and established the regular compilation of the annual statistical demographic series, which continues to this day at the high standard he established and which provides British Jewry with a unique resource.

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Prais honed the unit’s techniques for collecting data while at the same time leaving behind a legacy of detailed description of Britain’s Jewish population in the 60s and 70s. His investigations were published as papers in various volumes of this journal, as set out in the bibliography at the end of this obituary. His “careful and dogged” approach to the work was noted by Professor Ernest Krausz.

In Britain religion is not noted on birth certificates and until 2001 the decennial British census contained no question on religion. Assessments of the vital statistics of the British Jewish population had therefore to rely on indirect measures. Figures on births, marriages, population size and deaths were all compiled by the Unit under Prais’ direction.

Regarding the birth rate, Prais and Schmool (1970) collected data from statistical returns from “authorized Mohalim” who, at that time “ritually circumcised virtually all Jewish male children”. This to a large extent overcame the conundrum that official statistics took no account of religion.

In 1967 Prais introduced a refinement to a method which had been used on occasions prior to then to estimate the Jewish population: estimating the size of the living population by its deaths. Drawing on pre-war studies (by A. Ruppin) and post-war studies (of Switzerland and Montreal, Canada) in respect of Jewish mortality rates compared to those of the general population, Prais observed that the Jewish mortality rate was lower by between 5 to 15 per cent. He therefore employed a 10 per cent increase in his estimates for the British Jewish population while allowing a margin of error of ±5 per cent. This method of estimating the Jewish population, with an adjustment for the lower mortality rate, was continued more or less unbroken until the introduction of the religion question in 2001.

The process for obtaining the figures for Jewish deaths across Britain was also established as part of the process for deducing population size: information was provided upon request by the Jewish burial societies of London, twenty London crematoria and ninety provincial burial organisations. A process for obtaining statistics on Jewish marriages was also put in motion: the records of the Chief Rabbi’s office, the Sephardi synagogues, the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain and the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues were all studied.

The picture of the Jewish population of Britain that Prais’ studies produced sometimes concurred with that of communities in other parts of the world, but there were sometimes striking differences: the figures for marriages under synagogue auspices between 1901 – 1965 were noted as being abnormally low when compared to Jewish communities elsewhere.
It was suggested that the then ongoing decline in synagogue marriages was attributable to the rise in civil marriages. In 1971 the average family size in Britain was 2.1, whereas the average Jewish family size was lower at 1.72. But at that time, as today too, the right-wing orthodox group stood out “on all indicators as having a higher fertility than the rest of the Jewish community.” Finally, by 1961, the Jewish population of Britain appeared to have lost its unskilled social class – there were no Jews recorded as being in unskilled occupations.

When Prais left Birmingham in 1970 he continued his work in London and wrote the ground-breaking “Synagogue Statistics and the Jewish Population of Great Britain, 1900-70”. He returned to the theme of trends in British Jewish population in 1977 with a conference paper assessing the 15 years since the earlier conference.

Outside his professional sphere, Prais’s enthusiasm for Jewish sociology and anthropology remained to the end. He could not infrequently be sighted in oriental synagogues enjoying the Eastern melodies and had a particular passion for the music of the Moroccan singer Jo Amar.

**Bibliography of S J Prais’ Jewish Sociological Writings**
