

CHAPTER NINE

TOWARDS A NEW BUILDING

When the minute-book covering the period from 1940 to 1949 came to an end, the Committee of the Congregation was not only occupied with finding a new minister; it was also discussing the details of refurbishing the old building. Since I have not seen any documentary material of the next ten years or so, I cannot say precisely when the conviction became established that the building was at the end of its useful life and that a new building was necessary. The degree to which undergraduate meals had taken over the synagogue had certainly done much to show that more space was needed.¹

Various points would determine the nature of the solution. If Oxford had been an ordinary community, there is no doubt that it would have had a new building appropriate for a small community by the early 1960s. But it was not an ordinary community. The undergraduate element was a far more substantial proportion of the Anglo-Jewish student body than the resident community was of Anglo-Jewry as a whole, both in size and resources. Oxford itself could not afford to provide a building which would serve undergraduate needs, and there needed to be recognition of the fact, first enunciated in 1884, that undergraduate needs were in some sense a national responsibility. How much the undergraduates should be given was another question; some senior members felt that too ample provision would isolate them from the benefits of college life. Further complications would arise over the location of a new building. It was at first agreed by all that the area in which the old synagogue lay was so impossibly slummy and run-down that a new building there would attract nobody. But Oxford was in the throes of elaborate and far-reaching plans for redevelopment, which originally contemplated even wider reshaping than was in fact carried

out; it was thus difficult to get any firm guidance from the City authorities as to where rebuilding might be permitted and when.

The credit for getting things moving at all seems to belong to the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation, established after the war on an American model to promote social and educational activities among Jewish students. Its earlier ventures were all devoted to creating Hillel Houses in cities where there were largish Jewish communities, and it had not yet faced a situation where there was a large established Jewish student body and a small congregation, and close collaboration would be desirable. Consequently, when, early in 1959, its Chairman, J.C. Gilbert, and Executive Director, Henry Shaw, floated a plan for 'making a Hillel Centre in Oxford and using the existing site for a new Synagogue and vestry room, dining room and kitchen, and other rooms for Hillel activities', there was general goodwill with doubts about the detail from the city community, and serious undergraduate doubts as to what was seen as a threat to their independence.

Mr. Bloom had taken the matter up with some enthusiasm, but matters moved slowly, and he was reduced to near despair by correspondence with the Planning Officer in February-May 1961, from which it emerged that it was unlikely that permission would be given to rebuild on the existing site since the future of the area was under review, and that no assurances could be given as to when or even if a site could be offered in the rebuilding of St. Ebbe's. However, much needed relief to the synagogue was given in 1961, when the Hillel Foundation acquired a house next door at 1 Nelson Street and the undergraduate meals service and some of the synagogue's own classes were transferred into it.

The Hillel Foundation had many other preoccupations and calls on its limited finances, and what was needed for further progress was active workers, both national and local, with a specific interest in Oxford. By early 1963, the former had been found. Sir Alan Mocatta, a High Court Judge, and Robert Carvalho had, as undergraduates, been very much concerned in the 1926 refurbishment, and now dedicated themselves to the cause. They reported to a meeting in All Souls on 17 February 1963 that they had visited the City Architect, who now thought that there would be a site available in St. Ebbe's, possibly behind Pembroke, on which building might become possible about 1968. The meeting preferred the idea of a site in North Oxford, south of Bevington Road. Some attempt was made to look for one, but this was held up by the changes in the Congregation described in the last chapter. With George Silver as President and Dr. Segal, who became Lord Segal in 1964, as Treasurer, all the key figures were now in place.

At a London meeting at Hillel House in February 1964, nothing further was said about North Oxford; it was reported that, although the City Architect would still prefer St. Ebbe's, he would now not oppose the present site, provided that it was expanded on one side or the other, by the addition either of a builder's yard or of 2 Nelson Street. The meeting fell in with this solution, and it was agreed to set up an Executive Committee to launch an appeal. Of this Lord Cohen of Walmer would be President, N.J. Laski Chairman, Mocatta, Gilbert, and Carvalho members. Laski died soon after, and Mocatta took over the Chairmanship of the Committee, which was subsequently much expanded.

Laying the basis for an appeal took time, and it was not until late 1965 that the Wolfson Foundation promised £25,000, if not less than £100,000 were raised. It now seemed likely that the project would eventually succeed, and another essential step was taken in May 1966, when the builder's yard and 3 Nelson Street were bought.

Lord Segal, in particular, had always held the view that an appeal would be more likely to succeed if it were promised that the building would be designed by a major architect. Negotiations were now opened with the Dane, Arne Jacobsen, who had just built St. Catherine's College; he had never built a synagogue, but was distinctly interested. In June 1966, the Congregation and the University Jewish Society agreed the requirements for the building, and in October Jacobsen produced his first plans.

To speak very roughly indeed, these plans were the reverse of those which were eventually arrived at. The ark was placed in the west wall of the synagogue, in defiance of tradition; a row of classrooms would be still further west. The seating area in the main synagogue was sunk into the ground. The meeting-hall would have been to the left of the synagogue, to adopt more familiar terminology, with the dining-room behind it; kitchens and storage-space would have been lined up on the east wall. Various doubts were felt on practical grounds, but the key point was that the plans presupposed the availability of 2 Nelson Street, which was occupied by a widow of 89, who, understandably, would not sell; she did not die until late in 1969.

1967 and 1968 were essentially wasted years, in which the architect was deaf to suggestions about a re-design. There was fretting in Oxford about whether the London Committee, all busy men, were showing enough firmness and sense of urgency. In October 1968, however, another house became available on the east side of the site; the architect was now prepared to move the plans as a whole to the east. Though there were still doubts about detail, soundings of possible benefactors could

now proceed, and an appeal for £125,000 was launched in December 1969.

However, as the money started to come in, the London Committee began to share the practical doubts about the architect which had been current in Oxford for some time. He was in Copenhagen, his English office was in Newcastle, and it was never quite clear whether non-reply to questions and lack of progress on the detailed plans were due to problems of communication or unwillingness to take a serious interest in the project. In the spring of 1971, he was dismissed and died, unfortunately in that order.

In May 1971, David Stern and Partners were appointed to take over the project. David Stern had built synagogues before, and was well acquainted with the problems; he was particularly acutely aware of the dangers of dealing with committees. He moved very fast. By September, the final design drawings were approved. The last service in the old synagogue was held on 4 December and demolition began on 6 December.

For the next two years or so, the Congregation was homeless. Most services were held in the church hall of St. Aloysius Roman Catholic Church at the beginning of Woodstock Road; we shall always be grateful for its hospitality. High festival services were held in 1972 at Manchester College, with which Lord Segal's father had been connected, and in 1973, not for the first time, in Rhodes House. Yom Kippur that year has left an indelible impression; news that the Egyptians had crossed the Suez Canal gradually filtered in during the afternoon. The undergraduate meals service moved to 2 Ship Street. The classes for the children of the Congregation were widely scattered, as far as the Department of Biochemistry.

The building as originally designed had a small second storey at the west end which would have provided fixed classrooms. But 1972 was a year in which building costs went into a rapid spiral, and earlier delays were now severely punished. All the tenders which came in in the spring were well over the budget, and most of them provided for the possibility of further escalation of the costs. It was, however, possible to negotiate a fixed-price contract with Symm & Co. Ltd. of Oxford, which simply eliminated the second floor, though there was some internal unrest as to whether the architect was being properly instructed as to how to remedy what was being lost. Once this was over, construction could proceed. Lord Cohen laid the foundation stone on 22 October, and the new building was consecrated on 28 April 1974 by the Rev. Malcolm

Weisman, Jewish Chaplain to the University, amid general rejoicing and deep sighs of relief from those who had been most closely associated with the workings of the project.

Even with the cuts, it had been necessary to issue another appeal for funds in 1973, and Lord Segal and Sir Alan Mocatta in particular spent long painful hours in persuading possible donors in person and by correspondence. The total cost of the project was a shade over £200,000, plus at least one substantial donation in kind. The major donors after the Wolfson Foundation were Sir Michael Sobell and the Sherman Foundation with £10,000 each, but the list of donors runs into the hundreds and some of the smallest look as if they meant some sacrifice. I note again the contribution of the Beckman family to the library. The best estimate I can make of the amount actually raised in Oxford is £25,000, plus the same donation in kind; there should be no doubt about Oxford's debt to the wider community. There was eventually a surplus on the main operation, which came in useful at a later date when there had to be remedial work on the roof.

The building is nearing its twentieth year of hard use, to which on the whole it has stood up remarkably well. The exterior has enhanced its neighbourhood without dominating it, and such inconveniences as have arisen in use are largely attributable to the last-minute change of plan. The architect and all those who worked on it and for it can be well satisfied.

While building was in progress, some thought had to be given to future organization. The first question was that of its future ownership. The old synagogue was in the hands of the surviving Trustees, Michael Franklin and Isaiah Berlin; the first wanted to secure the rights of Progressive Judaism (to which no one objected), the second the rights of the University. 1 Nelson Street belonged to the Hillel Foundation. The remaining properties had been bought in the names of Samuel Segal and George Silver, sometimes (though not always) described as Trustees for the Congregation. There was a second group of questions about the actual organization and finance, which affected the first. The Congregation was an Orthodox Congregation which could hardly be entrusted with preserving the rights of Progressive Jews, and it also seemed pointless to try to maintain a fiction, never very operative after 1940, that undergraduates were members of it. For its part, the Congregation was terrified that it might have to bear responsibility for unquantifiable losses on the undergraduate meals service; there had been some nasty experiences when these had gone out of control.

The solution eventually arrived at was to form a Company Limited by Guarantee to hold the building, the Oxford Synagogue and Jewish Centre Limited. The Oxford Jewish Congregation, the Oxford University Jewish Society, and an Oxford Hillel Committee (to run the meals service) would have the right to use the building, and an unrepealable clause in the Memorandum of Association of the Company provided that the building was available for all forms of Jewish worship. The Congregation and the Hillel Foundation would each nominate three members of the Company, and the retiring Trustees nominated three more, only stipulating that the successors to these be appointed in such a way that the members of the Company would always include two resident members of the University.

Under this umbrella organization and under Rules approved by it, actual management would be in the hands of a Management Committee, with representation from the Congregation, the University Jewish Society and the Hillel Committee, and with a chairman nominated by the Company.

What was not settled in any very binding way was the distribution of costs. It seemed clear that the Congregation had no responsibility for the meals service; it continued to be unclear what the distribution of general running costs for the Centre was going to be. The difficulties arising out of this were increased by the fact that the Oxford Hillel Committee did not really work as it was intended to. The complexity of the organization has achieved some of its main objectives, but has remained bewildering to many².

CHAPTER TEN

THE JEWS OF OXFORD TODAY

In 1963, the Congregation had under sixty members, expressed in terms of family-units; the present figure is about four times as large. Counting is always difficult, since there is a high turnover, as visitors, chiefly academic, arrive, seldom for more than one year, and depart. Some of them have made their own special impact on Oxford Jewish life; others are not discovered until they are on the point of departure.

It is difficult to assess progress since the new building opened in 1974, without reflection on the state of Anglo-Jewry as a whole. It should be clear that what follows, even more than the book as a whole, reflects my personal views.

Oxford, like all other provincial communities of the period, has been subject to the pull of London. Some actually work there. Although Oxford is now more 'normal' in having three-generation families, the Oxford child who does not move to London or Israel when grown-up is an extreme rarity.

In terms of synagogue attendance, there has surely been an improvement. It is no longer true, as the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* states, that there are no services outside University terms, though the Congregation is by no means always self-supporting in basic skills, particularly in reading the Law. Alongside the Orthodox services, regular Progressive services are organized and well attended. Festival services, all Orthodox, have sometimes come near straining what was thought of, when the building was planned, as an improbable maximum. As has always been the case, help is sought from outside for New Year and the Day of Atonement.

On the whole, most satisfaction can be felt about the education of the young, at least, considering the size and relative isolation of the community. Teaching has normally come from permanent members.

The problems of finding enough time to do anything useful for a large number of children living over a wide area and at a wide variety of schools are enormous, and the basic goals have to be limited. Nevertheless, most of the children seem to emerge to feel at home in the synagogue services, and some go far beyond that. *Batmitzvah* classes, which began in the early 1970s, started turning into classes for O Level (now GCSE), at which we have regular good results, and some *barmitzvah* boys have done far more than the minimum expected of them and become capable of taking services themselves. Three Oxford children of the period, two boys and one girl, have gone to Jerusalem for higher Jewish studies, as well as others for youth leadership and language courses. These achievements would be commonplace in a larger town with Jewish schools; for Oxford they constitute success.

A good deal less satisfaction can be felt about adult education, which has never taken off. Most of the community derives all it gets from the activities of the Women's Zionist Society and the B'nai B'rith Lodge (now the Oxford Menorah Society), and there is little which is systematic about this. It is only a few who can take advantage of the daytime activities organized by the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, opened at about the same time as the Centre, which has brought many distinguished visitors to Oxford.

It could be argued that things might be different if there were more leadership. Oxford has made a cult of doing things itself, and since 1949, the question of having a minister has never been seriously raised. The reasons are not only financial; there might well be difficulty, in the present climate, in finding a suitable candidate who would tolerate the religious diversity on which Oxford prides itself. The question is what underlies that pride, and on that there can be different opinions. In 1986, an outsider summed up: 'Oxonians smile upon their good fortune, bless the spirit of compromise and look pityingly upon "divided" Cambridge. Cantabrigians – or rather some of them – regard the Oxford solution as a symptom of lukewarm commitment.'

We have never tried to analyse degrees of commitment for the Congregation. For Oxford students, we at least have the results of a survey conducted in June 1970.² It dismissed the local community as 'negligible' and estimated the number of Jewish students as 300–400, probably on the high side. The 133 usable returned questionnaires broke down as: 109 male, 24 female; 106 undergraduates, 27 postgraduates; 98 arts, 35 sciences; 112 British, 21 foreign. 68 were born in London, 43 in the provinces, 22 abroad. 41 thought they were practising Jews, 87 did

not, but only 7 said that they ate kosher food at all times, though 15 generally did. They were overwhelmingly of the second generation born in Britain and from the urban professional and business upper class; 35% of them were from public schools. 43% of them were members of the University Jewish Society. 62% of them had visited Israel; 92% could name the Israeli Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Defence Minister, but only 61% the Chief Rabbi. The answers to these and further questions suggested to the investigator that religion was on the way out among this group, that intermarriage was increasingly tolerated, and that interest in Israel was now a main Jewish identifier. What figures and trends would emerge from a similar survey today is a matter of speculation. There should certainly now be a higher percentage of women, and the last twenty years have seen an expansion of Jewish schools which might make a difference. I leave it open what a survey of Oxford Jews might show.

The question of leadership for the student population has recurred throughout this book. Not long after Cecil Roth left Oxford, a resident Jewish Chaplain to the University was appointed and held office for one year, but left for personal reasons. Since then the post has been held in plurality from London as one of many responsibilities. The Chaplain is always ready to help in a crisis, but he, and successive Senior Treasurers, have seen it as their main task to make it possible for the undergraduates to run their own affairs. Lord Segal, who died in 1985, was always concerned about the lack of provision for student guidance, and in 1982 created a fund in memory of his parents to bring visiting preachers for weekends. This has not worked all that well, for the same reasons as in 1884; it is hard to get busy ministers to leave their congregations.

Very recently, the Lubavitch Foundation, quite independently of the older channels for dealing with Oxford problems, has taken this need in hand and appointed a Chaplain of its own. A few weeks before this book was finished, it opened a Student Centre at Carfax, on the fringes of the medieval Jewry, next to the site of the Swyndlestock Tavern, scene of a famous battle between town and gown in 1355. It remains to be seen whether it can establish a realistic educational programme.

Meanwhile, as the generations rapidly come and go, Oxford students have varied in their capacity to shape their own affairs. The most impressive performance was the fortnightly Colloquium in Jewish Studies in the middle 1980s. Co-operation on the Centre Management Committee has been good on the whole, though with the difficulties inseparable from a situation in which the Congregational representatives

think they know the problems and continually have to expound them again.

This is a relatively small part of the burden sustained by the Management Committee and its successive Chairmen. Help from the Hillel Foundation, faced with multiple problems, has been intermittent, and financing the Centre has always been a problem. Some help has come from letting, but an ever-growing weight has fallen on the Congregation. It would not have been sustainable, if there had not been benefactions during the period. Sophie and Gertrud Singer of Nikolai, Germany, who had come to Oxford as refugees during the war, died in 1977, leaving the Congregation over £40,000; this has mainly been used for financing administrative help. Felix Sieburg, another German refugee, transferred his house to the Congregation in 1978. After his death, in 1981, this led to a dispute between students and Congregation which dwarfed the rows of 1881–2 and 1945 and reached the national press. As I myself was deeply involved and the Congregation chose not to make its case public, I merely record that the income from the sale of the house is used towards the cost of student use of the Centre. Further help has come from the George Silver Memorial Fund, set up after his death in 1984 as a fitting memorial to one whose patience, work and leadership were essential to the creation of the Centre.

He would have been the first to say that he was only one of a team. Oxford Jewry has been fortunate over the last thirty years in its possession of a group of hard workers who have done the rounds of the various tasks. The machinery has been kept going, and, quite apart from those who have maintained it, special thought must go to some, who have not been President, Secretary or Treasurer, but who have never lost sight of any Jew in Oxford. They have visited the sick, consoled the mourners, and reminded the sometimes preoccupied administrators of the purposes of a Jewish congregation.