

## CHAPTER SIX

# BETWEEN THE WARS

As we have seen, the history of the community between the wars is virtually entirely an undergraduate story. It has been hard to write, since minute-books for the period between June 1920 and autumn 1937 were destroyed by enemy action. More information has been coming in from the press and from reminiscence until the last minute before publication, which has done much to modify what started as a fairly impressionistic account.

Undergraduates started to return to Oxford from the beginning of 1919, but it was not until May that a meeting, attended by twenty-two people, was able to contemplate any detailed plans for reorganization. It was agreed that arrangements for the synagogue would be in the hands of a sub-committee of the Adler Society, with Ephraim Lipson as its Treasurer, with a separate synagogue subscription of seven shillings a term. It was evidently contemplated that this sub-committee would organize Orthodox services, but that those who did not subscribe to them could have possession of the building for an alternative service at any time when it was not in use.

It was presumably this sub-committee which had the burden of facing the structural problems which Lipson had discovered in 1917; 'It was felt at the time that a minimum of expenditure should be incurred, and with the help of a generous subscription the corrugated iron roof was plugged, the walls repaired and the floor reset.'<sup>1</sup>

The main body of the Society would have weekly meetings on Saturday evenings, and was occupied with problems which money could not solve. A discussion meeting on assimilation in February 1919 had already revealed that the Balfour Declaration had sharpened attitudes on the Jewish future. It would be over-simplifying to talk of a split

between assimilationists and Zionists. The 'assimilationists' were not assimilationists, and genuinely believed in the possibility of an Anglo-Jewish identity, but they were now faced, as they had not been before the war, with a growing number of members who were Zionists in the most practical sense, for example, Herbert Samuel's son Edward. In May, only three weeks after the organization meeting, after two meetings oriented to Zionism, there were mass resignations, and a rump meeting passed a resolution that only non-controversial subjects such as Jewish history should be discussed and that the officers should invite speakers of all shades of opinion in the hope of inducing those members who had resigned to come back. Matters calmed down the following week, when Dr. Gaster delivered an inspiring address in the synagogue and a paper on Jewish historians from the pre-Spanish age to a very large meeting with many visitors, at which Herbert Samuel led the discussion. The term ended happily with a visit from boys from Oxford and St. George's, Basil Henriques' East End club.

The academic year 1919-20 saw some peace-making. Although a motion to confine the Society to the business of a literary circle without busying itself with any Jewish political movement, sponsored by proposers from both camps, was lost, a more acceptable formulation was found: the Society would be open to all Jewish members of the University and meet for the discussion alone of any questions of broad interest to Jews and for the collection and dissemination to its members of information on such subjects. The only remotely Zionist meeting that academic year was a report by Leonard Stein on the situation in Palestine. The gap was eventually filled, in February 1922, by the reanimation of the separate Zionist Society, under the name of the 'Erez Yisrael Society', by N. Sarif and A.S. Doniach, for the purpose of studying Zionism, the Palestine Mandate, Hebrew, and 'the Arabic language and literature'. Whether this last aim was ever carried out is extremely doubtful. In 1924, the old name of 'Zionist Society' was resumed.<sup>2</sup>

Although Oxford figured prominently in Jewish discussion in 1920 as a possible home for Jews' College, the subject was not formally raised in Oxford. The only notice that the Society took of proposals from the world outside was to turn down a proposal from the Central Kashrus Commission to establish a kosher restaurant and boarding house in Oxford; Mrs. Freedson was now providing kosher meals two doors from the synagogue, and this evidently satisfied what demand there was from those who were not provided by train with food from home.

In May 1920 Herbert Loewe came back from India and took up his

academic duties; dreams of a co-ordinating and inspiring personality were now fulfilled. For the eleven years he spent in Oxford, he was a much-beloved and exceptionally open-minded figure, doing his best for Jews of all persuasions and inclinations, though his own position was clear. 'He was the first person to show me', says one survivor, 'that it was possible to be orthodox without being fundamentalist.' He and his wife provided generous hospitality on Friday evening and Saturday lunch-time in his house at 29 Beaumont Street. In the afternoon there was a study-group, and at tea-time open house, followed on the short winter afternoons by the evening service and *havdalah*.

It now becomes easier to document the trend of undergraduates to come from increasingly varied backgrounds. The older families continue to be well represented, but we start to find the children of the great wave of Jewish immigration from Russia in 1890–1905. True working-class origins are attested, e.g. for Marcus Lipton of Merton, later a Labour Member of Parliament. Sons of Jewish clergy included Chaim Rabinovitch (later Raphael), son of a *hazan*, who had combined secular and talmudic education in Portsmouth, and Edgar Duschinsky (later Duchin) from St. Paul's, son of a former rabbi; he was sent to a *yeshivah* in Frankfurt for the four months between the time he left school and his arrival at Brasenose in 1928.<sup>3</sup>

The pre-war Liberal movement had by no means lost its impetus, and we have an account of it from its main reviver, Michael Franklin. 'In about 1923 I "gave" the garden of the synagogue to it and I started Liberal services there with the marvellously generousminded help of Herbert Loewe. Godfrey Samuel (my cousin) was I think a warden of the Orthodox and I claimed as an undergraduate of Oxford who was also Jewish the *right* to hold our Liberal services in the building and Godfrey agreed; in fact I became a co-warden of the whole synagogue. We got Dr Claude Montefiore and Rabbi Mattuck up frequently and my aunt Lily Montagu preached once – a great event. The secretary during my presidency of the congregation was Robert Henriques – no less (the novelist). Once Hertz, the then Chief Rabbi *not* known for his liberal views, came up and out of courtesy I attended his service. He proceeded to preach against me and like a Savonarola pointed to me and said "There is the man who is leading the Oxford Jews to Christianity". I felt rather flattered at the time. . . . I used to make "converts" to L.J. by having our sermons before *our* service but just after the orthodox one so that the orthodox members lingered on and listened to us – but such a devilish trick must be excused, I was only 21.'<sup>4</sup>

A minute book of Liberal services organized by Michael Franklin

survives from 1923. Attendances started with only 6 to hear Claude Montefiore, rose to 19 (including 5 Christians) for Rabbi Mattuck, and thereafter ran at 8, 7, 6, 12 (Perlzweig), 5, 5 ('for first time in history of Oxford Syn., a woman read from pulpit) Annie Samson read "Fires of God" by Drinkwater', 7, 9, 15 2 (Claude Montefiore), 7, ?, 6 + 1, 5. Michaelmas Term started with 19 to hear Lily Montagu, dropped to 7 next week, but then rose to 25 and 26 without the benefit of a visiting speaker. The services were planned afresh each week, with selections from the Prayer Book, printed sermons, various readings including the more optimistic poems of Browning.

What is in fact recorded for 1925-6<sup>5</sup> is a union of the two sections of the community, with both the Orthodox and the Combined services being well attended. A debt of gratitude was acknowledged to R.V. Feldman and Michael Franklin for their efforts in originating and working the new scheme, as well as to Loewe for his help and advice. Addresses during the year had been given by the Revs. E. Drukker, E. Levine and Perlzweig, and Messrs. C.G. Montefiore, Lionel Jacob, and Basil Henriques. The Adler Society had also had a successful Trinity Term.

The Combined services were those on Friday evenings. when there was segregated male and female seating for those who wanted it as well as a mixed section, which disappeared for services the next morning. After a year or so, the Liberals stopped coming in the morning, not so much because of that as because of the length of the Reading of the Law.

Louis Crook, a house-furnisher now living in London, had been left as sole Trustee of the building for too long,<sup>6</sup> and a letter of March 1926 from the Charity Commission shows that thought was being given to reorganization. It was suggested that the mortgage be paid off, and this was duly done, though whether Louis Crook actually found all the money is unclear. He then conveyed his Trust to a purely University group, apparently designed to cover all interests: the youthful Liberal Michael Franklin, the veteran Reformer Laurie Magnus, H.D. Barnard, a recent graduate, and A.L. Emanuel, a retired Indian Civil Servant now settled in Oxford.

Even more serious was the state of the building. The incoming Wardens, Ashe Lincoln (Exeter) and Alan Mocatta (New College), in a letter to the *Jewish Chronicle*,<sup>7</sup> reported that the palliative measures taken immediately after the war had been ineffective. They were threatened with the collapse of the roof owing to the inroads of damp and rot. The scrolls, books, vestments, furniture, walls and floor were perishing through the excessive moisture, caused by the defective roof and

unprotected guttering. Permanently and thoroughly renovating the building would cost £520, for which they now appealed. By the autumn the work had been done and the building now presented an attractive appearance, but only £225 had yet been raised towards the cost;<sup>8</sup> the balance was eventually raised by A.L. Emanuel.

Activity in 1926 had become complex. There was normally a considerable overlap between synagogue attendance, of either form, and membership of the Adler Society. Those who attended the University Zionist Society are remembered as a distinct group. There was now also added an Oxford branch of the Anglo-Jewish Association. It was hoped that it would not only support the Anglo-Jewish Association, but would also serve 'as a bond to link together old Oxonians and those of the present day, to revive in their souls the ever-glowing memory of their Varsity days, by means of social functions such as Purim suppers.'<sup>9</sup>

Two particularly grand occasions are recalled from Herbert Loewe's closing years in Oxford. In February 1930 the 25th anniversary of the Adler Society was celebrated in full dress by 60 or so at the Randolph Hotel; an eight-course dinner (the French menu was given a Hebrew commentary) cost ten shillings and sixpence. The only discordant features were caused by the President, who had been told that Dr. Gaster was lame and Claude Montefiore deaf, but who proceeded to support Montefiore and shout at Dr. Gaster, and by Dr. Gaster himself, who, required to propose the health of the Adler Society, revealed a long-suppressed view that it should have been called the Gaster Society.<sup>10</sup> In June 1931 Loewe was leaving to take up a Readership in Cambridge. He ended his Oxford period by organizing a grand service, attended by the Mayor, the Vice-Chancellor, and many dignitaries of the City and the University. Though unfeeling and cynical undergraduates referred to the occasion as 'Loewe's Goodbye Party', the ostensible purpose was to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Adolf Neubauer. To this was added the ceremonial deposit of the Torah scrolls of the Canterbury Congregation, which was going into abeyance. After the service the assembled company was transported in coaches to the unveiling of three tablets commemorating the medieval Oxford Jewry, one on the Town Hall, one at the Botanical Gardens, the site of the medieval cemetery, and one at Osney at 'the scene of the martyrdom of Haggai the proselyte on 17 April 1222'. The curious will find the first two tablets easily enough, but the path to the third is not recommended; it may be some consolation to know that its historical accuracy is dubious.<sup>11</sup>

Loewe's departure left a grave gap, not so much in expertise as in

leadership and hospitality. Ephraim Lipson, whose sole communal function in the Loewe period had been as Oxford Representative on the Board of Deputies, resigned his Readership in 1931, on not getting a professorship which appeared to have been designed for him; he went off on a world tour and never returned to Oxford. Chaim Raphael stayed on after Schools as Cowley Lecturer in Post-Biblical Hebrew and was reinforced in 1934 by the arrival from Edinburgh of David Daiches, son of a distinguished Rabbi, to take a second degree; he recalls that he often conducted the service and did the Reading of the Law ('which required quite a lot of homework!'). There was a growing number of senior members with strong Jewish identities. Isaiah Berlin was first a Fellow of All Souls and then of New College, the first Jewish tutorial fellow since Samuel Alexander. Walter Ettinghausen was University Lecturer in German. David Daiches became Andrew Bradley Fellow of Balliol in 1936, Max Beloff Junior Research Fellow of Corpus in 1937. But these were young and not in a position to entertain. There were two occasions in 1935 when married couples entertained the Society, but this did not amount to much. The gap was partly filled by Isaac Berenblum, who arrived from Leeds in 1936 to do cancer research; in 1937 he and his wife were holding open evenings every week.

After a year without Loewe, there was a reorganization. In October 1932, the Adler Society and the Zionist Society amalgamated as the Oxford University Jewish Society, with the aim of having one society which would be representative of all the various types of Jews and could satisfy the needs of and speak for the whole of Oxford Jewry.<sup>12</sup> Some doubted whether this would be possible, and in fact 1932-3 and 1933-4 were not thought to be good years. Synagogue attendance seldom exceeded 14 or 15, and there were many weeks without a *minyán*. Attendances at the Society averaged 20 or so, and the Study Circle and the group which was learning Hebrew only attracted four or five each.<sup>13</sup>

1934-5 saw a marked improvement. Jonah Silman, writing as Warden<sup>14</sup> to chronicle it, attributed it to the keenness of the 'freshers', particularly the women, and even more to external circumstances. The bubble of German Jewish emancipation had been pricked by Hitler, and this had aroused grave misgivings in the minds of those who had been prepared until recently to travel the road leading to assimilation. The most potent factor of all was the stimulating effect of Jewish national rebirth in Palestine. (That the Society was Zionist in orientation this year is confirmed by its election of Nahum Sokolow, head of the World Zionist Organization, as Honorary President.) This position was attacked by an

anti-nationalist 'Law Student',<sup>15</sup> who doubted the reality of the revival, for which no numbers had been given, and saw no difference between Silman's language about Zionism and contemporary Nazi claims about German rebirth.

'Law Student' had asked for numbers, and, after a month, he got them.<sup>16</sup> If one counted everyone in Oxford who was reputed to be Jewish, whether or not they took any interest in Jewish affairs, there were 64 undergraduates and 13 undergraduettes, as well as some 23 other Jewish residents in the town (a number which by now will have included the first wave of academics from Germany). 72 of this 100 had in the last two terms shown at least some interest in Jewish activity. 35 attended the synagogue fairly regularly, with an average attendance of 22. There had been twelve meetings of the Society, with average attendances of 30, and an Annual Dinner with an attendance of 50. The Study Circle had a membership of 18 and an average attendance of 12-13, and the Hebrew Group had also doubled in size. Attendances and membership evidently continued to rise in 1935-6.<sup>17</sup>

In the same number as these figures appeared, Rabbi Dr. Samuel Daiches supported Silman's contentions about Jewish spirit in Oxford, and thought that too little was being done to support it. He had preached in February, and the cold in the synagogue had been so intense that it was almost impossible to sit there; he had only got warm in preaching. Besides a proper heating apparatus, Oxford needed a 'nice place' where the students could have kosher meals and where there could be a library where they could read Jewish and Hebrew books in comfort. In fact, it needed a 'Jewish Centre', and it was the duty of the leaders of the London Jewish community to devote more attention to the problem; nearly forty years were to elapse before this dream was realized.

Silman was surely right in thinking that times were changing. Whatever their own feelings about Judaism were, the rise of Nazism faced Jewish undergraduates with special problems, to which their responses were less likely to be religious than political, either on the general left or in a move towards Zionism.<sup>18</sup>

The sources improve in the last years before the war. First of all, we have the results of a survey of Jewish students conducted in 1936-7 on behalf of the Inter-University Jewish Federation and published in the *Jewish Year Book 1938*. Oxford reported 120 Jewish students in residence. The increase over the 77 of May 1935, which had been presented as comprehensive, is quite astonishing. It estimated that 65 of these 120 were 'conscious of their Jewishness', a somewhat vague phrase. It is not at

all clear how these figures are related to others. 33 were reported to be foreign, 12 German, 8 American, 5 Dominions, 3 Palestinians, 5 others. Of a sample of 50, 33 were doing Arts or Social Science subjects, a proportion totally different from any other British university except Cambridge; there were at the time at Oxford technically no medical students, the overwhelmingly favoured choice of Jewish students of the period.

In 1937, we once again get the assistance of the minute-books. There were two visiting ministers, one Reform and one Orthodox, in Hilary 1937, as well as six meetings, now normally on Sunday afternoon, neatly representing Zionism, the Left, Orthodoxy, Reform, Literature, and Social Work. Unfortunately, the old habit of recording attendances has died out. There are now new offices, a pair of Zionist Conveners,<sup>19</sup> one of them Lord Erleigh, later Marquess of Reading with little Jewish involvement, as well as a Discussion Group and a Hebrew Reading Circle under Walter Ettinghausen. But the summer is a blank, represented only by a printed circular asking for more synagogue attendance to supplement the hopelessly small congregation. Michaelmas Term was an improvement, though only four of the six speakers turned up.

In the remaining five terms before the war, the atmosphere is not unnaturally intense. Virtually every meeting began with some form of appeal, either for refugees or for Palestine; Ettinghausen was particularly firm in his belief that people should give until it hurt; every form of useless expenditure, pleasure and tinsel must be sacrificed. There were meetings which had nothing to do with the present situation, like one addressed by Isaiah Berlin on Jewish Music, but not many. The Society was lectured on and discussed every form of solving the crisis, Partition, Revisionism, Socialism, the Freeland Movement (a project to settle German refugees in Western Australia). They were given contrasting views on the strength of Arab resistance to Jewish settlement, and the Negev was presented as the most hopeful way of finding more space for settlement.

There clearly was national concern about the lack of Jewish leadership in Oxford from the social point of view. though I have found it hard to document. It was not until autumn 1938, seven years after Loewe's departure, that funds (£550 p.a.) were found to create a Readership in Post-Biblical Jewish Studies, to 'lecture and give instruction in the literature, history and social life of the Jew and . . . promote generally the study of such subjects in the University'. The understanding was that the appointment should go to Cecil Roth, now 38, an Oxford graduate with



a long list of historical publications but no permanent job, and he took up office in January 1939. The University acknowledged the benefaction as 'from Harry Sacher and certain of his friends'; the Roths themselves had no doubt that the Readership was financed by Marks and Spencer, at least for a seven-year experimental period. That a hospitality allowance came with the job, they always strenuously denied.

For the next twenty-five years or so, the Roth household, first at 1 Garford Road and then at 31 Charlbury Road, was a focus for undergraduate Jewish life. The pattern of entertainment maintained by the Loewes was restored and so was the instruction, informal and formal, based on a rather wider, but different kind of scholarship. From the undergraduate point of view, Roth's ability to listen as well as instruct was remarkable and extended to all sorts of people, though he and his wife had distinct preferences for some sorts. As will be seen, this had its disadvantages in a transformed Jewish Oxford. But my own personal debt to them is very great, and I am only one of many.<sup>20</sup>