

## *The New Synagogue and Centre*

### **“SAM” Lord Segal of Wytham 1902-1984**

*by his daughter, Maureen Hadfield*

SAM Segal knew and loved Oxford all his life, and this close association had a profound influence on him. Although born in London, his early years and schooldays were spent in Oxford; in later life he lived first at Wytham Abbey and then in Park Town. In the intervening years he studied at the University and from 1944 to 1949 lived in Headington. Today he and his wife lie buried in the Oxford Jewish Cemetery.

“Who’s Who” lists his various achievements and activities in full, many of which were connected with Oxford. In 1919 he went up to Jesus College, Oxford to read medicine. As an undergraduate he was an active member of the Oxford Union, the University Zionist Society and the Oxford University Branch of the League of Nations Union.

His interest in politics, Judaism and Zionism began early. At Oxford in 1922 he organised a public meeting in the Town Hall on behalf of the Oxford University Zionist Society, at which the chief speakers on the subject of “The British Mandate in Palestine” were Chaim Weizmann (President of the World Zionist Organisation), and Sir Alfred Mond M.P. (then Minister of Health, later Baron Melchett). It was, apparently, Dr. Weizmann’s first visit to Oxford. Records show that the private dinner for ten persons held at the Randolph Hotel before the meeting, and strictly Kosher, cost a total of £5.6s.3d.! The meeting, widely reported in the national press, was considered an important contribution to the public debate on Palestine.

By the time Sam qualified as a doctor at the Westminster Hospital he was already active in Labour Party politics, and in 1935 contested his first bye-election for the Labour Party at Tynemouth. His second was fought in 1939 at Aston, Birmingham.

During the Second World War Sam served in the Royal Air Force as a doctor. He was based in the Middle East, and for a time stationed in Palestine. The last months of the war were spent in Oxford, where he was stationed at Magdalen College with the Air Ministry Medical Staff. It was

then that he and his family went to live in Headington. His close association with the Oxford Jewish Community was renewed and he regularly attended the Synagogue.

Sam stood as candidate, and was duly elected Member of Parliament for the Lancashire constituency of Preston North at the 1945 General Election, defeating the sitting member Randolph Churchill. However, he, in turn, was narrowly defeated by Julian Amery in the 1950 election, having fought the campaign from a hospital bed. In Parliament his two chief interests were foreign affairs and the birth of Israel, and the introduction of the National Health Service. He worked hard to further both causes for the rest of his life.

His close involvement with Oxford was renewed once more in the early 1960's when he retired to live at Wytham Abbey. He had decided on early retirement from his job at the Ministry of Health and did not anticipate returning to politics, but in 1964 was offered a peerage by the then Prime Minister Harold Wilson. He became Baron Segal of Wytham, and remained a working Labour peer for nearly twenty years, until a stroke forced him to retire. From 1973 he was also a Deputy Speaker of the Lords.

In 1965 he succeeded Lord Longford as Chairman of the National Society for Mentally Handicapped Children, and presided over its growth, as MENCAP, into one of the country's major charities.

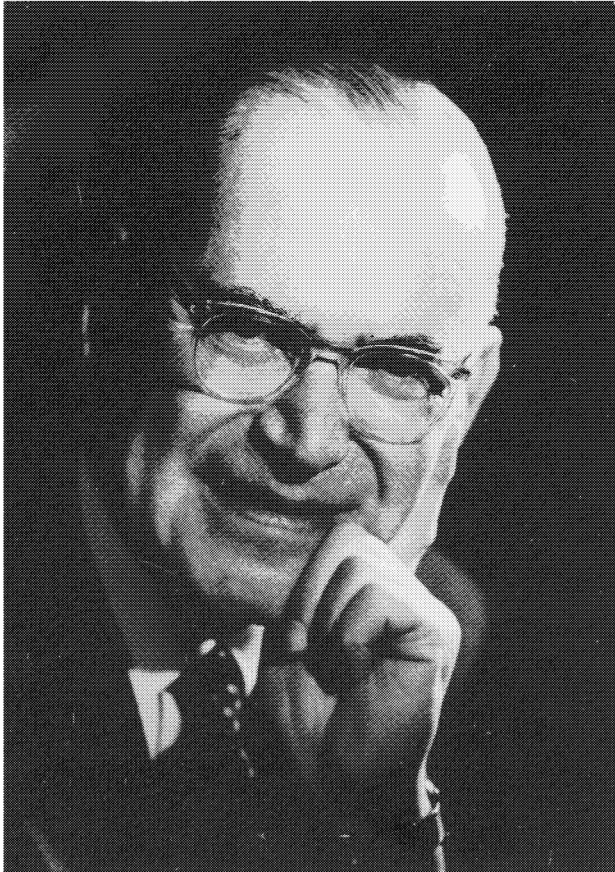
His association with Oxford deepened during these years, indeed he always felt that it was incumbent on him to champion Oxford's cause in the Lords. In 1966 Jesus college made him an Honorary Fellow, an honour which gave him immense pleasure.

In 1934 Sam had married Molly Rolo, whose family lived in Alexandria, Egypt. The contact with Egypt remained a lasting one, and during the seventies a warm friendship developed between Sam and President Anwar Sadat. Indeed Sadat sought Sam's advice on the possibility of a reconciliation between Israel and Egypt. So when Sam asked if he might rescue the scrolls from the synagogue in Alexandria and bring them to England, Sadat agreed. The scrolls are now housed in the Jewish Museum in Birmingham.

Sam's other abiding Oxford interest was the Synagogue. His father had conducted services in Oxford earlier this century, and Sam was grateful for the opportunity to make his mark on the later development of the Jewish community in Oxford. Together with his colleagues - notably George Silver - he was able to pursue a project dear to his heart, the building of

the new Synagogue and Jewish Centre, which was to enhance the lives of Jewish students at Oxford and the ever growing number of the city's residents. Once more Sam worked tirelessly to raise funds needed for the building work, and took a keen interest in the planning, architecture and construction of the Synagogue. When the harmonium in the House of Lords was being removed, he was able to acquire it for the Synagogue, where it is still used for festive occasions.

Sam died on 4th June 1985 at the age of 83. His memory is today kept alive through his contribution to the Oxford congregation in the form of the Synagogue, which stands as a monument to his endeavours and a symbol of his pride in his religion and his fellow Jews. Jewish students at Oxford, in whom he had always shown a great interest, will continue to benefit in a small way from a travelling scholarship endowed in his will.



*Baron Segal of Wytham*

## **The Birth of the Oxford Jewish Centre**

by *Don Blenford*

IN the late '60's and early '70's a revolution took place in Oxford's Jewish community. The communal facilities in the 1960's were a synagogue (converted from an old chapel), seating a maximum of 100 people, with a small outbuilding for other activities. It was increasingly showing the ravages of time, with rising damp and other unpleasant features associated with old buildings of this kind. Oxford had never had a purpose built centre of worship although it had worshipped in Richmond Road for 100 years.

Adjacent to the synagogue, at no. 1 Nelson Street, there was a small, old two-up-and-two-down end-of-terrace building owned by *B'nai B'rith* Hillel Foundation and used mainly as a student social centre, and a centre for kosher food run wholly by the students.

As it became obvious that the situation had to change, in 1964 it was decided between the Oxford Jewish Community and the Jewish students (OUJS), in conjunction with Hillel, under the direction of Mr. Joe Gilbert, that a new synagogue/Jewish centre be built. The site unfortunately was inadequate, and arrangements were made to purchase an adjacent builders' yard and to try and acquire nos. 2 and 3 Nelson Street. No. 3 Nelson Street was acquired but no. 2 was not yet available and a rethink was necessary. Later it was possible to buy the adjacent property no. 21 Richmond Road. Thus we had a site which encompassed Richmond Road from no. 21 to the builders' yard and the existing synagogue plus no. 1 Nelson Street. Obviously money was needed and for this purpose an appeal committee was formed in London chaired initially by Lord Cohen of Walmer, but mainly run latterly under the chairmanship of the late Sir Alan Mocatta. Actively involved in the appeal committee were many well known figures of Anglo-Jewry both in London and Oxford, with Oxford being represented by the late Lord Segal of Wytham, and the late George Silver who, throughout this period, was President of the Oxford Jewish Congregation.

From that decision in 1964 there followed what could be described as a



nightmare, but really no different from what invariably happens in circumstances where three, or four, or more committees vie with each other for their points of view to be upheld and executed.

In 1965 Professor Jacobsen, the famous Danish architect, was engaged by the London committee to become official architect. He produced a specification at the end of 1966 which was revised in early 1967. But very little was effectively done about this as there were a lot of negative comments about it, particularly its perceived cost. The Oxford end, in relation to the requirements of all those to be served by the new centre, was not fully represented, although strong representations were made by Prof. Lewis and Dr. Ian Grant in particular. At that time there was the Oxford Synagogue Appeal Committee, chaired by Lord Segal; the President of the Oxford Jewish Congregation was George Silver.

The appeal for £125,000 was launched at the beginning of 1970, but the plans for the centre had to be completely reconsidered, particularly when Prof. Jacobsen, the architect, died in April 1970. The situation was also one that required considerable rethinking, and to this end the Oxford community established a building committee in July 1970. I was the Chairman, and Alan Curtis and George Silver were on the committee; Helen May was its secretary. Its purpose was to prepare a detailed specification for the new Oxford Jewish Centre for submission to the new architect and the London Appeal Committee on behalf of the OJC.

Such a project specification was drawn up and submitted in November 1970, and after circulation and comment in Oxford was revised by 27 December, 1970. Consultation took place at all levels with all those involved, particularly members of the active community, and the Oxford Jewish Student Society, who produced their requirements in some detail. The new architect appointed by the London committee in April 1971 was David Stern & Partners of London.

The requirements set for the new centre were quite unusual, bearing in mind not only the restricted site and consciousness of minimising costs, but also that it had to accommodate various additional needs.

Firstly, at High Holy Days the synagogue had to contain up to 400 people, whilst regular services on Friday nights and Saturday mornings would often attract any number between 11 and 120 people, depending on whether there was a coinciding social event, and whether it was in or out of Term. In addition the centre had to accommodate facilities for the students in the form of a meeting room, dining room, and facilities to provide kosher food, that is to say two kitchens to provide such meals on

a daily basis during Term and for special occasions. There also had to be facilities to provide alternative services, parallel to the main service, to accommodate different shades of Judaism when required. Also there were requirements for four *cheder* classes, and other social activities that were to take place at the centre. In view of the location of the centre and feelings in general it was decided early, with some argument, that there was an urgent need to have resident caretakers on the premises. It was therefore decided that no further accommodation could be provided, particularly the sleeping accommodation the students had requested. The architect appointed local builders, Messrs. Symm & Co. The last service in the old synagogue was held on December 4th 1971 and the foundation stone of the new building was laid on the 22nd October 1972 by Lord Cohen of Walmer in the presence of many members of the Congregation and their children. Completion of the new building was targeted for the High Holy Days of 1973.

We had lost our venue for religious services and will always be grateful to the local parish, at that time under the auspices of Father Costigan, and the use of the premises of St Aloysius nearby. Their hospitality and support during the period of 1972 through 1974 was most generous; without it, the community would have become very fragmented.

The new centre was opened in 1974 - a great sigh of relief by everybody! During the course of construction considerable difficulties had arisen and had to be resolved. Also it became clear even before then that the new centre would need administering on a very different basis from earlier days, particularly in view of the fact that it would have to cater not only for the community, but also for student activities, and other events arising from time to time. In view of the costs, it would also be necessary to create some income when the Centre was not being used by students in vacation. To deal with this a management committee was formed, of which I had the honour to be the first chairman. The committee was established to represent all interested parties particularly the community, the Hillel Foundation, the student body, and others. I remained in that position until retiring in 1986. With the enthusiastic help of the committee members it did a remarkable job, bearing in mind that it had to start from scratch. Those were heady days, with decisions having to be made virtually every day to arrive at agreeable compromises, appeasements, etc to ensure that everybody not only had a say in the running of the centre, but that everybody got something, if not everything they required.

At the end of the day we did finish up with a Jewish Centre in Oxford of

which we were, and are, proud, and which met many if not all of the criteria set for it. In no small measure this was due to the commitment of a small band of people in Oxford (of whom George Silver was the leading light) who spent a lot of time and effort in achieving what we now have. The purpose of the centre was clear; to bring together under one roof all the Jewish activities in Oxford. It certainly was a proud moment when the centre was officially opened in 1974 in the presence of the Chief Rabbi. Unfortunately many of those who participated actively in bringing this dream to realisation are no longer with us, but we all feel sure that they would feel quite happy with the results that now stand as an edifice to their endeavours. Many of the decisions that were hammered out in those early days, particularly regarding resident caretakers etc., have been shown in the light of subsequent events to have been right. However, we still live with some of the problems inherited from other decisions made at that time, not necessarily influenced by those who have to live with the Centre. The resulting Centre is unique for other reasons. It is owned by The Oxford Synagogue and Jewish Centre Ltd, an independent company, whose Board of Directors is drawn from the Oxford Jewish community and the Hillel Foundation. Funding for the Centre is mainly the responsibility of the Oxford Jewish Community.

*[On a personal note I would like to add that my wife and I and our family were very proud indeed that a little while after the new Centre opened our son Jeremy had his Barmitzvah there, a wonderful day for us all.]*

## **The Library**

AT the rear of the lounge can be found a wealth of books of Jewish interest - books of Prayer; Jewish fiction and non-fiction periodicals; journals and above all books to interest children of all ages. Known as the Beckman library it was donated by Mrs. Hilda Beckman and her three sons in memory of her husband Barney.

Dan Kemp recalls that Barney, a Minister of Religion in South Africa, returned to England before the war where he qualified as a solicitor. Settling in Oxford with his family during the war he closely identified himself with the community serving the synagogue as warden. His deep knowledge of Judaism and of the services endeared him to one and all. The Beckman library, to which in this anniversary year it is proposed to add an attractive new children's section, remains as a living testimonial to his memory.



*Lord Cohen of Walmer laying the Foundation Stone of the new Synagogue - 22nd October 1972*

## **The Consecration**

by **Sandra Dwek** - reprinted from the *Oxford Menorah* 1974

THE opportunity to witness the consecration of something as large and permanent as a synagogue does not come to the average person more than once or twice in a lifetime, unless you are the Reverend Malcolm Weisman who, so he told us, has become a fairly regular participant in such events, by the nature of his calling.

Those of a more humble calling who were at Richmond Road on Sunday, April 28, 1974 were probably, like me, not at all sure what to expect either by way of a service or of a building. Certainly interest and curiosity were enormous, judging by the large and assorted numbers of us who turned out on that grey, wet morning. There were old members, new members, some of whom had never known the original *shul*, V.I.P's from London, the Very Orthodox (were they shocked by the mixed seating?), the clerical visitors of various denominations of the Christian Church, the frankly Non-Observant, the critics, the Press, children, students and ex-students, future students and mere students of human nature. Not to mention The Architect of all this excitement, and you and me.

Now, if *Menorah* had a fashion page or a gossip column, libel suits no object, there would be appropriate comments here on who wore a new hat, who sat in the reserved seats on the front rows and consequently were privileged to be in the unique position of being able to hear the proceedings which others less fortunate had to take on trust; though of course the comments of the gentleman who walked smack into a plate glass door in the heat of the moment would be less suitable in a family magazine!

Some comments of a more reputable nature heard at the time may be of interest: "This blue wallpaper may be very nice in a bathroom but most unsuitable in a *shul*." And, "I liked the Ark in the old *shul* best, because the *Sefer Torahs* didn't lean over" (from small boy). The most typical reaction from those around me though, was: "It's like a miracle that we're actually worshipping in our own synagogue, after thinking about it, talking about it, arguing about it for so long!"

The ceremony itself, however, was a suitable climax to all this watching

and paying (sorry, slip of the pen). The whole building vibrated, I was almost going to say with a sense of religious excitement, but of course that is what it was! A thanksgiving, a relief and a delight in the new Communal Centre, which everyone experienced, down to the smallest child who slept like a charm in his pram right the way through. The swell of voices in the Psalms of David as the *Sifrei Torah* were taken round testified to the general exultancy; the prayers and blessings, the familiar texts recited by various members of the community and University exhorting God's blessing on them and us were more appropriate and moving than usual. All the disappointments and minor frustrations which seem (inevitably) to beset projects of this nature seemed to melt away as the nail was banged into the doorpost and the *Mezuzzah* affixed. The Eternal Light was lighted - electrically, of course - and nonetheless significant for that.

After the exhilarating effect of the ceremony, who needed the added stimulant of sherry (or was it *Kiddush*? I never quite discovered)? Good question. For once I was - by sheer chance I insist - in the right place at the right time. Apologies to the thirsty majority who may not have been. Good will and bonhomie were as thick on the ground as people, who were very thick indeed, and a major gesture to the emotional and physical strain of the occasion was the incredible speed with which the six Speeches which are of course '*de rigueur*' at Consecrations were dispatched. Each speaker outdid the next in his efforts to be brief - 'no Repetition, no Hesitation' - "Just a Minute" was the name of the game. Sir Isaiah Berlin looked a firm favourite at three hundred witty words a minute, but Lord Segal outclassed him in the brevity stakes, with a sentiment which we all approved: "*Shehechiyanu*". The Speakers rightly confined themselves in the main to thanking God, the Founding Fathers, Reverend Weisman, the various Chairmen, Patrons and Institutions such as George Silver for the luck and longevity we had all enjoyed to stay alive to this minute.

And what can one say but "Amen" to that?



*Photograph taken during the Consecration Service. Reproduced from The Oxford Times - 3rd May 1974*



## **Centre Forward**

by **George Silver** - as printed in the *Oxford Menorah* 1974

THE Oxford Jewish Congregation has surely experienced the most exciting moment in its history. Our University Jewish Centre has been completed, and on April 28 of this year, the Synagogue was consecrated with dignified ceremony. On that day, much was said about the reality of dreams and the completion of a task well done. However, little was said about the problems involved in the fulfilment of the dream. As with all such undertakings, the task was beset by many such problems. The acquisition of additional land necessitated delicate and protracted negotiation. The requisite needs of undergraduates and community had to be studied, and this was done by a small group of people from the Congregation and the OUJS. Then came the all-important "Appeal" - A Brochure to be compiled, printed and circulated. Three people spent hours acquiring lists of graduates from all over the world, to be tabulated, sifted and sorted. Envelopes were addressed and a personal message (all by hand) was sent to hundreds of would-be donors. All-day informal meetings went on Sunday after Sunday, and local committees also met well into the night. Official meetings necessitated journeys into London, and a great deal of entertaining was done privately in the hope of raising money. Two members of the congregation helped to draft a new constitution. As each problem arose, it was tackled with mounting interest and good humour.

During all this time, the greatest problem of all was undertaken by our own Synagogue Council. Razing our old Synagogue to the ground left us with many difficulties. The building had to be cleared of all our possessions. Temporary premises had to be found and suitable preparations made for holding normal Shabbat services there. Larger premises had to be found for the *Yomtovim*, and this necessitated erecting a temporary Ark in Rhodes House and transporting *Sifrei Torah* and prayer books, etc. backwards and forwards. This was done by volunteer members of the Council three times during our sojourn in the 'wilderness'. The problem of Hebrew Classes



had to be dealt with, and the Education Sub-Committee saw to it that classes were not interrupted.

Whilst everything went on as if by magic, it has been an onerous task for the 'magicians'. But they have given of themselves unstintingly, so that the many young people growing up in this town will have the best possible. Apart from the fact that we are still in debt, most of the problems have been solved and a new Management Committee has been formed to deal with the day-to-day running of the Centre (but not the Synagogue). From now on, there will be fewer problems but many responsibilities will take their place. As you know, we are affiliated to no particular denomination of Judaism - we have no Minister of Religion as other communities have. We shall remain the same do-it-yourself congregation but from now on we shall have better facilities to ease the task, and a Synagogue of which we can be justly proud. It will be up to each and every member of the Congregation to play his part. Parents of children in the community (and other members) will have to take on the responsibility of making sure that the greatest possible advantage is taken of our new Centre and that regular services continue in the Synagogue. Judaism has been kept alive in Oxford by a group of determined residents working against tremendous odds. And now the future is in your hands - may it be blessed with the same tenor of interest and determination as in the past, and may the Congregation prosper.

## **Keeping Kosher in the Kitchen**

*Oh, What a “Din”!*

1. 1974: Kosher canteen requires cook Jewish couple hired. (Oh, what a relief.)
2. Student discovers non-kosher ingredient in fridge: We are denounced!
3. *Shomer* from Carmel College called into “exorcise” wrong doing.
4. Cook leaves: Hunt now on for caretaker/cook.
5. Volunteers from the Community now supervise canteen: students approve and agree to help.
6. Friday nights (as well as the rest of the week) take on a new look as new caretakers taken on.
7. One man’s “*kosher*” becomes another man’s “*tref*”: Carmel College expert consulted again.
8. Palatable food consumed by more and more students, until...
9. Freshers *too* fresh: start a new “*din*”. *Oi Vay!* here we go again.
10. New cooks, new pots, new recipes. Old friends, old arguments, old traditions.

FSJ and Caroline

Never fear, reader dear, all is **K.O.** in this 150th year.



*Sir Alan Mocatta Q.C.*

### **Sir Alan Mocatta (1907–1990)**

**W**HEN Sir Alan Mocatta died in November 1990 aged 83, tributes were paid from all sides for his work as a High Court Judge, a leading member of the Anglo-Jewish Community and chairman of the Oxford Appeal for the new Synagogue and Jewish Centre.

Educated at Clifton College and New College, Oxford he officiated at Jewish services as an undergraduate and held the office of Warden, even helping in the solemnisation of a marriage. He went on to be called to the Bar by the Inner Temple in 1930, where he developed an extensive commercial practice, taking Silk in 1951. A distinguished war service saw him appointed to the War Office, where he rose to the rank of lieutenant-colonel in 1942.

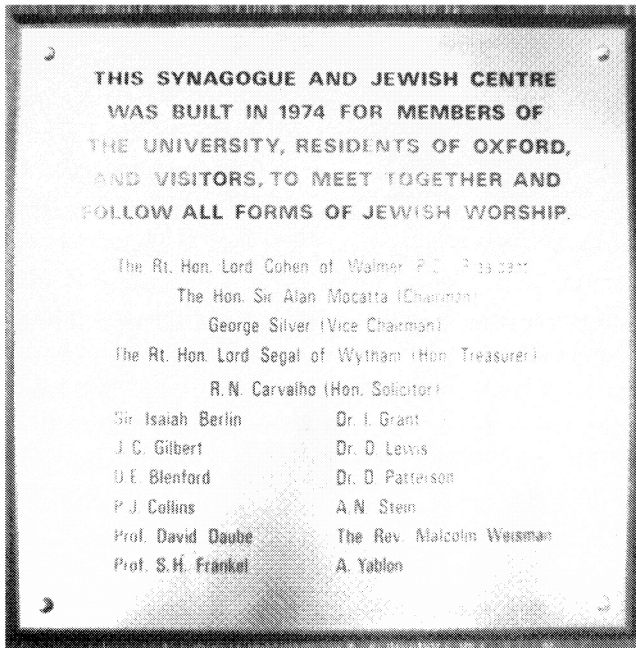
As a High Court Judge, from 1961 to 1981, he was widely respected for his talented commitment and attention to detail. Throughout his life he served the Jewish Community tirelessly, particularly as chairman of the Council of Jews' College for sixteen years and as President of the Board of Elders of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation for fifteen.

No less valuable was his contribution to the Oxford Appeal; few today are fully aware of the great debt which the Oxford Jewish Congregation owes him. As a student, he had known the old Synagogue in Richmond Road, Oxford, which remained in continuous service up to the late 1960's. But he was to become involved in a project to raze this old building to the ground and erect a new Synagogue and Jewish Centre. Obviously the dream could not become a reality without the necessary finance. Sir Alan undertook the task of writing hundreds of letters to Oxford graduates and other notable people all over the world. Without his efforts the building of the Centre would have been difficult to achieve. He gave up many Sundays to come to Oxford to discuss the project and was present at the laying of the Foundation stone and later at the opening ceremony in 1974.

We did not see Sir Alan in Oxford, after that, until June 1990. He had come to attend a function at his College and decided to attend Synagogue on the Saturday morning. He sat quietly in his seat, and it was only when he was given an *Aliyah* that he was recognised by a few of the older members of the Congregation. At the *Kiddush* which followed, he was publicly introduced as one of the prime movers in the establishment of the Synagogue and Centre which is used regularly by Jews of all denominations – students, graduates, residents, children's classes and visitors from all over the world.

We are happy that circumstances enabled him to visit Oxford once more before his death and that he was able to see for himself the fruits of his splendid efforts on our behalf. The Oxford Synagogue and Jewish Centre will be a lasting tribute to his memory.

## *The New Synagogue and Centre*



*This plaque is fixed near to the entrance of the Synagogue to act as a reminder to future generations of the unique purposes of this House of Worship.*



*The Synagogue - now - 1992*

*Photos by courtesy of Ivor Fields*