

CHAPTER ONE

BEFORE THE CONGREGATION

Although this book is written to commemorate the foundation of the Congregation in 1842, it should not be imagined that the history of modern Oxford Jewry begins in the 1840s. This chapter will show that there is a fair amount of evidence for Jewish residence in Oxford well before then, at one time so ample as to make it likely that there was Jewish worship there, at least in private houses.

The story of the medieval Oxford Jewish Congregation is no part of my subject. It is well known, and has been fully studied by Cecil Roth.¹ I have no ability or wish to attempt to enlarge on it here. On the other hand, although the beginnings of the modern settlement have also been already studied twice, the evidence for them is steadily expanding and they are an integral part of my subject.²

The first reappearance of Jews in Oxford is connected with the revival of Hebrew studies in England, and those scholars and theologians who were interested always appreciated the desirability of finding Jews to teach Hebrew and assist in the purchase and cataloguing of Hebrew books.³ In Oxford, this last became particularly important when Sir Thomas Bodley started to put his library on a firm footing; in 1607 he was looking for help from Jews. Before the official resettlement of Jews in England, these were necessarily always converts. The first known, Philip Ferdinand, a Polish Jew born in 1556, first a Catholic and then a Protestant, was admitted to the privileges of the University in 1596, and taught Hebrew in various colleges and halls before migrating to Cambridge. We cannot even put a name to the Jew whom Bodley was hoping would help in cataloguing in 1607, but in May 1608 we find a convert, Jacob Wolfgang, from Germany, admitted as a reader in the Bodleian, followed in November 1612 by a Jacob Levy. We hear rather

more of Jacob Barnett, who, after a short period of teaching, returned to Oxford in June 1613, prepared, he said, to submit himself for baptism. The date for the ceremony was fixed, but Jacob decamped; the preacher designated to deliver the baptismal sermon had to change his theme to the Perfidy of the Jews.

Others of the period are little more than names, which begin to cluster more frequently during the Commonwealth period, with the Puritans' overpowering interest in Jewish matters. Two converts were supported by the local Baptist congregation, and Jacob ben Samuel, later Reader in Hebrew at Sion College, London, though eventually converted, made a point in the 1650s of only eating meat of his own dressing.

There may have been others who were less professional. A famous entry in Anthony Wood's *Life and Times* reports that, in 1650, 'Jacob a Jew opened a Coffey House at "the Angel" in the Parish of St. Peter in the East, Oxon; and there it was by some, who delighted in noveltie, drank'. It is unfortunately not clear whether he is the same as 'Cirques Jobson, a Jew and Jacobite, borne near Mount Libanus', who, in 1654, 'sold coffee in Oxon in a house between Edmund Hall and Queen Coll: corner'. If he is, there is a serious possibility that he was not a Jew at all, but a Syrian Jacobite or Maronite, and that his customers were confused about his origins.

At this time there began Cromwell's dealings with the Jews which led to the Resettlement. Hostile gossip, not traceable to Oxford, extended to the proposition that he would have been prepared to sell, not only St. Paul's Cathedral, but also the Bodleian Library to the Jews, but they did not offer quite enough.⁴

The Restoration of Charles II did nothing to impede the process of Jewish resettlement. The first professing Oxford Jew of modern times was Isaac Abendana,⁵ one of a pair of Marrano brothers from Holland. He first visited Oxford on 3 June 1662, but thereafter resided in Cambridge until 1676, where he was maintained to make a Latin translation of the Mishnah. He kept up contact with Oxford, in 1668 receiving £37 from the Bodleian for a consignment of books and manuscripts, and eventually moved there permanently. He registered at the Bodleian on 26 April 1676, but there is no consistent trace of him until he starts appearing in the Magdalen accounts as Hebrew lecturer at the end of 1689, generally paid £2 a year. He taught also for Trinity, and possibly for other colleges as well, and clearly did much else, the permanent remains of which are his almanacs of 1692–1699, notable steps in the publicizing of Jewish knowledge in the Christian world.⁶ Presumably he was paid for these,

but he also had charitable supporters, notably Arthur Charlett, Master of University College, to whom we owe the account of his death in Oxford on 18 July 1699.

His death introduces us to a different kind of visitor, 'a merchant Jew, happening very fortunately in town' who 'took away his body for London'. The accounts of Bevis Marks Synagogue record the name of this merchant, Ishak Gomes, and payment to him of £9/18/0 for his expenses in bringing the body from Oxford and the burial. Mr. Edgar Samuel identifies him as Ishak Gomes Henriques, naturalized in 1694, and tells me that he seems to have been close to Alphonso Rodrigues, diamond and East India merchant. Though Gomes was described as a poor Jew in 1696, he rapidly became prosperous, contributing £7 to the rebuilding of Bevis Marks.

The next Hebrew lecturer at Magdalen from 1706 to his death in 1709 was Philip Levi, a convert. They considered one Isaac Bernard of Prague, but do not seem to have thought well of him; 'he is not only a Schmutz (as the Spanish Jews call those of Germany – but a Rogue into the Bargain'. Magdalen paid Aaron, an old Jew, £4 p.a. from 1726 to 1734, and then took on Mark Moses Vowell at the same rate between 1748 and 1751; Vowell was also Lecturer of Queen's, getting £6/10/0 p.a. from there. There has been some uncertainty whether Vowell was a Jew, but Dann, who assigns him the highest place among these Hebrew teachers, feels certain that he was and not converted. Bishop Percy, who was taught by him in spring 1750, had no doubt that he was a 'Poland Jew', converted at Oxford.⁷

Others had a wider variety of talents. There is a good deal of information about the convert David Francisco Lattes or Lates, who taught, not only Hebrew, of which he published a grammar at the Oxford University Press in 1758, but modern languages and music as well. He died in 1777, but his family can be traced for two more generations in his son, James Lates, violinist to the Duke of Marlborough, who can be claimed as the first Oxford Jewish composer, and his grandsons, John James (1770–1831), who matriculated at All Souls in 1776, subsequently becoming Rector of Sudeley, and Charles (b. 1771), another composer, who matriculated at Magdalen in 1793.

What had brought the merchant Ishak Gomes to Oxford in 1699 we do not know, and there is a long gap before we actually find professing Jews living in Oxford. A register of circumcisions in the records of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue records in 1740 the circumcison in Oxford of Joseph, son of Hyam Levy, who had two more sons

circumcised there in 1742 and 1750. Hyam Levy lived in the parish of St. Peter in the East, but we have as yet no clue to his occupation. He was in some unspecified legal trouble in 1743, which was 'discharged for uncertainty' and fined 2s. 6d. in 1748 for not repairing the paving before his door. By that year, he had been joined by yet another family, since he acted as godfather in that year to Alexander, son of Saunders. A proselyte family in Oxford is recorded in the same register, without name or date.

Besides these Sephardim, there seem to have been other families in Oxford in the 1740s, perhaps Ashkenazim. When Levy Andrew Levy, already in business in America by 1760, was living in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1771, a stranger, son of Hyam Gast, arrived and claimed relationship with him, claiming that they had been brought up in the same street in Oxford. When it turned out that he was a 'convict', that is, had been transported to America, he was shown the door. Though Levy doubted the relationship, he did not deny the plausibility of the story.

This gives us four or five resident Jewish families for the late 1740s and, since they went to the trouble and expense of bringing a *mohel* from London for circumcisions, I find it inconceivable that they had no regard for other needs of Jewish life and did not co-operate in assuring themselves facilities for prayer and kosher meat. This is without allowing for others who might have regarded Oxford as a base. It was certainly a very suitable centre for the well-known pattern of development in Anglo-Jewish provincial history, in which pedlars frequently attached themselves to more established Jewish groups, returning to them as a base for the Sabbath.⁸

Jewish pedlars do seem to have been already familiar in the Oxfordshire countryside in 1753.⁹ In that year, the Jews' Naturalization Bill caused an outburst of politically motivated antisemitic propaganda, not least in Oxfordshire, where the election of that year was particularly hard fought. The propaganda concentrated on national Jewish figures, and, although we can extract nothing from the literature about real Oxford Jews, there is a stray reference to 'all Jews wandering in Oxfordshire'.

1753 is also an important date for the local historian, since it saw the establishment of the first regular local newspaper, *Jackson's Oxford Journal*. From now on, aided up to 1790 by the indexes to be found in the Local History section of the City Library, we have the opportunity of looking for Jewish names, though the coverage is inevitably restricted to those whose business activities were substantial enough for them to

consider advertising them or to those who got into trouble or found themselves connected with it.

The haul is remarkably slim, and there seems to be no link with the community of the 1740s. Though the most recent investigator of eighteenth-century Oxford Jewry draws a picture of steady growth free of external hostility, my own present picture reverses this. It seems to me possible that the events of 1753 may have suggested to the Jews of Oxford that it was time to move on. We have already seen that by 1771 at least two of them were in America, though one had gone involuntarily, and the rest of the eighteenth century has little to suggest even the beginnings of a community.¹⁰ It may be that, when Levy Andrew Levy was taken prisoner by Red Indians in 1763,¹¹ he temporarily regretted his decision to move.

There are, however, various individuals of interest. Mayer Lewis, 'operator for teeth' and perfumer, is first attested in 1767, when he was lodging with grocer Seely opposite Balliol, and treated the poor free. He later had his own premises in Pennyfarthing Street and in High Street (at the present no. 107, opposite Brasenose), before moving to London in 1774; he returned for at least two short stays. Before moving to London, he diverged from the norm for such practitioners by actually publishing a book in 1772, dedicated to the Gentlemen of the University: *An Essay on the Formation, Structure, and Use of the Teeth, with a Supplement, containing the necessary Directions and Instructions for cleaning and preserving them, wherein The Opinions of some ancient and modern Writers on the Subject, will be impartially considered.*¹²

A contemporary had a different way of making a living. Marcus Wolfe, of High Street, St. Clements, was in December 1768 forbidden all commerce with the gentlemen of the University for various offences greatly prejudicial to the youth of the place and injurious to the good order and discipline of the University. The particular offence was trying to persuade a Christ Church undergraduate to buy sugar on credit and sell it to him for cash, but various other things, suspicious dealings in chocolate and second-hand clothes, were mentioned to the Vice-Chancellor's Court.¹³ It seems reasonably likely that he was the 'Jew pedlar' Wolfe, who with his brother was expected to give evidence against Lee Elkington, hatter, in January 1771, but who absconded before the trial; there was, however, ample evidence against Elkington on another charge of stealing cloth, and he was transported for seven years.¹⁴ It looks as if Marcus Wolfe lived very close to the edge of the law, but he was still listed in the Oxford Survey of 1772.

I had originally associated him with a report that ‘suspicious-looking Jews were arrested at Truro, Falmouth, and Oxford among other places’ in December 1771 in the course of a hue and cry for the remnants of a Jewish gang, who had committed a famous murder at Chelsea in June, but I can as yet find no contemporary evidence for Oxford in this story.¹⁵

Another family low down the social scale emerges from newspaper reports. There are various references to persons called Manuel, Manell and Emanuel, who between 1765 and 1790 are found in business near Gloucester Green and ‘seem to have specialized in the care of lost or strayed dogs and horses, and their return to their owners for a consideration’.¹⁶ They provide one of the rarely identifiable cases of lower-class Sephardi assimilation,¹⁷ since Sarah, daughter of Isaac Manuel, a servant, married Thomas Hicks, a servant, at St. Michael’s Church, Oxford, on 15 July 1776.

The most substantial Jewish family in numbers and status in late eighteenth-century Oxford was the Isaacs family. The family story¹⁸ was that a certain Dr. Raphael, ‘Professor of Music’, came to England in the reign of Charles II, and had a daughter Eva, who died in Oxford on 28 December 1794, allegedly at the age of 105. After a first marriage to a Mr. Davis at the age of 12, she was married again at 21 to Issachar Barnett. Her daughter Sarah Barnett (1739–1809) married Henry Isaacs of Oxford in 1762; Henry was 23.

London synagogal registers call Henry’s father Meir Englander; he had another son besides Henry, David Isaacs (David ben Meir Oxford). Henry and Sarah had twenty children, who can be traced in many connections. For us, the most interesting are Rosetta (1765–1828), known to family tradition as ‘the Belle of Oxford’,¹⁹ and Barnett, the most permanent resident of Oxford.

When they start appearing in the local press, Henry has evidently been living in London. In November 1784, he advertised himself as a salesman from London, who ‘has removed from the Eagle and Child to his son’s house in Gravel Walk, nr. Magdalen College, where he continues to buy ladies and gents cast off clothes. His son sells all kinds of foreign fruits, nuts, confectionery, etc.’²⁰ By 1791 Barnett Isaacs was living in Smith’s Place, High Street (on the site of the Examination Schools). In 1796–7 he is on the list of subscribers to David Levi, *Form of Prayers for the Feast of Pentecost According to the Custom of the German and Polish Jews*.²¹ Henry seems to be in London on that list, together with a large number of other Isaacses. Apparently he came and went. In what is probably 1794, he is the first Oxford Jew I have found in a trades directory, under the name of

Henry Isaac, 'Clothes seller'.²² In 1797, Henry and Barnett are conjoined in an order of the Oxford Council that 'The solicitor is to write to Mr. Isaacs, sen. and his son, the jews, to cease carrying on any sort of trade within the liberties of the city'.²³ What they had done to attract the attention of the Council after so long, I have no idea.²⁴ But Henry continued to live in Oxford, where he died in Ship Street in 1812; 'Being an Israelite he was immediately placed in a shell and forwarded to his Synagogue for interment according to the funeral rites of that people.'²⁵

We have no clue as to when Barnett Isaacs died or left Oxford. The last of the Oxford Isaacses was L. Isaacs of Oxford, who subscribed to Sailman's *The Mystery Unfolded* of 1817;²⁶ he appears to be the Lewis Isaacs, jeweller and pawnbroker, first attested in Cheltenham in 1823, where he took a prominent part in the foundation of the Synagogue and died in 1841.²⁷

Apart from the Isaacses, the record is desperately thin. Oxford had no particular attractions for the shopkeeper compared with Cheltenham or Bath. There is an isolated report in 1808, when the Curate of Holywell reported one Jewish family in his parish,²⁸ and there is another possible Jewish family put together by Roth²⁹ from circumcision records. Jacob ben Abraham Cohen Oxford (but the reading is not certain) circumcised in 1785 and David ben Jacob of Oxford circumcised in 1824. Nothing as yet can be said about them.³⁰

The interest switches back to the Hebrew teachers, fully discussed by Roth. By the early nineteenth century, they are apparently much less inclined to convert to Christianity. Moses Sailman indeed, described as of Oxford in 1804, but moving on to Southampton, published an anti-missionary book in 1817. The only other one who was certainly a resident local figure was Solomon Strassburg (1747-1817), 'a man of singular habits', who made 'occasional excursions on foot to Bath, Cheltenham, etc., and always conducted the expenses of his journeys, and of his whole system of life, on the principles of the most rigid economy. Although possessed of considerable property in the funds, he never could be induced, on any occasion to deviate from this plan; and so extreme was his penury that at the time of his death he was without a shirt.'³¹ He has left no written record of his teaching.

Two more productive teachers, in terms of books, were H.V. Bolaffey and Solomon Lyon.³² Bolaffey taught both at Oxford and at Eton, Lyon at Oxford, Eton and Cambridge. Lyon's Grammar was in use, not only in the Christian world, but also among Jews; it turns up several times in the record of Jewish education compiled for Chief Rabbi Adler in 1845.

The most interesting literary product of his family, however, was his daughter Emma's *Miscellaneous Poems*, printed for her by J. Bartlett at Oxford in 1812. The poems are correct, though not particularly inspired; there is some subdued Jewish content. The family was evidently in trouble: 'The piercing thorns which still spring in our rugged path, force me to yield to the glaring eye of day the employment of my lonely hours. It is the only means in my power of contributing to the support of a large family, the object of my tenderest solicitude.' The enterprise was surprisingly successful; she secured a subscription-list, headed by the Prince Regent, for 421 copies at 10/6 each. Though there were 120 subscribers in Oxford, there is not a single Jewish name among them. I doubt whether Emma actually resided in Oxford, as Roth thought; her father clearly moved around a great deal; in 1815 he seems to have settled in Cheltenham.³³

The last of this sequence is Selig Newman, who is said to have taught at Oxford while Minister at Plymouth. He is evidently the 'S.N. of Oxford', who wrote to the *Voice of Jacob* in 1842;³⁴ by that year, Oxford Jewry had entered on a new phase.