

The Bodleian Library

The Hebrew Connection

by **Ron May**, formerly senior assistant librarian

THE part played by Oxford's Jewish residents as custodians of the Bodleian Library's Hebrew books and manuscripts in the last one-hundred and fifty years furnishes yet another piece to the complete mosaic. The first, and easily the most distinguished of these residents was Adolf Neubauer (an uncle of Miriam Kochan's grandfather Adolf Büchler, sometime Principal of Jews' College). Neubauer, whose name is included among Oxford's worthies in one of our *Yizkor* prayers, was engaged in 1868 to catalogue the Hebrew manuscripts in the Bodleian Library and the college libraries, and eventually resigned as senior sub-librarian in 1899 through ill-health. He was a considerable scholar who published extensively, and the catalogue of Hebrew manuscripts in the Bodleian Library when it appeared in 1886, received immediate acclaim as an indispensable reference work for all time. A second volume of the catalogue, compiled in collaboration with Arthur Cowley, appeared in 1906. Neubauer did not involve himself in communal affairs, the *Dictionary of National Biography* drily observing that "he did not practise Jewish observances". Moses Lutzki came to the Bodleian Library in 1932 and left around 1939. He was an able scholar who identified autograph works of Maimonides deposited in the libraries of Oxford, Cambridge, and New York, publishing them in learned vehicles. He also recorded valuable notes and corrections to Neubauer's catalogue. It is not known whether he took part in communal activities, but the fact that one of his addresses while working in the Bodleian was 20 Richmond Road seems to be a pointer. After leaving Oxford he continued his career in America. Otto Lehmann was appointed an assistant in the newly formed Department of Oriental Books in 1947. With a strong interest in Biblical and Aramaic manuscripts, his post was no doubt of mutual benefit, and he too added his findings to Lutzki's. He left the Library in 1956 and was subsequently appointed Curator of Rare Books at Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati. He is now retired, and at the time of writing still visits the Bodleian annually to pursue his researches. While in Oxford he identified with the community, and was

among the early members of the newly formed *B'nai B'rith* Oxford Lodge. I came to Oxford in 1956 to join the University Press and was soon drawn into the community, successively acting as Hebrew classes teacher, conductor of children's services on *Shabbat*, *Bar-mitzvah* teacher, and Synagogue warden. In 1964 I transferred to the Bodleian Library, retiring in 1984 as senior assistant librarian. I am too modest/honest to characterize my tenure as anything more than "minding the shop", but it was a period of great expansion in the acquisition of Hebrew books and in the use made of the Hebrew collections by international - and above all, Israeli - scholars. Shortly before my retirement the Library authorities decided the time had come to revise Neubauer's catalogue. An Israeli team was assembled to carry out the revision and I was invited to spend part of my retirement editing their contributions and seeing the work through the press. The revision of Neubauer's catalogue is due to be published by the Oxford University Press in 1992.

The following anecdote, though not strictly relevant, may pardonably find a place here on the grounds that otherwise it might be lost forever. The source is our own Naky Doniach, who recalls that during the difficult days of the First World War, when London was an uncomfortable place because of enemy action, a certain Jew was told that the Bodleian Library held every book ever printed (a myth which refuses to lie down and die). He decided that Oxford was a good place to be in. One Saturday morning he presented himself to the porter on duty at the Bodleian and asked for a *Vilna Shas* (the best edition of the *Talmud*). As the porter had no idea what a *Vilna Shas* was he directed him to Arthur Cowley. Cowley politely pointed out that books could not be taken out of the Library but could be consulted on filling out an order form. The Jew excused himself by saying he couldn't write. "That's all right," said Cowley, "I'll fill in the form, you just sign it." On which the Jew, in some embarrassment, admitted that he couldn't even sign it because of the Sabbath. Cowley, ever the gentleman but an erudite Rabbinic scholar as well, quoted the Talmudic maxim, *Anus, rachamana patreh* (the Law exempts a person acting under duress). A delighted smile broke out on the Jew's face as he exclaimed, "*Ach, du bist oich a Yud!*" (Oh, so you're a Jew too!)