

A Tribute to George

by *Ian Grant FRS*

“**W**HAT A BIG MAN!” My first sighting of George Silver at a college ball that he catered in 1950 came back forcibly when I returned to Oxford to rejoin the Oxford Jewish Community in 1964. This was at the first of many memorable occasions at which George and Freda played host to the Oxford Jewish Community at large, a farewell party for Cecil and Irene Roth when they left Oxford to go on Aliyah. It was the beginning of that exhilarating period culminating in the rebuilding of the Synagogue, in which George and Freda were the pivot around which Oxford Jewish Community business revolved. Those of us who were active participants at the time got to know their dining room intimately. The Congregation’s Committee, then as now, held passionate debates which, under George’s patient chairmanship, were somehow cajoled into consensus. The Committee of the Appeal for the projected Synagogue and Centre met there when it came to Oxford, and plotted how to approach donors and whether to approve the architect’s latest proposals. Usually it was Lord Segal and George who were sent away to take executive action on the Appeal side, whilst the more technical details relating to the building were debated by Don Blenford’s *ad hoc* committee. The Silvers’ huge ballroom was the scene of many communal parties, assemblies and concerts. I expect most of us remember the electric atmosphere of the meeting to raise money for Israel at the time of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The Oxford Jewish Community turned out in force and displayed remarkable generosity and unity of purpose. Of course, this set back plans for the proposed Appeal, which had to be laid on ice for some 3 years. It was a great relief when the Appeal finally got under way, and the project was too far advanced to be set back again by the war in 1973. The completion of the present Synagogue and Jewish Centre in May 1974 was a matter for rejoicing all round.

George and Freda were generous of their time and their resources on behalf of the Community in other ways. The regular Sunday morning gatherings at Charlbury Road were an opportunity for us to get to know

undergraduates, new members of the Congregation and overseas visitors of all shapes and sizes, many of whom later became our friends. It was indeed to ensure that the large numbers of Jewish visitors and students in Oxford were catered for properly that George involved himself in communal affairs in the first place. George put a rarely used food preparation room below his Ship Street offices at the disposal of the Oxford University Jewish Society for nearly 2 years after the old *Kosher* Canteen in 1 Nelson Street was demolished to make way for the new Centre. This space is more or less that now occupied by the Souvenir Shop of the 'Oxford Story'.

He was warm, humane and a good practical man of business – he got things done, but he was no intellectual. He was not a *shul-goer* by temperament, and it was not uncommon to see him sleep peacefully through parts of a long Service, something that excited envy in many of us. Of course, he had to sit in the front row, and there were many occasions when Freda commanded one of us to “Sit somewhere where you can poke George if he nods off.” This was not always easy to do in a way that would not be noticed by the speaker, as on the occasion when loud snores accompanied the Chief Rabbi’s discourse on Medical Ethics one evening in Worcester College, whilst Freda perched embarrassed, well out of reach three rows back, on the edge of her seat.

George’s resignation in 1975 to make way for a younger person as President of the Oxford Jewish Congregation after some 12 years in office came as quite a shock. He had become so much of an institution as its head that it seemed that things could never be quite the same again. The Congregation then decided that nobody should be expected to commit themselves to communal office for so long a time, and no President has since held office for more than 2 years.

Resignation left George with more time to spare for his hobbies and enthusiasms. He was a great man for gadgets. Guests at Charlbury Road were quite likely to find themselves the target of his latest camera or, in the course of time, of his video-recorder. The results were always fun, even if they were not always technically perfect. He embarked on a new career in films. He took great delight in relating the story of how he was intimidatingly shadowed on the streets of Liverpool by talent scouts looking for someone of his size to play the villain in a new film. A substantial part as the drug-taking “heavy” in “Gumshoe”, starring Albert Finney, was the result. This was followed by many other roles, including some in James Bond films and in “Murder on the Orient Express”, in

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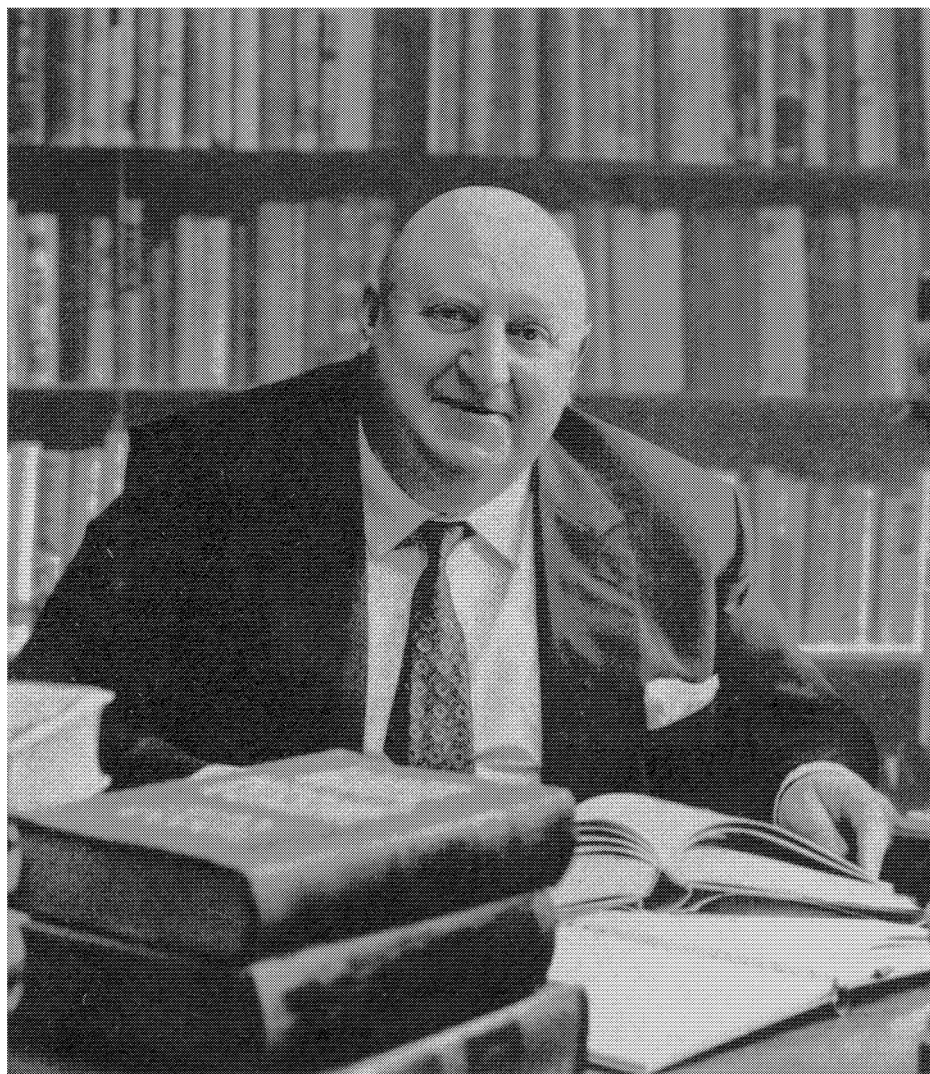
which he was the chef on the train. I am told there were a number of commercials although I never saw one myself. The part I best remember was in a television play by Colin Welland called "Leeds United". This was about a rag trade strike and George played one of the bosses. His unwanted appearance on the platform at a union strike meeting, saying "I appeal to you..." was cut short when he was picked up by several burly strikers and carried out of the hall protesting volubly. Memories of long-forgotten *shul* AGMs came irresistibly to mind!

George was a great family man. He always seemed in his element at parties and I particularly treasure the image of George among his grandchildren. What a lot to remember... Yes, he was a big man.

George passed away suddenly on 4th June 1984. His headstone in Wolvercote Cemetery bears the tribute from one of his many friends -

"Nature made him - then broke the mould".

Then and Now



'George'