

THE JEWS OF OXFORD

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TO BARBARA

who always asks the right questions

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PREFACE

As Anglo-Jewish provincial communities go, Oxford was a relatively late arrival and has not been of great importance in itself. As a market-town, Oxford had no great attractions for Jews. The City had a tightly organized corporation, which restricted the opportunities for trade, and Jews seem to have found for many years that the one Jewish talent which was of interest to the University, expertise in Hebrew, was most easily practised if they became Christians. When a small community did come together, around 1840, it was mainly founded on clothes-dealing, where contacts in other centres were of importance, though it rapidly switched to tobacco-dealing and trade in watches and jewellery. also characteristic Jewish trades of the period.

The town community thus established lasted about sixty years, without a great deal of diversification, and petered out shortly after 1900. But the Jewish character of Oxford had already been sharply affected by the arrival of Jewish undergraduates from 1869 onwards, and it was this undergraduate community which constituted Jewish Oxford until the Second World War. The story of its attitudes has a contribution to make to the dominant theme of Anglo-Jewish history, the relationship between Jewish and English identities.

The influx of German refugees and evacuees from London in 1939-40 produced a substantial community operating under wartime strains, and even after the war, the town congregation was a great deal larger than it had been in the nineteenth century. On this foundation there was gradually added a new professional community of a 'Home Counties' type, by no means only connected with the University, although the University's expansion contributed and the needs of the student body were decisive in planning and financing the new Oxford Jewish Centre. As we reach the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation, we are unusual in being a growing community. We are unusual in another respect. So far, we have largely been spared most kinds of fission, and our unique institutions provide equal rights to all denominations of Judaism.

In a desultory way, I have been collecting material to tell this story for some time. Its foundation has been the minute-books, which has some disadvantages, particularly since some of them never existed and some were destroyed by enemy action. The gaps have been partly filled by

unsystematic reading of the *Jewish Chronicle*. I am not a trained Anglo-Jewish historian, and have only realized some missed opportunities when it was too late to remedy them. Some themes have been crowded out by the shortness of time at my disposal; in particular, I have hardly taken the internal affairs of the undergraduate community beyond 1939.

I started by thinking that I had one special qualification as historian of Oxford Jewry, in that I have been President both of the University Jewish Society and of the Oxford Jewish Congregation, a distinction I share only with Neville Laski. It has not been as much of a help as I had hoped. I have come to realize that there are excellent reasons why the content of congregational histories tends to thin as they reach their end. I have not concealed anything very dreadful or embarrassing, but the need for discretion and politeness starts very soon after 1940. That my story of the most recent history is reticent about individuals is not so much a matter of discretion; it is caused rather by the impossibility of including all those whose work has gone to build the community. The gap will be filled by another book, *Then and Now: A Collection of Recollections*, edited by Freda Jackson.

I have had help of many kinds from many people. Of the dead, my greatest debt, personal and historical, is to Cecil Roth. Among the living, I single out Raphael Loewe, as a repository of oral tradition, Lionel Kochan, who always turned out to own the book I needed, Miriam Kochan, Helen Lewis, Madeleine Ginsburg and Peter Oppenheimer for encouragement and help. Ron May added to his other services a final reading of the typescript; errors of style which remain will be due to my obstinacy. I have bothered many other people. Particular advice is mostly acknowledged at appropriate places, but I also have to thank Robert Carvalho, F. Ashe Lincoln, Daphne Jacobs, and Bill Williams. Nothing would have been possible without the resources of the Bodleian Library and the Local Studies Section of the Oxfordshire County Libraries. The dedication registers a fraction of what I owe to the prime mover.

Oxford, November 1991