

CHAPTER TWO

THE CONGREGATION ESTABLISHED

No certain connection can yet be found between anyone mentioned in the last chapter and those visible in the first decade of the organized community in the 1840s. There is an ambiguous intermediary, Israel Levy, listed in *Pigott's Oxford Directory* of 1830 as a clothes-dealer in St. Ebb's Lane. He cannot be the same as the Israel Levi born in 1819, who is first attested in Oxford in 1846; there is at least one possibility for another linkage. That other Jews had been going and coming appears from the appearance in the Birmingham Census of 1851 of Marquis Mier, son of Joseph Mier of Swansea, born at Oxford in 1832, and Henry Harris, son of Isaac Harris of London, born there in 1839.¹

Greater certainty comes with the first Census of 1841. I may have missed some isolated names, but it is clear that there were then only three Jewish households in Oxford. They and their families would constitute the nucleus of the Oxford community for the next twenty or thirty years. Wolf Harris, then 35 or so, perhaps Isaac's brother, had already been living in Oxford in January 1839, when his son, another Henry Harris, was circumcised by an official from Cheltenham.² He was born in Lambeth, and in 1841 he was living at 54 St. Ebbe's, with his father Moses aged 65, his wife Esther, born in the New Cut in Surrey in 1811, and two children. There was some family connection with Canterbury. A few steps away, at 25 Queen Street, was an older man, Harris Levi, born 1785, possibly the son of the Israel Levy of 1830. He and his wife Anne (Hannah), probably born in 1806, had married in Poland, where their two daughters had been born; they had come to England after 1826. The elder daughter, Sarah, was already married to another Pole, (Isaac) Jacob Cohen; they were both 20 and living in the house, as was the younger daughter Malca (Mathilda), now 15. The third household,

that of Isaiah Wo(o)lf, lived a few streets to the south in Pensons Gardens. The household was incomplete on Census night. Evidently, Isaiah, born in 1795, and at least one older son were away travelling, leaving Catharine Woolf to make the return for herself, her daughter Leah and two younger sons. The whole family had been born in Poland, except for the youngest son Levi, who was born in London in 1834. The family had thus come to England before that year and to Oxford since.

Two points immediately call for notice. First, the two Polish families; the conventional view is that such immigration starts in the 1840s, when the railways made travel from Eastern Europe easier. Secondly, every adult male from Moses Harris down to Jacob Cohen is described as a clothes dealer. We have already seen Marcus Wolfe and Henry Isaacs similarly engaged in the previous century. This trade was peculiarly Jewish, and fulfilled a vital function in providing clothes for the lower classes by resale or remaking, either on the spot or by sending the material back to the centres of manufacture of 'shoddy'.³ It looks as if at least the Wolfs were searching for clothes outside Oxford. Fuller details of the Oxford Jewish trades will be found in Appendix A; it will be seen that the clothes-dealers gradually moved over to being cigar-dealers or jewellers or both at the same time, until Jews came to dominate the Oxford jewellery trade in the 1860s.

We have seen that the group was, in 1839, still dependent on Cheltenham, at least for circumcision. Until now, the date of the foundation of the congregation has been given as 1841. This date cannot be traced back beyond the first edition of the *Jewish Yearbook* in 1896. It was certainly known in the 1890s that the congregation went back fifty years or so. A more precise date was inferred by C. Duschinsky⁴ from the fact that Isaac Jacob Cohen was authorized by Chief Rabbi Herschell as a *shochet* in March 1842, with the express condition that he should not function in Oxford (*gam shelo lishchot bOxford*). It appears therefore that there was already a duly authorized functionary there, which is a criterion for the existence of an organized community. In deciding when to celebrate our 150th anniversary, we have adopted 1842 as the earliest safe date.

Who did Isaac Jacob Cohen learn the laws of ritual slaughter from, and whose priority was not to be infringed? The Cheltenham *shochet* is a possibility, but Cheltenham seems a little far for regular visits. It might have been his father-in-law Harris Levi, whom we shall find described as a 'Rabbi' in 1844. But the logic of the situation suggests that the tiny group may already have felt the need for reinforcement by someone with

the necessary skills. They clearly could not afford a full-time official; whoever did the job would have to combine it with other activities. The probability is that there had already been reinforcement, and there is a suitable candidate who must have arrived in Oxford very soon after the 1841 Census.

Our most vivid evidence for the young community comes from a tragedy which occurred on the night of 26–27 February 1844.⁵ In 9 St. Ebbe's Street, across the road from Wolf Harris, there lived Aaron Jacob or Jacobs, aged 54. The neighbours said he had been there for two or three years, and, though he is absent from the 1841 Census, he is indeed attested in a trade directory of 1842. With him lived his wife, his son Nathan, aged 18, who had recently come from Poland and spoke no English, and two daughters, Rebecca, aged 16, and Rachel, aged 11; there was apparently a third daughter, who did not sleep at home that night. The local belief was that Mr. Jacobs was of the tribe of Levi and a Rabbi; it will appear likely that he was in fact performing some ministerial functions.

There were also two lodgers, a Mr. and Mrs. John Tubb. These slept on the first floor in a large room; the family occupied two rooms on the second floor, the mother and daughters in two beds in one room, the father and son in the other room.⁶ Mr. Jacobs was described as a 'remarkably steady man, who bore the best character', keeping a sort of general warehouse; there were various estimates of his financial status, but the stock was substantial enough to be insured with the Phoenix. The groundfloor shop, which had a boarded floor, but a hearthstone and fender, stocked tea, sugar and other groceries. There was also a great quantity of ready-made and second-hand men's and women's clothes; some of these were hanging up, some on the counter, some on shelves above the fireplace. Before going to bed, Mr. Jacobs had counted out £7 and put it in his pocket, where he normally kept his money; there were two or three gold rings in a drawer and apparently some other jewellery.

Before they went to bed, Rebecca had put out the fire and taken the coals out. There was no gas in the shop, and there had only been one candle burning that evening. Nothing more is known till later that night, when Mr. Tubb woke to find flames in the shop and Mr. Jacobs saying 'Dear me, Tubb, what shall we do? Give me a light.' The fire had already alarmed the neighbours; it eventually spread to the houses on both sides. John Price, a butcher, whose stock and furniture were considerably damaged, broke open the shop-door with a cleaver, and helped Mrs. Jacobs, Rachel and Nathan out of a window; they were caught by

Edward Cutliffe, a tailor who lived opposite and knew the family well. Nathan, however, fell on his head and was badly hurt. The Tubbs also made their escape, but it was clear that Aaron and Rebecca had not.

The fire was slowly brought under control. Many years later, it was remembered⁷ that ‘ultimately an old rickety manual fire engine was brought into use, but it was of little service, as it was an intensely sharp frost, and the water was almost frozen before it left the engine’. But it was reported at the time that there was enough water ‘(no thanks to our city water works which were as usual inoperative)’, but several persons were apathetic or indifferent, and declined lending a hand; the local press attributed this to the fact that they had in former fires been shabbily treated by the Fire Offices. Aaron’s body was seen to be in the shop. Another ‘Rabbi’, a Mr. Levi (presumably Harris), had arrived, and most earnestly entreated that the body might not be touched until *he* had first touched it. A new opening was made to make this possible, and Rabbi Levi, with some peculiar ceremonial, touched the charred and smoking remains and repeated over them a ‘prayer of forgiveness’. He was extremely concerned that all the mortal remains of the deceased should be collected. He claimed custody of them, placed them in a sheet and had them removed to a room in Mr. Price’s house, where they were joined a few hours later by the body of Rebecca, found in two halves in the basement. Rabbi Levi and the other Jews in Oxford were anxious that the burial should take place within twenty-four hours and in London; the local press thought that the need for burial in London arose from Aaron’s being a Rabbi.

Their wish was frustrated by the absence in London of the Coroner, who came in for a good deal of criticism, even in *The Times*. His story was that he had taken advice from a Rabbi Solomon the moment he heard of the disaster, and had been assured that the need to be buried within twenty-four hours would be overridden by the civil law. The inquest was held on the Wednesday, at the Horse and Chair Inn, three doors from the house. Mrs. Jacobs was too ill to give evidence, but made to appear to receive the jewellery which had been found, together with several documents chiefly in Hebrew. The main evidence was given by Rachel, in her twelfth year, in a very clear, intelligent and satisfactory manner. She gave no countenance to the earlier reports that Aaron had escaped, but gone back to secure his property, and was convinced that her father and sister had died because neither would leave without the other. The jury brought in verdicts of ‘Accidental death by fire’ and the bodies were at last removed to London in plain coffins for burial ‘in the Jewish

burying place'.⁸ A number of Jews had been waiting, feeling very acutely the loss they had sustained in the premature death of one, who, as a Rabbi or a neighbour, commanded the respect of all who knew him.

There was apparently another distressing loss, 'a Hebrew Bible, which the Jews held in particular veneration, as it had been consecrated by the High Priest. It had been lately left in Mr. Jacob's custody, and its loss is deeply regretted by Rabbi Levi and the other Jews in Oxford'. The infant community had lost its Sefer Torah. Since it was in his hands, it looks as if he had been performing some ministerial functions. It is made even more likely by the fact that, as we shall see, the Oxford *shochet* in 1845 was a Mr. Jacobs. He can only be Aaron's son Nathan, who officiated at his brother-in-law's wedding in 1848⁹ and who described himself in 1851 as Reader of the synagogue. Given that they were unlikely to have been moving the Sefer Torah through the streets, we can perhaps assume that services were being held in the house, either downstairs in the shop or moving the lodgers out of their upstairs room.

Besides the vivid light thrown on the way in which Aaron Jacobs' operations spanned clothing and jewellery and on the family's way of life, we may note that the general atmosphere, besides the excitement of the tragedy, was one of sympathy, though mixed with a certain naive curiosity about the Jews. The gentile lodgers are certainly noteworthy,¹⁰ and the behaviour of Mr. Cutliffe the tailor was throughout a good deal more than simply neighbourly; there may have been a professional connection between him and Aaron Jacobs. One's feeling of unease about the apathetic bystanders may be misplaced.

Two weeks later *Jackson's Oxford Journal* reported a meeting of the Oxford Auxiliary Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews; it does not seem to have occurred to anyone that it had any local relevance.

Later in the year, the Jacobs family satisfied Oxford curiosity about Jewish customs in a very different way. In August 'the nuptials of Mr. Nathan Jacob (son of the late unfortunate Rabbi who, in March last, with his daughter was burnt to death in St. Ebbe's) and Miss Hannah Wolf, daughter of Mr. Isaiah Wolf, of St. Peter Le Bailey, were solemnised in the garden of Mr. Kemp, mercer, Queen Street, . . . and as invitations had been sent out to large numbers of respectable inhabitants, the garden, as well as the neighbouring ones, was crowded, chiefly by ladies. Around the canopy where the marriage ceremony was performed we noticed the lady of Dr. Buckland [Canon of Christ Church] and family, Mrs. Hall (widow of the late Dr. Hall) and family, the lady of Dr. Symons, Warden of Wadham College, and many other

ladies. The ceremony was highly interesting and was performed by the Rev. Dr. Aaron Levi of London, successor to the late Dr. Herschell [he had not even been a candidate to become Chief Rabbi, whatever the local press thought], assisted by Mr. Pulver, reader of the Cheltenham Synagogue. The service was performed in the Hebrew language. Many of our readers (particularly the fair sex) will, we have no doubt, read with interest the following details of the ceremony which have been handed to us, and which commenced as follows:— The bridegroom was brought under the canopy erected for the occasion by the Rev. Dr. Levi and the father of the bride, when the bride, accompanied by two ladies, was introduced and walked round the Bridegroom three times, during which the reader chanted.’ A summary of the *ketubah* follows, naming a possibly real dowry of 200 pieces of silver sterling. ‘The bride and bridegroom having partaken of the wine which had been blessed by the Rev. Gentleman, and having had the usual blessings of the congregation (a great many Jews being present) bestowed on them, a glass of wine was placed on the ground, which the bridegroom broke with his foot in imitation of what is recorded in the Talmud, on the Wedding of the son of a learned man. . . . After the bride had retired several very handsome presents were given her by many ladies who were present at the marriage.’¹¹

The first clear evidence for the organized community comes in August 1845, when the new Chief Rabbi, S.N. Adler, sent out a questionnaire asking for statistical information.¹² The results have not yet been printed, but are available in typescript.¹³ They report for Oxford a paid shochet, Mr. Jacobs, 4 *ba’alei batim*, no seat-holders and 20 individuals. The synagogue was declared to be ‘a private room’. *Mitzvot* were not sold. The answer to ‘Is there a *mikveh*?’ was ‘Not yet’ (other communities in the same position just said ‘No’). Blanks or negatives were recorded for burial ground, charitable institutions and schools.

The four *ba’alei batim* of 1845 are presumably Wolf Harris, Harris Levi and Isaiah Woolf, who had moved to a better address in New Road, plus either Nathan Jacobs or Isaac Jacob Cohen. Of these Harris Levi died in 1846 or 1847, but the community was about to expand, surely because of the extension of the railway to Oxford in 1844. In 1846 another Polish couple in their late twenties, Israel and Selina Levi, had arrived; he was a cigar dealer at 11 Pembroke Street; by October 1847, they had moved to St. Giles, where he was a jeweller as well as a tobacconist, and had a thirteen-year-old maidservant, who received fatal burns while dishing up the Sunday dinner.¹⁴ Another Pole, Abraham Davis (born 1816)

with a Surrey-born, probably non-Jewish wife, was also outside the original area of settlement as a dealer in jewellery in St. Clements; he had moved to 54 High Street by 1851. The Polish predominance was modified by Abraham Zacharias, born 1817 in Prussia, but with another Surrey-born, but certainly Jewish, wife. He is listed in 1847 as a hardwareman at 68 St. Aldates. Where he was actually living may be more interesting.

The 1851 Census enables us to be a great deal more precise. There were then ten households headed by Jews, predominantly described as jewellers, of which two were married children of the original group; these covered 22 adults and 14 children. One of the families had four Jewish lodgers, two travellers in jewellery born in Poland, one 'Hebrew writer' born in Austria, and a journeyman tailor born in Prussia. On the Sunday night in question, two public houses in Castle Street were being patronized by Jews. At the *Blucher's Head*, there were six dealers in jewellery, two London-born, three from Prussia (Nordhausen and Posen), one from Poland (probably Bialystok), as well as a general dealer born in Amsterdam and a travelling hawker born in London. The Dutchman actually appears in trade directories at that address, and it is possible that some of these 'lodgers' at the *Blucher's Head* were more permanent residents than the three 'travellers', all Polish-born jewellers, at the *Three Horseshoes* down the road. There are a few more possible names.

Paradise Square 1847-??

In 1845 there was no synagogue.¹⁵ It is not quite clear when the first synagogue was established in Paradise Square. Roth¹⁶ has '1847, if not earlier', which seems to be a mistaken conjecture from the return given in the *Jewish Chronicle* of 1847. There is other evidence. In 1851, for the first and last time, the national Census included a questionnaire on religious buildings. The return for the synagogue was made by Nathan Jacobs, describing himself as 'Reader'.¹⁷ He said that the building had been 'held about 3 years'. He ought to have known, and this fits with the statement we shall shortly come to that it had been 'recently established' in 1849. Although very near the main area of Jewish occupation, Paradise Square itself was relatively new, opened up in 1838, with pretensions to gentility which it never managed to realize.¹⁸ We cannot place the synagogue in it with any certainty,¹⁹ though we may suspect that it was at the north end, where the Zacharias family was living in 1851. Virtually all we know of it comes from this Census return. It was

not a 'separate and entire building'; it had thirty seats, of which only six were reserved. On the morning of the Census Day, Saturday 29 March, 1851, there was a congregation of 10. We do, however, have a description of one service.²⁰

OXFORD SYNAGOGUE

'To turn from the magnificent colleges, halls, churches and chapels, with their ancient splendour and majestic grandeur – with their verdant gardens and walks, rivulets and orchards – down to the lonely, humble synagogue, excites reflections of the saddest nature, but affords also a shade of consolation. The contrast between the rich and princely institutions of the church, on the one hand, and the poor synagogue, on the other, is certainly a melancholy one. In London and in some of the large provincial towns, where the Jews have respectable buildings in which to worship their God, the contrast is less glaring; but here, at Oxford, where we have stayed during this week, we could not help lamenting the smallness of the Jewish congregation in a place the name of which is synonymous with learning and knowledge. There are no more than five or six Jewish families in this place altogether; and these take no interest whatever in collegiate affairs – they are occupied with business. Our learned friend, Rabbi Hirsch Edelman, is the only one who knows anything about learned Oxford, and he works from morning to night at the Bodleian Library. When we visited that vast establishment, and there saw the two greatest collections of Jewish books and MSS which our nation ever possessed (the Oppenheim and the Michael Libraries), we could not resist exclaiming *Mah norah hamakom haze* 'How awful is this place!' But what increased its awfulness was the reflection that there could not be found a Jewish individual or a Jewish institution to purchase these treasures, which are now *buried* in Oxford.

Proceeding on the Day of Atonement to the small synagogue in Paradise Square, which was but recently established by the Jews of Oxford, we consoled ourselves with the idea that these few poor Jews – poor in comparison to the immense wealth of the great founders of the Oxford institutions – after all, congregated to worship the God of Israel, with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their might. There was no choir, no grandeur of any kind, no show and no pomp, yet there was earnest devotion. The poor Jewish travellers in the vicinity flocked to this humble house of worship, to implore pardon from a merciful God, who has set apart this day for prayer and

humiliation. Strange, that the bishop of the diocese (no friend to the Jews, as we all know²¹) had also appointed Wednesday as a day of humiliation and prayer on account of the cholera. We cannot conclude this notice of the Oxford congregation without recording the charitable efforts of this small and humble congregation, and their benevolence to the many poor strangers who visit this town. Much praise is also due to them for their excellent management of the synagogue affairs, which require to be conducted with much economy, on account of the smallness of its income.²²

That Nathan Jacobs described himself as Reader, rather than *shochet*, for the 1851 Census was presumably motivated by the need for a title for the outside world. In 1858, he apparently moved as Minister to Cardiff, already a rather larger community with a new synagogue.²³

The Paradise Square establishment only left one tradition behind it, that of a painful morning when the convert Ezekiel Margoliouth attempted to address the congregation and was howled down.²⁴ It is not clear how long it lasted. It is listed in a directory of 1863,²⁵ perhaps uncritically reprinting earlier material. Moore 1871 (see below), if taken literally, would suggest that it faded out in about 1853, which happens to be a year of reshaping in the neighbourhood, when a church and school were built. The disappearance may be connected with the move of the Zacharias family to 95 High Street, some time before 1861.

As the 1849 report in the *Jewish Chronicle* makes clear, outside interest in Jewish matters in Oxford in this period lay with the recognition of the vast resources of Hebrew manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, which hardly forms part of our subject. It was not quite true to say that local Jews took no interest in them. At least Israel Levi was interested, writing a letter urging support for Hirsch Edelman,²⁶ who had started as a printer and publisher in Danzig and Koenigsberg and had been in Oxford since 1847. In the 1851 Census we find him lodging with Nathan Jacobs and described as a widower of 40, born in Moldava, then part of Greater Turkey, with his trade given as ‘teacher of Hebrew’. Given the number of Jewish children that year, it looks as if the congregation had acquired a second part-time official; he was getting some support for his researches from outside sources.

A strange *Jewish Chronicle* item of January 1853 describes how, not many months ago, a query was put to the Chief Rabbi about the proper day for the redemption of a first-born male child at Oxford, whose 31st day fell on First Day *Rosh Hashanah*. He seems to have got the answer wrong, but this gives us a first-born boy born on 14 August 1852, whose

father or relations cared enough to ask the question; almost certainly he was Levi, son of Lewis Solomon.

There is now a long gap, which can only be filled from scattered evidence. It is clear from the 1861 Census that growth had stopped. I have not checked the suburbs, but the main families now show 17 adults, 6 teenagers in work and 17 children. There is only one new household, formed by one of the travelling jewellers of 1851. The street directories continue to document the trend to jewellery and clock-making, often combined with cigar dealing, but of organized activity there are only occasional visible traces. The death of Isaiah Wolf around 1857 may have removed the community's mainspring. There is however sufficient evidence to demonstrate continued employment of people who were at least *shochetim*.

There was no need to look further for a successor to Nathan Jacobs than I.J. Cohen, who had been licensed as a *shochet* in 1842. We do not know if and where he had been operating as one. In the Censuses of 1851 and 1861, now widowed with four children, he was living in Church Street, St. Ebbes, and described as a jeweller. He described himself as 'Shochet and Examiner here in Oxford' in a book-annotation in the Bodleian in 1862,²⁷ and in June 1864, his eldest loving daughter Leah married Gustav Frankel of Sunderland at a confectioner's premises in St. Giles.²⁸ He also seems to have been working as a librarian. From April 1858 to April 1866 he was constantly calling up manuscript material in the Bodleian, and he published one Oppenheimer manuscript in Warsaw in 1866.²⁹ He left Oxford for Aldershot in that year,³⁰ and remained there, despite complaints about his salary, until 1888.³¹ His successor in Oxford seems to have been one Nathan Aaron, as we know only from the chance that he also acted as locum for Cheltenham in 1866.³²

St. Aldate's ?1871-8

The years of silence are broken with a strangely conscientious *Jewish Chronicle* report of the High Festivals of 1870. 'OXFORD—The attendance at the above synagogue was very good, 25 persons attending on each day of the holidays. The services were read by the shochet Mr. Kronsow, assisted by Mr. Lazarus of Leman Street, London. There was no sermon. There was a little curtailment in the service, the *yotzeh* of the *kedushah* being omitted.'

A guide-book of 1871 reports in its main text³³ 'They worshipped until within the last few years in a small synagogue in Paradise Square, but

have now no public place of assembly in the city', adding in a note at the end 'Jews' Synagogue. A room has been opened for this purpose in St. Aldate's Street, after eighteen years' lapse.' Consideration of street directories suggests that the most likely place for this 'untidy room' (see Chapter Three) was at no. 12 or 13 over the music warehouse of M.E. Slapoffski, one of a few new arrivals of this time. Of these, at least one, Gabriel Davidson, a jeweller, was capable of conducting a service.

This evidence for 1870 or 1871 as a year of revival may be connected with a visit from the Chief Rabbi in May 1871;³⁴ Oxford was only one of several communities he visited for the first time that year, 26 years after his appointment. Though such visits were reported elsewhere by the local press, nothing appeared in Oxford, where the community had a lower profile than in, say, Cheltenham, and we have no details, merely a report that he had 'succeeded in obtaining from the Bishop of Oxford the grant of a site for a burial ground for the use of the Jewish inhabitants, who are at present few in number', and that had to be corrected the next week by a statement that negotiations for the cemetery land had as yet been conducted privately with the Bishop's secretary.