

## *Women of Worth*

**Natalie Koch**

*A tribute to my mother by **Harriet Cronin***

**M**Y mother was an extraordinary lady who, although born in 1906, had very modern ideas.

She grew up in Esslingen near Stuttgart in Germany, one of four siblings, in an extremely cultured household. She was a highly accomplished pianist who, no matter what time she came home, always went straight to the piano. She went away to university in Berlin and Tübingen where she studied Musicology, English and Germanic Studies. After she had gained her degree, she qualified as a teacher.

In 1932 she came (alone) to England, on a one year's teaching programme at The Warren School in Worthing, but when Hitler came to power in 1933 she decided to stay in England. She got a job at Downe House near Newbury, a very academic school, teaching the daughters of the English upper crust and at the same time learnt about the English way of life. Manners and etiquette were very important to her, I believe as a result of this experience.

As war approached, her sisters and mother joined her in England. According to one sister, she made tremendous efforts during the war to rescue as many people from Europe as possible, horrified by the dreadful stories she heard.

In 1940 she gave up teaching and moved with her mother to Kingston Road in Oxford. She wanted to contribute to the war effort and, as she had already passed her driving test in 1936, she volunteered to drive ambulances part time and drove a bread delivery van for Paines the bakers to earn her living. She had never been particularly happy teaching and this new life was far more exciting and sociable.

At the end of the war, she was asked to manage the bakery office. Here she met my father, who arrived in Oxford as a refugee from Vienna, via Dachau and Shanghai, in 1948 and claimed experience as a baker in order to get work on his Manual Labourer's Permit. Needless to say, with his "expertise" the job lasted only a few days, but their friendship blossomed

and endured and they married in 1949.

I was born in 1951, when my mother was 44 years old. Apparently she insisted on finishing the bakery accounts that night before going in to the Radcliffe to give birth.

As my father gradually was able to establish himself financially, my mother involved herself with the Oxford Jewish Community and drew my lapsed father back into Jewish life. They both became totally committed to the community.

My mother was a very warm hostess, particularly to newcomers, and in turn involved them in the community as quickly as she could. She would introduce herself to any unfamiliar person at *shul* and frequently we would have visitors at home which, as an only child, thrilled me. The spare bed was always ready for anyone who might need it, and people literally turned up from all over the world.

She was not a very good cook (though she baked delicious cakes) and, being used to preparing meals for only three people, the visitors would often have to wait rather long for their food, but she was a marvellous conversationalist with such a wide range of interests and such vast knowledge that the time would seem to pass very quickly. She taught me how to put people at ease in our home and how to show interest in others. Her foot was always ready to kick my father under the table whenever he became boring!

Foreign travel was very important to my mother broadening her horizons and discovering new places as well as revisiting favourite old ones. She returned to Germany only once, to visit her father's grave. By 1960, I had already been to France, Switzerland, the United States, and Israel amongst others. Of course, all I wanted to do was to spend two weeks in a hotel in Bournemouth or Torquay like most other people did at this time, rather than touring interesting places, but it was never important to my mother to be like everyone else.

She fell in love with Israel on the very first visit, but felt that she and my father were unfortunately at a stage in life where they could not uproot themselves again. Instead, they visited as often as they could, and this culminated with the decision to spend part of every year there in a flat in Netanya.

Now that I have a family of my own, we still visit people I met on those trips, and of course we are in touch with so many of those people who passed through Oxford.

She became very active in Wizo, serving later as chairman for many years as well as being elected to the National Council. She was a founder member of Oxford *B'nai B'rith* and later was on the National Council of that too.

When it came to collecting money for Jewish Women's Week, she was most adept at sniffing out people pretending not to be Jewish, though possibly it was Rufus her little dog who was the great persuader.

Sometimes I would accompany my mother to Tom the occasional kosher butcher in the market. There she would encourage me to collect money for Jewish Child's Day from all her friends, instead of only from the immediate family which most other children were doing. This required great bravery and *chutzpah*, but it was a practice that has stood me in good stead.

She also took me on her frequent visits to the elderly and lonely people she knew, deciding that they needed to see children sometimes. At that time, of course, there were still so many people without families. Visiting the sick was done on her own.

During the 1960's she started teaching again, and later became the Jewish community's first emissary to schools in the city and surroundings. She would explain Judaism enthusiastically, with just a few notes and props, and as a result of the most positive reaction this became an established custom in Oxford.

Music was a great source of pleasure to her. At the age of nineteen she had auditioned at the piano with Wilhelm Kempff who told her she would be ready to perform publicly within a year. She chose to go to university instead, but in the late 1960's she started taking piano lessons again and soon returned to her previous standard. My father being hard of hearing (as well as tone deaf) did enhance her concert visits to the Sheldonian with his snoring, but she felt that I was probably a more receptive audience. She would explain every piece of music to me and truly brought it to life, though I do remember being very embarrassed when other members of the audience would listen to her. At home she would carry a radio with her, and would encourage me to identify composers. She loved opera, and especially loved her annual visits to Glyndebourne which she saved so hard for.

Where other parents were protective, my mother always encouraged my independence, reassuring me that doing things alone can be just as rewarding as being a part of another unit. She encouraged me to have

independent means of transport; she encouraged me to travel, she encouraged me to live away from home; but most of all she encouraged me to think independently.

Sadly, my mother died in 1978 after many years of illness. She clung to life until a few weeks after I married. On the day of my wedding she expressed deep sorrow that she would never see her grandchildren, but she has left a fine set of values and a tremendous wealth of culture for them to absorb.

I am very grateful to her.



## Miriam

an appreciation by **Sandra Dwek**

IN 1964 I found myself in Oxford, newly arrived, newly married and straight from Manchester. It was a heady sense of freedom, fresh air and novelty which hit me on my first meeting with the Jewish community here, and I enjoyed meeting many interesting and varied individuals of town and gown who comprised this close-knit community. Miriam Kochan arrived a few years later in January 1969 as a wife accompanying her husband Lionel, who was to take up an appointment at Warwick University, with their three children. They found a house on Woodstock Road and turned it into a charming clutter of antique chess sets, uncomfortable sofas, typewriters, knitting wool, cats, coffee and cigarettes. (I expect the latter were needed by Miriam as aids to tranquillity and calm against the background of constant telephone and doorbell ringing).

The most notable feature of the house, however, was the books. Books were everywhere. Many were loaned out to friends as a matter of course. Friends and poppers-in were always adding to the clutter and were welcomed as members of the family, despite this being a very busy working environment for both Lionel and Miriam.

Miriam's hobby is people and the Jewish community, and her work is writing about them, as well as translating the works of others from French into English, and she usually has at least one book on the go even while running family and communal affairs.

To go back to 1969. The Oxford community little knew what bombshell was about to stir its sleepy existence when this deceptively ordinary *haimische* Jewish mother decided to "help out". Being a good mother was probably part of the motivation, I imagine. Unlike me Miriam did not seem to expect the various services such as a *Cheder*, a youth club and all the infrastructure of Jewish life to be automatically on tap, and because she cared that her children and other Jewish children should learn and be proud of their heritage, she set about using her unique skills to make this

possible in Oxford.

If Oxford had a struggling youth club, which might at any moment fall apart, the answer was why not have a weekly play-reading group for young people, led by Miriam in the Kochans house. This proved for several years to be a resounding success.

The next and most significant area of concern for Miriam was Jewish education. If asked, Miriam will tell you she has no training as a teacher and that she is a complete amateur! I have not met a teacher in my own career who has more of an instinct than Miriam for educating and who enjoys watching her pupils' success in learning. Certainly, when I watch Miriam teach, either as a colleague or as a parent, I see the genuine relationships she forges with the children.

Miriam clearly likes the children even those who would try the patience of a saint. And Miriam is no saint. I have seen her patience severely tried, and seen her deal tactfully and humorously with brats, prima donnas, and the Oxford brand of "little professors", winning them over more often than not with no loss of dignity on either side.

Yes, Miriam has taught at the *Cheder* for over twenty years. Her role as headteacher gave her much responsibility. She also innovated the *batmitzvah* ceremony in 1970, with the first group batmitzvah in Oxford of five girls, including her own daughter, Anna. No girl was pressurised to take part in the two-year course devised and taught by Miriam, but those who did gained in confidence, in Jewish knowledge and involvement, and in making good friends within the group and with Miriam. I think the atmosphere of the Oxford *Cheder* is unique and characterised by a feeling that everyone takes it seriously and ideally wants the children to enjoy a morning's work which challenges them in the same way as weekday schoolwork does. The culmination of this philosophy is that Miriam believed that the same rigorous standards which prove their academic achievements in school should be the goal of the weekly two-hour *Cheder* session, and from 1973 through to the time of writing, the top age-group is encouraged to take the GCSE Jewish Studies exam, and most have passed it very creditably.

How to unify a geographically, religiously and ethnically mixed and disparate group from as far afield as the outlying Oxfordshire villages and Oxford city has been a constant problem. The answer devised by a new *B'nai B'rith* committee formed in 1970 was partly provided in two ways, in both of which Miriam took a leading role, and which were inspired by her flair and intuition. The first of these innovations was to be a bi-

monthly communal magazine “for children and their parents” and Miriam was to be a member of its editorial board. The new infant was born in May, 1970, not knowing whether it would survive its difficult birth or not. Its circulation was to all children in the community, and the contributions and readership were aimed at them. Every child who could hold a pencil, or dictate a story, joke, puzzle or fun item was exhorted to come up with something for the brand new magazine. Everyone who read “Menorah” combed the pages and columns for word of his or her offsprings’ doings, or reviews and recordings of their own or their friends’ *simchas* and news. “Menorah” also became a focal point for communal grouses and controversial views. Steering a course which reflected the differing needs of young and older people, Oxford-born and visitors, took an editor with strong stamina, with a sense of fun and yet firm control, without undue censorship. A task on which Miriam thrived as did the magazine. Contributions usually flowed in, but Miriam managed to cajole the lazier among us to produce something. As in the real world, these material productions cost money too. Some was raised by the “Menorah” cookbook, which was compiled from recipes contributed from “Menorah” readers. Miriam and her team of volunteers have over the years, typed, licked labels and delivered *Menorah* to past and present community members and well-wishers far and wide.

The second B’nai B’rith innovation was aimed at bringing in adults to participate in what was to be called a “Study Group”. Several names, I remember, were put forward for steering the new sub-committee to launch this project; one was mine, and the others, from the Men’s Lodge, were Paul Brodetsky and Norman Lawrence. There needed to be a second member from the Women’s Lodge, and it was proposed after some debate that Margaret Curtis would invite her new neighbour to fill this slot. I know that I felt quite nervous at the idea of being involved in such unaccustomed cerebral activities and I thought this was going to be a very serious Oxford-type of activity. My very first impression of Miriam when I was introduced at a coffee morning was that she looked very well equipped for the task ahead.

First impressions are often notoriously unreliable but Miriam was extremely capable in having ideas. But what I hadn’t expected was that working in this team with her would be such fun. As we drove to meetings and made plans, talking non-stop, Miriam would put her faith in my ability to arrive at strange venues on dark evenings. Often her confidence proved quite misplaced, as my own sense of direction away from my own patch of

Oxford, was quite unreliable, and we would wander for miles hopelessly lost. Miriam's first impression of the Women's Lodge Study Group idea apparently was that the ladies would study Jewish cookery, which rather alarmed her, I think.

The general idea was to provide a theme loosely connected with Jewish history, work out a reading list, persuade one of the members to introduce each book, first having publicised the hope that members would obtain a copy and read the work, then have some general discussion. This proved to be a great draw: it attracted new participants who maybe never came to anything else. The Study Group ran for several years, took place in members' homes and introduced us to books and people we might never otherwise have met.

The Study Group also prepared the ground for the idea that having separate lodges for men and women was not for us in Oxford, and that a natural mix of sexes was potentially the way forward for a thriving social group, something which Miriam felt strongly about.

The catalogue of Miriam's contributions to the community does not end here, long and comprehensive as it may appear. She has always had a hand in encouraging, working with and supporting the Jewish Friendship Club. She was President of the synagogue for two years, giving commitment and time which the job requires. She has chaired or been secretary of all the vital Oxford communal organisations that I can remember (except perhaps the Choolent Society) and this includes the Management Committee and the original B'nai B'rith joint lodge. Miriam was a brilliant chairman of Oxford WIZO for whom she originated and produced the long-running, very successful annual Children's Chanukah Concert, together with its fund-raising brochure.

Miriam and Lionel have given the community a great deal. As you will recognise, behind every great and successful woman is a supportive husband. They do get together occasionally I understand, and play a passable game of bridge, and Miriam is no mean Scrabble player. Of course, I nearly forgot the Oxford Scrabble championships that Miriam also launched. It was played in people's homes throughout the region and brought us all into contact with other players and would-be champions. That it also raised some funds, some excitement and a lot of laughs goes without saying.

In writing this brief view of Miriam Kochan's contribution to the Oxford Jewish community, I have been brought to realise more than once that life

here over the last twenty years or so might have been very different, less interesting and much poorer, if fate or destiny had not brought Miriam and her family to Oxford. On a personal level, I would not have wished it any differently. In the life of the community, Miriam's role has been a cohesive and driving force, the benefits of which will be reaped by many future generations.

## **Equal opportunities for women in a Jewish Community**

**I**T was 1981 when a predominantly male committee of the Oxford Jewish Congregation proposed and unanimously elected their first lady President. The person in question was one of two ladies already serving on the Committee. This commendable foresight on the part of our hard-working volunteer men-folk in the community was the forerunner of a splendid joint male/female effort to keep the highest possible standard in the running of the Congregation. The Community comprises a mixed group of Jews both resident and transient, of different denominations, all under one roof - and no Rabbi! This equality in Jewish religious affairs has produced an atmosphere of tolerance and respect.

Now women are proving their worth as members of the Synagogue Council; Education Officer; teaching in the Hebrew classes; arranging *shabbat* children's services; members of the Religious Affairs committee; caring for the vestments and adornments; organising *Kiddushim*; serving on the Management Committee; representing Oxford at the Board of Deputies; acting as librarian; organising the Friendship Club; Hospital and elderly visitation; organising a *Playshul* for our toddlers.

Most of our women are well versed in the tenets of Judaism and are highly qualified to assist our menfolk in serving our community. They are indeed the 'Women of Worth' as depicted in the book of Proverbs, who at the same time follow their own careers and yet find time to devote to their community. They are too numerous to be mentioned by name - we salute them all.

*FSJ*