

## *In the Wilderness*

**Helen May**

*tells of our two year sojourn*

THE Oxford Jewish Congregation didn't wander for forty years, nor did it wander far. It wandered from Richmond Road to Woodstock Road, to St Aloysius Church Hall, and the Congregation stayed there for about two years from 1971 to 1973. The reason for the exodus from the original Synagogue building to a temporary home in St Aloysius Church Hall was the rebuilding of the Synagogue. A momentous occasion for the Oxford Jewish Congregation, as many years of planning, fund-raising, deliberations, and decision-making had gone into this great event. Why St Aloysius Church Hall? A member of the Oxford Jewish Congregation knew that the Hall would become vacant since St Aloysius Primary School, which used it, was moving to new premises at the same time as the building for the new Synagogue was to commence. The Church Hall was convenient both for students and community: it was central and not far from Richmond Road, easy to locate, in fact far easier than the original Synagogue.

Arrangements were made between George Silver (then President of the Congregation) and Dr. David Lewis (then Secretary) on the one hand, and Fr. Costigan, the Parish Priest, on the other, who consulted the Diocesan Council (St. Aloysius is in the Diocese of Birmingham). After much negotiation the Hall was hired for £450 per annum. Adjustments had to be made, such as the discreet covering up of various Christian symbols in place. This had to be done weekly as the Hall was still to be used for various Church events. The Congregation then had to transfer the Ark, Scrolls, prayer-books etc. Places had to be found to store such items when not in use. Some prayer-books, Scrolls, and other appurtenances were stored in members' homes. The Hall was used regularly for Friday evening and *Shabbat* services as well as being used for Hebrew classes on Sunday mornings. Five boys celebrated their Bar-Mitzvah there as well. One Bar-Mitzvah, which might have come to grief, was saved by the boy's observant mother, who, on attending Synagogue one *Shabbat* close to the due date, noticed an announcement pinned to the door of a jumble sale

to be held in the Church Hall on a Saturday. The date somehow looked familiar. On checking, she found to her horror that it was the date of the Bar-Mitzvah. How could this be? She phoned the Presbytery and was told by Fr. Costigan that it had been arranged that a smaller room was to be used for the Synagogue service that Saturday. Another Community member had said that this was all right because it was out of term and the congregation would be fewer in number. As this does not hold good for a Bar-Mitzvah the mother had to hastily arrange for an alternative venue. Fortunately, many of our members have ecumenical connections, and Lord Segal arranged for Manchester College Hall to be used. Of course, all the religious equipment had to be moved. Alf Delcoy took charge of this, and the Bar-Mitzvah went ahead as planned, the only drawback being that the hall was very cold.

As the Church Hall was not large enough to accommodate the increased numbers of worshippers attending on High Holy Days, arrangements had to be made for other halls to be used. The old Synagogue, in fact, had never been large enough for the Festivals, and it had always been the practice for the Oxford Jewish Congregation to worship in other places at this time, such as Rhodes House, Manchester College, or the Forum. Hence all of these had been used in former years. The new Synagogue was designed to be adaptable so as to accommodate increased numbers, so since 1973 we have worshipped solely in this building.

During this time, and until Fr Costigan died, the Congregation enjoyed very good relations with the St Aloysius community. When the time came for us to leave the St Aloysius Hall the parish members gave the Oxford Jewish Congregation a party in the Hall, going to great lengths to ensure that the food was kosher. When we were established in our brand-new building the Oxford Jewish Congregation reciprocated by inviting members of St Aloysius to a similar event and a tour of the new Synagogue. The Congregation also planted trees in Israel in the name of St Aloysius parish to commemorate the "Wilderness Years" and the unusual experience of worshipping in a Catholic Church Hall.