

Growing up in Oxford

Sheila Krouse and Brenda Gould (daughters of Laurie Bloom)

recall

AT first Hebrew classes were held in the dining room of our house at 116 Divinity Road, Cowley. Subsequently a school-teacher held a *cheder* on *Shabbat* mornings for children in Cowley. Eventually classes were established in the Richmond Road synagogue, with prize givings in the Walton Road Community Centre. Famous people presented the prizes.

As well as the synagogue at Richmond Road there were over-flow synagogues in Headington, Cowley and Iffley. There were huge congregations for the High Holy Days held in church halls. Young people would walk from one to the other of the four services; this took most of the day on *Yom Kippur*! Many of the congregants were very devout. Rhodes House near the Parks was used as an overflow synagogue when the community had shrunk somewhat and those in Iffley, Cowley and Headington were no longer in existence.

The Community Centre in Walton Street was run by the ladies, for example, Lady Samuel, Mrs. Laski and our mother, as a canteen for the community and the forces. There was a kosher kitchen, and lunches were served every day. There was a social club, as well as a canteen, for everyone, and a club for teenagers as well. Here, we played table tennis and there was *Habonim* on Sundays. The Centre was well patronised for all events. Social events were held regularly, particularly the monthly get-together of the whole community in the Forum Dance Hall in the High Street. Frequent gatherings on fine Sundays were also popular around the swimming pool at the Shillingford Bridge Hotel, where tea was served in the garden to a gathering of grandparents, parents and children.

Kosher meat at first was sent down from London and delivered by the postman. It was war-time, and it often arrived putrid and dripping from broken brown-paper parcels. Father then arranged for a shop in the covered market to allow half its space to be used for kosher meat. A

fishmonger on the Plain began to stock the fish required by the congregation: halibut, fish for chopping, etc. Mr. and Mrs. Silk stocked kosher food in their shop in Cowley Road.

Much later, a canteen was made at the back of the synagogue in Richmond Road so that the students and visitors could have kosher meals on Friday night and *Shabbat*. Father arranged it so that at first the ante-room to the *Shul* was used, but when it grew too small, half the synagogue was partitioned, so that it could be re-instated when the congregation was large.

Growing up in Oxford

by **Eva Loeffler**, (*daughter of the late Sir Ludwig Guttman*)

IT was in May 1939 that our family, my parents Ludwig and Else Guttman, my brother and I came from Breslau, Germany, to Oxford. Leaving other members of the family like my paternal grandfather, aunts, uncles and cousins was traumatic and so was coming to a strange country where no one spoke my language. As a rather shy and timid 6 year old I felt confused and unhappy.

For the first weeks we stayed in the Master's Lodge at Balliol College as Lord Lindsey had offered us accommodation while we looked for a small house. That we found at 63 Lonsdale Road, a small semi-detached house into which our large pieces of German furniture were squeezed. But it was home for us and Dennis and I soon cheered up and made friends with the milkman who came round with his horse and cart every day.

In the autumn we started school at Greycotes Preparatory School in the Banbury Road. Our parents who were short of money at the time had wanted to send us to the local elementary school but were told that it would not be suitable for the children of professional people, and Mrs. Cunliffe, headmistress of Greycotes, offered to have us free of charge.

The synagogue in Walton Street soon became very important in our lives. In Germany we had belonged to the Reform Synagogue and we were not orthodox. I was told not to tell people that we got the No. 2 bus up the Banbury Road on Saturdays to attend the service. The Rabbi, Dr. Weinberg, was very strict with the children and we did not like him very much. My two friends were Elsie Winter (who was very orthodox indeed) and Sarah Newman.

After the outbreak of war in September 1939 many Jewish families came to live in Oxford from London. The community became very much bigger and the synagogue was full on the High Holy Days and pretty full on Saturdays too.

Gradually my parents made some Jewish friends and we often went to Neville and Cissie Laski to dinner. They had a big house on the

Woodstock Road and a very clever daughter called Marghanita. We also used to see the Berenblums who later emigrated to Israel and the Walter Ettinghausen family who also went to Israel after the war and changed their name to Eytan. The person I most enjoyed visiting was Lady Samuel who lived in Staverton Road in a large house with a lovely garden. She gave us the most delicious tea and sometimes Lord Samuel would join us on the lawn for a game of clock golf. I remember knowing a very beautiful little girl called Miriam Margolyes who lived off the Banbury Road. She is now a famous actress.

The Jewish ladies, including my mother, worked hard at the Jewish Centre in Walton Street. It was a fairly large hall and every day they cooked rather awful kosher lunches. But it was a meeting place for all the displaced people from Germany and also from London and the atmosphere was usually very jolly.

My parents eventually had a large circle of Jewish friends and our house was always full to bursting point, and before D-Day there was an added influx of Jewish soldiers from the USA. We really enjoyed their visits with presents of chewing gum and sweets and tinned foods which we hadn't tasted for years. We always had as many people as there was room for round the table for High Holy Days and *Pesach*, and Lottie Worms always made the *Choroset* for the *Seder*. The synagogue was very much the centre of Jewish life and after the war there were many more Jews than before the war started.

The war years were very exciting, and immediately afterwards nearly all the congregation became very Zionist. Most of the ladies belonged to the WIZO which was first chaired by Dora Goldstein and later by my mother. There were regular lectures and fund-raising events, and the children joined a *Habonim* group.

One of the highlights I remember of those post-war year was that my mother became very friendly with a lovely young couple, George and Freda Silver. I used to baby-sit for Freda's two little boys, Jonathan and Andrew, for 1 shilling (5p) an hour while Freda helped George in his restaurant, Long John's. Freda and I have been close friends ever since and George and Freda's daughter Caroline was my bridesmaid.

In 1951 we left Oxford to move to High Wycombe to be nearer to my father's work at Stoke Mandeville and I started my physiotherapy training in London and although my parents loved their new home, nothing could erase the very fond and happy memories of those years in Oxford.



Children of the Community, probably in 1950, photographed on an outing. Photo loaned by Rita Butler (née Steiman)

“Other towns aren’t like Oxford”

by **Michael Spira**

That phrase seemed to have been repeated throughout my childhood in Oxford.

At various times my parents made first the decision, and then the preliminary actions to move to London in order to achieve the goal of a “proper Jewish environment” in which to raise my sisters and me. In my younger days London was a magical place akin to Utopia where everyone was Jewish and all lived a full and happy life.

At the time I found it difficult to justify my parents’ actions, after all I had Jewish friends, we went to the Synagogue regularly – well pretty regularly – and didn’t I “have” to attend Hebrew classes; anyway the community had a full religious and social calendar, what more could we need? Reviewing that period in my life, and as with most reminiscences, the better memories always seem to come flooding back and perhaps that is what my childhood in Oxford has become, just a series of events: perceptions altered by time and experience into something to treasure.

Individual memories like the weekly standing in line at Butterfields, in the Covered Market, to buy kosher meat. There were always women, and occasionally men, in the queue that I thought I recognised but always got their names wrong (a character trait I have honed and developed to perfection in later years). The line never seemed to move or get shorter and the noise, the buzz of conversations in German, English and occasionally Yiddish, together with the smell of sawdust, seemed to pervade my whole being. At the end of the line stood Tom, the butcher, and Reverend Sichel from Reading; Tom trying to make sure there was enough meat for all and everyone got a chance of the choice cuts – if not this week then the promise of some kept by, next week. Reverend Sichel did nothing but talk, or so it seemed. Butterfields was a point of contact for a large proportion of the community as indeed was the whole Covered market.

My father worked at Lucks, the fabric stall, and “Uncle Ben” (Walter Benjamin), “Old” Mr Decofsky and “Old” Mr Watson (they were always

“Old” to me) had stalls. There was a shoe shop owned by a Mr Lewis who later moved back to London. A large part of the Congregation at that time were people who had evacuated to Oxford during the war. Some remained, many returned in the fifties. The whole place was like a Jewish shopping arcade to me.

Every week, for all my life it seemed, I *had* to attend Hebrew Classes on Sunday mornings. One of my earliest childhood memories is of Classes at 11 Bullingdon Road, the home of Else and Ken Lawrence. In their front room was a large round table covered with a cloth, chenille I think, which reached down to the floor; I used to hide underneath but the teacher always knew where I was. My father acted as taxi-driver for the Classes and our car was always full of children both there and back. This continued throughout my progression in Classes as did my father’s habit of offering hospitality to the parents of children who lived out of Oxford. These people had to spend two hours in Oxford on Sunday mornings because it wasn’t worth going home and many people visited with us regularly to the consternation of my mother who, besides having to prepare lunch and do other chores, couldn’t stand some of them – usually the people Dad preferred.

Friends were made, and over the years we got to know many people such as the Finnestons when Sir Monty worked at Harwell. Oxford is that sort of town, people pass through and with the passage of time you suddenly find you have friends all over the world.

My life in the Classes progressed when they moved to the Synagogue which, being a one room building plus the vestry, meant all ages were at a table with one teacher. As numbers increased there were other tables, other teachers, and some age-grouping. During term there was a prevailing smell of cooking, either left over from Shabbat, or from the occasional preparing of Sunday lunch. Some years later, a large curtain was put right across the front part of the building to divide the area used for dining from the body of the Synagogue used for worship. The Classes used the dining area until numbers increased and we moved into the Synagogue proper with its hard benches and book rests. We quickly turned these into school-like furniture, as my contemporaries and I carved initials and other designs, usually in inconspicuous places. In later years I used to seek out this graffiti during the more tedious sections of Services.

The *Bimah* in the Old Synagogue was a source of wonder and amazement to me as a child, dominating, of highly polished wood and at its four corners, candle holders which on occasions actually contained lighted

candles. Inside the *Bimah*, on the two longer sides, were hard benches sometimes piled high with books, but used by people to sit with the *Sefer* and others who came to keep them company. I spent many happy minutes hiding under those benches after break at classes but again the teacher always found me – do they give teachers practical training in finding pupils? There was a magic and mystery about the *Bimah*: during Services people came and went; my father always seemed to be there when the *Torah* was being read. Most magical of all was at the end of *Yom Kippur* when the *Bimah* produced a bottle of milk for Laurie Bloom to break his fast; a truly wondrous piece of furniture.

Eventually 1 Nelson Street was purchased for the Meals Service and the Classes spilled into it; the smell of cooking followed. Strange that many of my childhood memories seem to feature food, both at home and at the Synagogue. The occasional *barmitzvah* or *kiddush* seemed to highlight this, especially when *Simchat Torah* and *Chanukah* came along – didn't we hold *Chanukah* parties at the Co-op Hall in Cowley Road?

The highlight of my academic achievement was being banned from Classes (only for a week) by Mrs Rabin because I preferred discussing gangster history, complete with own toy gun, to Biblical history in Class. As I pointed out to a new generation of children at Hebrew Classes when I talked to them shortly after becoming President, it is a tradition of Oxford that they who challenge the “Oxford Way” usually end up helping to sustain it; or put another way, they who mess about in Class stand better chance of becoming President.

Services in the old Synagogue feature in my memories. As a child I was overawed by the size of the building. Either side of the huge black Ark, with the hands and Hebrew letters above, were large chairs occupied by “old” men in bowler hats each wearing a gigantic *tallit*. I was told that these were the President and the Warden of the Synagogue, people who demanded, and got, the respect and obedience of a young child. My father and I always sat on the right hand side of the Synagogue, and so large was the *Bimah* that I couldn't see the other man on the left, except when we stood up – oh, how often did we have to stand up, and for such long periods – and I could just see them through the “portholes” that decorated the sides of the *Bimah*.

I still can't decide whether the building was hot or cold. The large gas heaters suspended from the ceiling always noisily pushed heat down, never quite reaching me in full before drifting back up to fill the V-shape space miles above me. There was always a conflict between the heat coming

down, and the cold seeping in from the windows behind – perhaps that’s why we sat in the front row, and probably why Dad had this large wool *tallit* I could snuggle into.

One of my lasting memories in the Old Synagogue was the buzz of conversation that acted as a background noise to the *Chazan*, and sometimes seemed to be designed to intimidate him. At moments like this, book-thumping and loud “*ssh*’s” filled the air and the sound level dropped dramatically, only to rise steadily later.

In the row behind us usually sat Nat Posner and Ben Brown, a fortunate combination indeed. At providential moments during the *Yom Kippur* service, when one of Nat’s jokes would have been inappropriate, out would come the tin of snuff Ben kept in his pocket to be passed along the rows on our side of the Synagogue – the poor people on the left side never revelled in the pleasure of snuff, introduced to me at a rather earlier than necessary age. After sneezing loudly (more book thumping) we sank back into the tedium only to be roused moments later by the appearance of the ammonia bottle Nat had in his pocket. Of the smells of my childhood those two must be among the most unusual.

The Youth Club was part of my experiences. Who could forget that inaugural meeting held at the Curtis’s house in Cowley on a New Year, after one of the heaviest snowfalls in recent years? Just getting there was an experience. Trips to visit other Youth Clubs in Reading and Uxbridge, usually being driven by Alf Delcoy in his Dormobile – how many miles did I travel in that vehicle? Of course there were the illicit visits to the pub in Nelson Street (I was older then) to buy cider for Club meetings in the vestry, not to mention what went on in the cellar under the Wimpy Bar in St Giles – and since I promised not to mention what went on, I won’t.

Any one’s childhood is dominated by their parents and mine was no exception. My mother Paula was the one who ran the home. Dad was heavily involved in community life, spending many years on the Synagogue Committee. In fact I felt some of the kudos for all his work came to me. After his death in 1968 I was asked to stand for the Committee and I was not sure whether it was out of respect for him or because of my own qualities; in retrospect it was probably a combination of both. It is the legacy of my father’s involvement in the Jewish life of Oxford that gave me the example and set me on the path that I have followed most of my adult life. Eventually becoming Warden of the Synagogue, my father was involved at all levels; he was there to help, advise, and run matters social

and religious. His religious knowledge was such that he was a point of reference for many people. My regret is that I failed to get a greater share of his wisdom.

A trip to Shillingford or to Studley Priory was a treat. On a fine summer Sunday (as they inevitably were in one's youth), a proportion of the Oxford Jewish community moved to Shillingford, to be precise the meadow with the swimming pool situated by the Thames across the road from the Shillingford Bridge Hotel. Our friends seemed to be there, and we met people from Reading, and those from London and elsewhere who were visiting children at Carmel College and taking them out for the day. To me, my parents seemed to know everybody.

In seeking to move from Oxford my parents had the welfare of their children at heart, but by failing to do so they gave us the gift of growing up in Oxford, an experience unique, pleasurable (for the most part) and one to be cherished all our lives. If "other towns aren't like Oxford" it is for me an expression, not of regret for missed opportunity, but of thanks that Oxford is what it is.

Caroline Lewis (née Silver)

recalls

MOVING to a new area (i.e. South London) is not as simple as *Alef, Bet, Gimmel*. As careful as one chooses a house and school, so finding the right *shul* is just as important. The rigidity of our local United Synagogue being out of the question, I researched the Reform - friendly, but with an alien atmosphere was all I could feel. My Oxford upbringing had much to do with these feelings. After a while, I discovered a small congregation where I felt quite at home. This new *Masorti* community had the same pioneering spirit, reminiscent of my youth in Oxford. No Rabbi, classes in congregants' homes, and services that are only as good as their contributors - i.e. sing your heart out.

My recollections of the old '*shul*' are vivid. The memories are brighter themselves than the dark drab interior and gabled roof. Gas heaters on chains hung down, heating only the top of one's head. On high holy days it was crowded, hot and stuffy. Arguments frequently broke out as to which window to open, so as not to cause a draught on an elderly congregant. On *Yom Kippur*, a mixture of mothballs and smelling salts, wafted along the rows of the ladies section. The same hats reappeared annually. Chatting was a pastime, but if our corner became too noisy, the Warden would bang loudly on the outside of a closed *Chumash*.

When our small community celebrated *Purim* all the children were given a part in the play and, although fancy dress was less sophisticated that it is nowadays, no less effort went into the frantic preparations. Our *Chanukah* parties were often held in a church hall, sharing our candles with their Christmas decorations. This added much secular confusion to the festivities for us children, but no Christmas carol could ever compete with Natalie Koch's piano accompaniment to *Ma Otzour*, to which everyone joined in with gusto.

As a small child, Sunday mornings meant Hebrew Classes. These were held in the small extension at the rear of our house, adequate for the half a dozen or so children who reluctantly appeared each week to learn their *Alef Bet* from José Patterson. We were of mixed age, ability and behaviour.

Despite this, we all learned our *Shema* and festival stories. Each of us in turn would be sent out for disrupting the class. The kitchen being the only place to go for this “punishment” was always occupied by my mother who, along with her lecture on how to behave in class, supplied biscuits and treats. As the Classes grew we were obliged to move away to No. 1 Nelson Street. On Sunday mornings the students came to clear away their *shabbat* meals, so the clatter of dishes and smell of two-day old boiled chicken which permeated this terraced house accompanied us as we continued learning the *Alef Bet*.

By now the classes had been split into three groups, the oldest (and most serious) were taught by Ron May (Mr May, to us). The younger ones, predominantly female, seemed to drive a succession of teachers away – one even to *Yeshiva*. I have to admit, and I’m sure I don’t offend my contemporaries, that we were unteachable. We rushed off to the sweet shop at break, only to saunter back. There seemed no sense of importance – no *Batmitzvah* to look ahead to, no role models to look up to. We found it hard to care and I still don’t know my *Alef Bet* properly.

Meanwhile, back at my parents’ home, they would be busy preparing for the weekly Open House for Jewish students. We would arrive home from Hebrew classes to hear the sound of high-brow, intellectual conversation. My only contribution to this, however, would be to hand round the chopped liver and peanuts. Although I’m sure they were extremely clever and interesting, as I grew into a teenager of the Sixties, the students seemed a dull lot to me. None had Beatle hair-cuts under their *kippot* and many were smaller than me. Much to my parents’ chagrin, they were definitely not “my scene”.

More at my level was the Youth Club. This was held in a brick cellar underneath the old Wimpy Bar in St Giles. The walls had silhouette pictures of jiving couples and we played ping-pong to the sound of records on a “Dansette” record player. Occasionally, we would meet up with boys and girls from Reading, or go on a sponsored walk. The Youth Club was never exactly Oxford’s hottest social venue, and to add to the tedium, we were always the same dozen or so youngsters. A small *Habonim* group was formed, but that was short-lived for the same reason.

All our parents worked hard at trying to provide that nice Jewish background, so unnatural then in Oxford. Looking at the community now I see how much has changed. Girls, in particular, have much more hope and opportunity. *Bat-Mitzvahs* are assumed, and GCSE has made Hebrew a credible subject and language.

Then and Now

One could use the cliché of how lucky the youth of today are, but will they have such rich and atmospheric memories? Of one thing I am sure, that is that they will learn their *Alef Bet* with greater ease. They will have the pride of having been brought-up and educated in the warm and broadminded community that Oxford continues to offer.

Oxford Jewish Youth Club

by **Laura Spira** (*née Frank*)

IN late 1962 Else Lawrence consulted her amazingly comprehensive community card index, identified those families with teenage children and invited those teenagers to a meeting. That meeting at the Lawrence home in Bullingdon Road saw the formation of the Oxford Jewish Youth Club.

My memories of that first evening are vague; some of us already knew each other but there were also new faces - what seems most striking is that such a disparate group of young people responded so positively to the suggestion of a youth club and immediately set about organising themselves so successfully. We were determined to be totally independent - no affiliation to any national organisation and no adult interference! (Just like those Cliff Richard films so popular in the early Sixties where a group of kids use their own resources to tackle some problem, and triumph against all the odds, singing tunefully at twenty minute intervals. We didn't sing. Thank goodness.) We were not, however, reluctant to accept adult support - and we received it in abundance from our own parents and from many members of the community. Our first event - a New Year's Eve party - was proof of this. You may remember that particular winter; the snow-fall was heavy and transport very difficult but our parents went to considerable lengths to convey us to the venue and the party was a great success. The venue? The home of a young couple called Margaret and Alan Curtis. These brave people went out to celebrate the arrival of 1963, leaving their home and a sleeping baby in our charge. (For many years I remained amazed at the apparent recklessness of this behaviour, until as the parent of small children I too experienced the difficulties of finding a babysitter on New Year's Eve!)

At some point a constitution was drawn up and a formal committee established, of which I became secretary. I remember producing detailed minutes of lengthy committee meetings which mostly consisted of arguments about the minimum age for membership and other immensely important issues. The arguments were mostly between myself and the

chairman, a very irritating and opinionated Michael Spira. (Reader, - I married him!!)

Meetings took place on Sunday evenings in the vestry of the old synagogue building. Someone donated a table tennis table and a record player and during one school holiday we painted the room a fetching primrose yellow. A small core of regular attenders was augmented by visitors - often American or Israeli teenagers whose families were visiting Oxford. One boy came on several Sundays but refused to join in any activities, preferring to sit quietly in the synagogue. Only recently, watching the play "Shadowlands" did I realise that David was the stepson of C.S. Lewis.

Although OJYC remained fiercely independent of any national organisation, we did make contact with other youth groups and organised exchange visits with a youth club in Ealing. The host group would entertain the visitors to lunch in their own homes and we would then meet up later for a social. We also participated in locally organised youth activities - very successfully as evidenced by the report in the Oxford Times memorably headlined "Jewish Youth excel at indoor games".

Great enjoyment was derived from fund-raising evenings at which we entertained our parents and members of the community with food, slide shows and a variety of games. These experiences honed my organisational and diplomatic skills - it was my job to book the hall, deal with the (invariably) surly caretaker and persuade all ladies attending to wear plastic covers on their shoes to protect the floor from the ravages of the then fashionable stiletto heel!

The generosity of George Silver enabled us to move our regular meeting place from the confines of the vestry to the much more atmospheric cellar beneath the then Wimpy Bar in St Giles (now the Oxfam Bookshop). Again, we decorated; a grand plan to cover the ceiling with egg boxes was only partially successful and a mural was designed but never completed - neither mattered since the dim lighting rendered our surroundings almost invisible!

When I left Oxford in 1964 the club was still thriving and successive waves of teenagers kept it active until the early 1970s when a *Habonim ken* was established to give a new impetus to activities for young people in the Oxford Jewish community. Looking back, I believe that we were right to remain so independent; we gained considerable experience in taking responsibility and in working as a team - and we also had a lot of simple unsophisticated *fun*!