

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE COMMUNITY REFASHIONED

The end of the war brought two contrasting movements to Oxford Jewry. The undergraduates returned in large numbers, and the evacuees from London went home; only those stayed who had established businesses in Oxford and saw no reason to abandon them. Many of the German refugees had no other base in England and also stayed.

I shall pass rapidly over the undergraduates. In the first years after the war, their main Jewish preoccupation was with what remained of the European Jews and the struggle to open the doors of Palestine which developed into the establishment of the State of Israel. It was a feverish time, as one did the rounds of all sorts of meetings to put the case, and things were seen very much in black and white. I have a vivid memory of being in the chair at a meeting of the University Jewish Society addressed by a Jewish don who thought that there was something to be said for the British Government. I was much criticized for closing the meeting before his opponents had their full say, but I suspect that he has always felt that I had not protected him enough. Only one undergraduate actually went to fight for Israel; he was not only badly wounded, but got into serious trouble with his tutor.

One local undergraduate development calls for mention now. In 1948, Passover fell in term, with consequent strains even for those who were only moderately Orthodox. The Congregation was sympathetic and provided a gas-stove in the vestry for small-scale cooking, and this developed into more extended provision for kosher meals, which gradually spread into the synagogue itself.

The Congregation was struggling with steep numerical decline, and the major wartime institutions were wound up one after the other. Mr. Laski returned to London and the office of President was not filled until

1949, when Professor S.H. Frankel was appointed. The main executive office was that of Senior Treasurer and was held, except for an interruption in 1948 and 1949, by Mr. Laurie Bloom. His furrier's shop was centrally placed opposite Balliol, and he acquired a position as representative of the Jews of Oxford comparable to that of Joel Zacharias, eventually becoming President of the Oxford Chamber of Commerce. His energy was remarkable and effective, but, again like Joel Zacharias, he liked to do things himself; if minutes were kept after his return to office in 1950, they do not survive.

The services of Mr. Weinberg, who was awarded the Rabbinical Diploma in 1947, were retained until the spring of 1948, when he left for South Africa.¹ Virtual non-recognition by the University lasted, absurdly, right until the end, and, although I was sent by the University Jewish Society to speak at his farewell party, it was hard to gloss over the fact that the Committee, unlike every other Oxford Jewish organization, had refused to make him even a token present.

For two years, the Congregation struggled with the problem of finding a successor, whom they could hardly afford. Was there to be a minister-teacher or a *shochet*-minister? A *shochet* was indeed briefly employed until was seen to be more sensible to bring meat in from outside and have the conditions under which it was sold supervised by the Reading minister. Various potential ministers were interviewed. There seems to have been sharp disagreement about their merits, and, even when one was agreed on and money even somehow found to buy a house for him, he did not like it and went elsewhere. Thereafter the search was apparently dropped, and there was a period of distinct decline. Hebrew classes were maintained, and the undergraduates conducted services during term, but vacation services, except on the High Holidays, when visiting Readers were employed, more or less came to an end.

The most lively Jewish organization of the period was the Women's Zionist Society which was active charitably and educationally. Other needs were met by a Jewish Social Circle which organized various successful major functions at irregular intervals and tried to ensure more continuous activity; at least its very large committee meetings fulfilled that purpose.

Gradually, new families arrived who had not been in Oxford during the war. Special importance attaches to two. George Silver, after wartime service feeding the army in Burma, opened Long John's Restaurant in Park End Street in 1947; he and his wife would both eventually be Presidents of the Congregation and much more besides.

Dr. Samuel Segal, son of Moses Segal, had only not been born in Oxford in 1902 because his mother had gone back to London for the confinement. After service in the R.A.F., he had been elected M.P. for Preston in 1945. He lived briefly in Oxford, but the loss of his seat in 1950 sent him back to work for the Ministry of Health until 1962, and his real involvement only starts then.

University expansion now brought in more senior Jews, and not only in the specialized posts attached to the University itself. Until 1939, only Isaiah Berlin, elected at New College in 1938, had succeeded Samuel Alexander as a college tutorial fellow, but colleges were now more welcoming. My view is that there was a period of about five years in the 1950s when colleges were more prepared to elect Jews than Roman Catholics. Not all the new appointees had Jewish involvement, but some did, and they were joined by an increasing number of Jews in the various research establishments, in general medical practice and in the hospitals. Other professionals in law and accountancy were slower to arrive, but came in due course. Many of the new arrivals had come from similar social backgrounds to those of the existing community, and relations were not difficult, though no doubt the University members were sometimes found awkward.

There were eventually two main organizational consequences. The newer generation of women had a fairly clear idea of what they wanted in the community where they were bringing up their children, and in any case felt they needed something broader to supplement the rather stiff attitudes of the Women's Zionist Society. In 1960 they formed a Women's Lodge of B'nai B'rith, thinking that they needed the support of a national organization for their aims. The men shortly followed suit; the lodges united in 1975. B'nai B'rith gradually took over various communal functions, particularly in sponsoring a Friendship Club for the elderly and, from 1970, in creating the *Oxford Menorah*, a bi-monthly newsletter allegedly for the children, but serving much wider purposes in keeping the community together.

The second change came in 1963, after Dr. Segal had retired from the Ministry of Health and moved to Oxford. He and others felt that the organizational work of the Congregation in a period of expansion should not be left to Laurie Bloom alone and needed wider involvement. The suggestion was that Mr. Bloom should become President and that the burden of work should be spread, but this was not acceptable. Segal became Secretary-Treasurer in July 1963 and in January 1964 George Silver took over as President; Professor Frankel had felt bound to support

Bloom. For the historian, the change is manifest in the changed form of the Annual Report and Balance Sheet for 1962–3. Bloom's simple typed accounts are replaced by a printed Annual Report with a good deal of detail. The task facing the new team is described in the next chapter.