

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Herbert Loewe came into residence at Exeter in autumn 1914, but could not do much before he left for service in India in 1915. On 31 October he was formally introduced to the Society and read a paper on archaeological research in Palestine with special reference to Gezer, passing round exhibits illustrating the results of his own excavations. Tolerant though he was, there was an immediate reaction in the forms of service; it was announced that there would be more Hebrew chanted, kiddush would be performed, and Yigdal sung; on Saturday morning there would actually be an Orthodox service. A suspicious Reuben Levy asked on whose authority the changes had been made and was told that they were only a reversion to the practice before 1912; there was talk of having a choir.

It might be thought that the outbreak of war in August 1914 would have produced an immediate exodus of undergraduates and a sharp drop in activity. In fact, for the first two years of the war, meetings had steady attendances of 10 to 13, though there were fewer of them: three in Michaelmas 1914 (besides Loewe, the Haham on the Oral Law and Brodetsky on the Jewish Outlook), one each in Hilary and Trinity 1915 (Henriques on Oxford and St. George's, Leon Simon on Nationalism and Religion); three again in Michaelmas 1915 (debates on 'Is Orthodox Judaism a fluent movement?' and on Zionism, with Leon Roth and Moshe Eliash thinking that the nationality of Jews had purely a spiritual existence, and a talk by Levy of Jesus on Liberal Judaism). Hilary 1916 saw four meetings, though with only one visitor, the Rev. S. Friedeberg of Liverpool, coming, no doubt, to see his undergraduate daughter; he spoke on 'Some Curiosities of the Higher Criticism'; no one seems to have been tactless enough to mention the *cause célèbre* of the moment, the

summary dismissal of his synagogal colleague for having shown sympathy with conscientious objection.

The first sign of hard times came in February 1916 when the synagogue was required to acquire blinds to black it out against possible air raids; since this would cost £2, the secretary was asked to go to the police station and secure immunity. A more metaphorical closing of the shutters took place in the summer, when a business meeting agreed that Ephraim Lipson would be President and Co-Treasurer, and Baron Franks, who was, apart from Daniel Davidson and Freedson, virtually the only survivor of the town community, would step down to Co-Treasurer; Franks finally left Oxford in November 1917. It therefore fell to Lipson to consider the deplorable condition of the roof. In May 1917 he got an estimate of 60/- for dealing with the guttering and a very pessimistic report about the state of the roof, for which no clear estimate was possible. There was in fact no money about. The caretaker, who was only paid 1/6 a week, wrote increasingly plaintive letters about the months she was unpaid for, and there was a bank overdraft.

For the rest of the war the Adler Society more or less turned into a discussion-group, with a very stable membership of seven or eight meeting practically every Friday evening to read and discuss pamphlets by Jewish thinkers of the day of various complexions; even this faded out after Lipson's departure to the Ministry of Food in March 1918. The group was not particularly united in its views. They considered the desirability of holding part of the service in English. There was allusion to the 'rigid orthodoxy' of Israel Brodie, a young Jews' College graduate doing a B.Litt. at Balliol, and Moshe Eliash, ultimately to become respectively Chief Rabbi and the first Ambassador of Israel in London, but even they agreed that the *haftarah* could be read in English if there was no *minyan*. There was complex thought about the relationship of the Adler Society to the synagogue, culminating in a row when Lipson ruled from the chair that a 'certain freshman who apparently combined a rabid agnosticism with a fervent sense of Jewish nationality' could not join the Society since membership of the Society without membership of the synagogue could not exist. There was some light-heartedness, however. In June 1917 Brodie brought the academic year to an end by delighting the Society with several short sermons delivered in a manner characteristic of preachers known to its members, and the break-up of a meeting by a Zeppelin warning in October 1917 was treated with calm. Whatever reservations some may have had about Zionism, a warm telegram was sent to the Prime Minister in November 1917, thanking him for the Balfour Declaration.

Some further lightening of austerity came from hospitality, above all from that of Mrs. Charles Singer (Dorothy Waley). She and her husband paid off the bank overdraft. She started to come to meetings, a particular advantage to the lady undergraduates, who could only come when she was there to chaperon them, and gave two papers herself. Until the Singers left Oxford in 1920, they had an Adler Society meeting at their house virtually every term.¹ As evacuation from London produced more private residents, others joined in.

A great number of Jews inevitably passed through Oxford during the war, on training or in hospital. The Adler Society was hardly organized to deal with them, though there was talk of getting soldiers to synagogue in autumn 1917. and 40 Jewish soldiers were entertained for Purim in 1918. Someone was around to deal with deaths. The improbably spelt Samson Phinklestin ('particulars unknown, South African papers please copy') died in January 1917, and Lionel Phillips Lipman, formerly of Edinburgh and Bournemouth, in March 1918; the latter at least was buried in Oxford.

In 1918, the increased danger of air-raids in London certainly produced an evacuee population of some size, though it is not clear what their religious needs were. It is not even certain that there were Festival services in 1918, though at least Charles Duschinsky built a *sukkah* at his rented accommodation in Divinity Road, doubtless the first in Oxford for many years. The first sign of any kind of organization came in September, when at a meeting of Jewish residents it was decided to form a Communal Society which would have the propagation of Zionism as one of its main objects; Mr. Berger and Miss B. Davis, 36 George Street, were to be the Secretaries.²

They moved slowly, and it was not until early November that the 'Zionist and Social Society' held its inaugural meeting at a hall at Bridge House, Botley Road, placed at its disposal by the Messrs Berger.³ The proceedings commenced with the singing of *Hatikvah* and an address by the Chairman, Mr. Harry Baker. Letters of congratulation were received from Dr. M. Gaster and Nahum Sokolow. A number of *shekalim* were sold, and the Chairman announced that henceforth there would be lectures, discussions, etc., on Zionism every Sunday evening at seven o'clock, but the main proceedings took the form of a concert, given by six local young ladies and two soldiers. However, the evacuee community clearly dispersed as fast as it had come, and the only other thing that we hear about this Society is in May 1919, when Mr. Baker attempted to transfer responsibility for it to the revived undergraduate community, which was unwilling.

Some form of local organization continued for a little. There was a meeting in September 1919 to organize the services for the High Festivals, which appointed L. Freedson to act as Secretary for the residents, apart from the University Section of the Congregation, and D. Davidson, senior member of the Congregation, as Warden.⁴ In October, Freedson took the initiative in suggesting a war memorial, which was taken up by the Secretary of the Adler Society, who appealed for information about dead members of the University;⁵ the response was evidently unsatisfactory, and the plaque which eventually resulted had no list of names. My own incomplete figures suggest a death-roll of ten to twelve. I single out two from the University, Robert Sebag-Montefiore, who had held part of the mortgage on the building and had been proposing the moving of Jews' College to Oxford or Cambridge in order to improve the quality of the Anglo-Jewish ministry, and F.W. Haldinstein of Christ Church, the editor of *Oxford Prayers*, who had left a deep impression on the generation of 1912-14 for his work for Jewish life in Oxford and at the Oxford and St. George's Club,⁶ and one from the town, Victor Zacharias Jessel, youngest son of Joel Zacharias, who had enlisted at the outbreak of war at the age of 18.⁷