The Cecil Roth Era

Profile - Cecil Roth (1899 - 1970)

by ***Professor Geoffrey Lewis, F.B.A.***

I came up to St. John's as an undergraduate in 1938 with two instructions from my father: to attend the Synagogue on Sabbath mornings and to go to tea with the Roths on Sabbath afternoons. The Roths had come to Oxford only a month or two before, on Cecil's appointment as Reader in Jewish History, a post he held for twenty-five years. Their house in Garford Road was never without guests, particularly on Sabbath afternoons, when anyone who wanted to drop in was welcome. Those tea-parties were an education, thronged as they were with refugee scholars from all over Europe, many of course from Germany, perhaps even more from Italy. It was a novel and rewarding experience to listen to them debating and reminiscing under Cecil's urbane and learned chairmanship and, for the more daring of us, sometimes to put in a word ourselves. As for the Synagogue, the untimely departure of the older undergraduates soon brought me to the dizzy rank of Treasurer. When I myself went off to the war in 1940 I was able to hand over the accounts, showing a credit balance of one halfpenny, to the Senior Treasurer, Walter Ettinghausen of Queen's, who some years later as Walter Eytan, First Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Office. I left Oxford with the Senior Treasurer's congratulations and some words of comfort from Cecil, who had served in the infantry from 1917 to 1919 before coming up to Merton to read History.

On my return to Oxford in 1945, accompanied now by my wife, I happily fell back into the routine of Sabbath afternoon tea at the Roths (in the late 1940s they moved to Charlbury Road), which was no less of a salon than before. In addition, except during one or other's absences abroad we met regularly until 1964, when at the age of 65 he resigned his Readership and left for Israel to edit the Encyclopaedia Judaica. His time there was not as happy as it should have been, for no fault of his own, and he died there in 1970.

To younger members of the Jewish community, Cecil Roth is at best a name familiar from their parents' bookshelves. To those who knew him,

the twenty-one years that have passed since his death have not made his memory any less vivid. In physical appearance he never aged, preserving an almost languid Edwardian style as well as his thick black hair with a centre parting. These, his mournful and droopy expression and his singular voice and pronunciation, especially of the letter *r*, may have begun as undergraduate affectation but became only a mark of his originality in a world of ordinariness.

His devoutness was unmarred by any shadow of bigotry. He thought it a great pity that modern orthodox Jewish practice had crystallized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Eastern Europe, in an age and an environment which brought so many accretions to the pristine simplicity of Judaism. Year after year we attended *Seder* at his house and for us and our children it was one of the highlights of the calendar. As befitted a man who had produced no fewer than six editions of the *Haggadah*, he would add his own comments to the text, some of them worthy to rank with those of the sages whose sayings it embodies. The duty of asking the Four Questions fell to our son who, having spent most of his previous fortnight memorizing or rememorizing them, would be anxiously waiting for me to prod him at the right moment. But there was no need for that; Cecil would turn to him and speak a formula you will not find in the book: "Jonathan, I believe you are waiting to ask us something". I have never known anyone else who could achieve, with perfect dignity and seemliness, the apparent paradox of an informal ritual. Some people see God as a great architect, some as a consummate mathematician. I think that Cecil Roth's God was a kindly old scholar, with infinite learning, infinite compassion for the stumbling young, and an infinite sense of humour.

He seemed never to be oppressed by that feeling of "so much to do, so little done", from which most scholars suffer. Gifted as he was with curiosity about everything and the mental vigour to pursue every line of enquiry and the discipline to finish whatever task he began, he was a man in equilibrium. Anyway, he had done an awful lot; an incomplete list of his publications between 1920 and 1966 records over 572 books and articles.

Oddly, in spite of his enormous output I cannot recall, in all the years of our friendship, ever seeing him working or making work an excuse for turning anyone away from his door. For Cecil Roth, humanity was an inseparable part of being a scholar; it was not an aspect of his personality which could be switched on if time permitted and switched off if he was busy. Some people found him remote; to a large extent that was their own fault, because of their preconception that scholars *are* remote and work in

a rarefied atmosphere and are not readily approachable by those unable to meet them in their own field. All who came to him with their troubles, or with a bee in their bonnet, or with a funny story they thought Cecil would appreciate, as well as those wanting help with some tangled thread of history, would always find him ready to listen and to reach down the relevant book or delve into his mind for the answer.

Yet it is impossible to look at any of his writings without admiring not only the thoroughness of his scholarship but also the sheer vastness of his reading.

His earliest specialisation was the history of Italy and he maintained a lifelong love affair with that country. His first book, the one in which he took most pride, was *The Last Florentine Republic*, and an item in his collection that gave him most pleasure was the keys of the city of Florence. Then his studies shifted to the history of the Jews in Italy and then to that of Jews in every place and at every time. From the Marranos to the first Jew in Hampstead, he was ready to try his hand at them all. I clearly recall his characteristic remark when he decided to write *The Historical Background of the Dead Sea Scrolls*: "I don't see that it's all that mysterious who the chaps at *Qumran* were: the story's all there in Josephus, you know. It's not my field, but most of the angels have already trodden it, so I may as well rush in."

He was a considerable authority on Jewish art: he wrote many studies of various aspects of it and could tell you the story of every item in his rich and famous collection of *Judaica*. It included some rather peripheral *Judaica*, like the splendid fourteenth-century wooden figure of St. Peter. But he was more interested in people than in things. He said to us one evening, when he had just finished correcting the proofs of *The Jews of Medieval Oxford*, "You know, when I walk down St Aldate's now I feel I know the life-story of every poor little Jew who lived there in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, from the cradle to the gallows." He did his duty by the great names in Jewish history writing on the house of Nasi, noble families among the *Sephardic* Jews, Sassoons, Rothschilds and many more. But he also wrote about ordinary Jews; that, for him, was the real excitement of Jewish history; not writing about the great and wealthy but trying to rescue from oblivion the countless ordinary people who would otherwise be for ever forgotten: a ballad-singer in medieval London, a gardener in Norfolk, a printer in Naples, a bone-setter in Palermo. Not that he romanticized them; he was an historian, not a propagandist. In *A History of the Jews of England*, writing of the time before the expulsion in

1290, he says "Though as a rule the Jews were unable to write in Latin characters, whether French, English, or Latin were in question, they could generally decipher (and, exceptionally, even forge) those languages." The furthest I ever heard him go was when he remarked, "I'd hesitate to say that Jews are better than other people. I *am* sure they're no worse."

With his death, it was not only a great deal of wisdom and learning that went from the world; it was also a great deal of kindness and innocence and fun. It often happened that just as we were taking our leave after dining with the Roths, Irene would insist on my wife's going upstairs with her to inspect some new item in her wardrobe. Having carried on a sleepy conversation for a minute or two, Cecil and I would then lapse into silence until they reappeared. On one such occasion, as they eventually came back into the study, my wife said to Cecil, "And what are *you* wearing to the Vice-Chancellor's garden party?" Cecil replied, "I shall wear my bifurcated trousers." When, on another such occasion, she asked him, "And what are you doing this season to make a new exciting you?", his lugubrious reply was, "I am thinking of having all my teeth extracted." Sometimes, more often in articles than in books, the fun would spill over into his writing; hence such titles as *"Medieval Illustrations of Mouse Traps"* and *"The Messina Synagogue Inscription: or, Alas Poor Zunz!"*

A few years after the move to Jerusalem, he sent us an offprint from *"Remember the days"*, a volume of essays on Anglo-Jewish history. Across the cover he had written, "And remember the Roths". We remember.

Cecil Roth

Michael Pinto-Duschinsky

remembers the Roths

COHORTS of students succeed each other very quickly. There must be dozens of groups of friends who first met at the old J. Soc. before the new buildings were constructed and who share their separate memories. But there is one common link between a quarter century of Jewish undergraduates and postgraduates of the 40's and 50's and early 60's: Cecil and Irene Roth. The name of Cecil Roth would have been known to most Jewish freshmen even before they arrived in Oxford. At that time, there could have been few who had not been given at least one of his works on Jewish history as a *Bar Mitzvah* or *Bat Mitzvah* present.

The first mass encounter with the Roths was the annual bunfight held at their beautiful home at 31 Charlbury Road in the most fashionable part of North Oxford on the first Sunday afternoon of the new academic year. As Irene Roth later wrote in her sparkling memoir *Cecil Roth: Historian Without Tears*, these annual affairs were organised by the Oxford University Jewish Society "who scanned the University's matriculation lists for surnames which sounded as if their bearers would appreciate an invitation to our party."

As many as 200 freshmen would be greeted at the door by a personality, looking more like a Hollywood star than a don's wife and wearing enough bangles to fill a vault ("I put them on as a conversation piece for shy undergraduates," Irene once confided). While Irene enthused, Cecil had a more contained style. Her ebullience was calculated to compensate for the fact that, as she later wrote, "Cecil never found it easy to start a conversation with guests whom he did not know." In appearance, he was no less striking than she was, with an aquiline nose and a remarkable head of hair parted down the middle, with locks falling on each side. It was not surprising that Mané Katz and other leading Jewish artists of the time had asked to paint his portrait.

The bunfight was not only an introduction to the Oxford University Jewish Society but a chance for Cecil and Irene to issue students with an

invitation to their open house held every *Shabbat* afternoon. Almost everyone who was in Oxford until the mid-sixties will have a different story of these events which long remained a central meeting point of Jewish student life.

We never knew whom we would meet at those Saturday afternoon events. Sometimes there was a throng; some weeks (especially towards the end of each academic year, when punts and walks offered rival attractions) the company was more select. The open house was a circus of undergraduates, visitors to Oxford and other friends. In my time, Geoffrey and Raff Lewis were sometimes there with their lovely daughter, Lally, then a sixth-former at the Oxford High School for Girls. She later married Mark Freedland and her early death was one of the Oxford community's tragedies.

If it was one of the quieter Shabbat afternoons, there would be a chance to see some of Cecil's wonderful collection of Jewish books and other treasures - particularly the historic *Ketubot*. There was also a stream of gossip about Jewish and other personalities, many of whom the Roths met in the vacations, mixed with talk about travel, political events and history, much of it delivered in Cecil's exceptionally rich and punning vocabulary.

At a point in the afternoon when Irene felt that most of that day's company had arrived, she would take everyone into a room where tea and sandwiches were set out. Yes, *those* sandwiches. The sandwiches are the common memory that distinguishes *R.* from *post-R.* Oxonians. Only yesterday, I chanced to meet a J. Soc. member I had not seen for some years. When I mentioned that I had been asked to write these pages, he merely exclaimed "*The* Sandwiches!" and "Do you know the story about The Bite?"

Irene was not only hospitable but also practical (given the amount of entertaining she did, she had to be). By the 1960s, she owned one of the earliest deep-freezers in the country. Since she did not know how many people to expect each Saturday, she started the year by preparing an abundance of sandwiches. Any that were not consumed on the first *Shabbat* afternoon of term would be put into the freezer for the following week. The modern discoveries that link re-freezing and food-poisoning had not yet reached North Oxford. The following week, the mature sandwiches were taken out again and the supply was topped up by some new ones. For some reason, the undergraduates chose the new sandwiches in preference to the old. The uneaten sandwiches - mostly the oldest - returned to the deep freeze again. As the academic year wore on, the

contrast between each week's supply of fresh sandwiches and the ones which had now paid an increasing number of visits to the freezer became more pronounced.

This is where that - almost certainly mythical - story about *"The Bite"* comes in. One week, an undergraduate took a single bite out of a sandwich and then left the rest. According to one version, it was a deliberate experiment to test whether it would reappear on the table the next week. Another version is that the student, having taken a taste from one of the old sandwiches, decided to leave the rest. The punchline is that the sandwich with the missing bite re-emerged the following week together with the other deep freeze orphans.

The Saturday afternoon *At Home* was not Cecil's only point of contact with the Jewish students. He was one of a relatively few regulars at Saturday morning services. A friend recalls *Purim* with the Roths and the reading of the *Megillah* at 31 Charlbury Road. Cecil took out some fifteen ancient *megillot*, one for each member of the company: "Who would like this one? It's from Sixteenth Century Venice... Or this one? Eighteenth Century..."

In the summer he frequently invigilated religious students who postponed until Sunday the final examinations due to be taken on Saturday. Irene's book recounts the origins of the invigilation system. When Cecil had completed his own undergraduate studies in 1925, there had been no allowance for absence from Saturday examinations on religious grounds. Cecil himself was forced to miss two of his papers scheduled for *Shabbat*. The fact that he obtained a first class degree without them is testimony to his performance in the remaining papers as well as to his courage. When he returned to Oxford as Reader in Jewish Studies, it was apparently he who persuaded the University authorities to permit Jewish students to postpone examinations scheduled for a Saturday.

In order to prevent cheating, the Jewish student is isolated in the home of an Oxford M.A. from the Saturday morning (when the rest of the finalists sit the paper) until he takes the same examination the following day. This meant that any Jewish student being invigilated by Cecil, had to be locked into a room to prevent contact with the other students at the normal Saturday afternoon *At Home*. Irene recounts the invigilation of David Weitzman:

> On Sunday morning, after breakfast, Cecil donned full academic regalia, scarlet and blue doctoral robes, while the candidate wore formal black and a gown, complete with white bow tie, for the examination

ordeal. Cecil went to his study, instructing David to follow him several minutes later. After Cecil had closed the door behind him, David had to knock on the door and was invited to enter.

"Your name?" he was asked.

"Weitzman," David solemnly replied.

"Your desk is over there," Cecil said with equal solemnity, pointing to what was in fact the only desk in the room.

My final undergraduate year was the last to have the good fortune to know Cecil and Irene and to benefit from their welcome. For many of us, they were like an uncle and aunt. We told Roth jokes because they had made us into an extended family. Cecil retired in 1964 and he settled with Irene in Jerusalem where he had only a few packed years to live.

Looking back, his contribution is even more remarkable than it seemed at the time. He had been appointed to Oxford in 1938. His readership in Jewish Studies had been endowed by Marks and Spencer with the stipulation that he should be the first holder of the position. Undoubtedly, Harry Sacher, who had been instrumental in arranging the endowment, had been influenced by the need to combat the tide of Nazi propaganda. The study of Jewish history would not only expose anti-semitic myths but would also foster among British Jews a sense of their roots and would help to maintain a pride in Jewish traditions.

Cecil therefore assumed the role of the main Jewish standard-bearer in the University at the darkest time in Jewish history, which was also a period when the place of Jews in the University's life was far less secure than it has since become. There were a number of Jewish dons at Oxford (though fewer than today). Whereas others taught and researched in secular subjects, Cecil concentrated on Jewish studies. In the 1990s, when there has been such a notable expansion of these studies, it is difficult to imagine the novelty and the isolation of the subject when Cecil took up his post.

Cecil's everyday life as well as his writings on Jewish history obliged him to confront the catastrophes that were unfolding. In 1936, when he published the first edition of *A Short History of the Jewish People*, he ended the volume with an account of the exodus from Germany in face of Nazi persecution. In a second edition, published in 1943, the extra pages wrote of the intervening years when "anguish was added to anguish", of the German Night of Crystal in 1938, of the revival of the Ghetto in Europe and of the "massacres on a scale of ferocity which former history could not parallel".

The worst was still to come. In the concluding section of the third edition, published shortly after the war, he had to summarise the Holocaust, "incomparably the greatest disaster in Jewish life; the greatest disaster, perhaps, in the life of any people since the dawn of history."

In each edition he strove to balance hope and faith against despair. In the edition written immediately after the War, he pointed out that England's was the only Jewish community in Europe that "still held some potentialities for the immediate future. Excepting here, there was little left but penury and bitter memories." He warned against the Jewish demoralisation which was a result of the "ceaseless and extravagant" anti-semitic propaganda which was still malevolently alive during the late 1940s, even in England, as in the rest of the Jewish world." Despite these grim realities and the still uncertain position of Palestinian Jewry, he concluded that "The Providence that guides the process of history had ensured that the Jewish future was safe". And the fourth edition ended with the formation of the State of Israel: "The age-old yearnings of a people had resulted, by devious and unexpected ways, in an achievement without parallel in human history."

Cecil's scholarly and popular writings on Jewish history, his passion for Jewish objects and all the paraphernalia and legends of Jewish life, and his and Irene's humour and hospitality were successful acts of resistance against intolerable realities. Anti-semitism, he wrote, fed on Jewish demoralisation. So he and Irene created a centre of regular, lively, if eccentric Jewish activity. The Roths' North Oxford home, the bunfights, and even *those* Shabbat afternoon sandwiches provided a unique experience for hundreds of students and were one major part of Cecil's and Irene's contribution to Judaism's future.