

Introduction

by PHILIP BLOOM,

President, Birmingham Hebrew Congregation, 1955—1964

This is the story of the stained glass windows in Singers Hill Synagogue, Birmingham. In these pages will be found delightful and colourful reproductions of the windows themselves and lucid interpretations of their messages and meanings. On behalf of the Birmingham Hebrew Congregation, I would like to pay tribute to the one person mainly responsible, not only for the windows themselves, but also for this publication.

The Window Scheme was the brain child of a man who has already been honoured by a Plaque in the Synagogue; yet the few well chosen words appearing on that Plaque could hardly give an adequate indication of the amount of time and endeavour spent by Joseph Cohen in the production of these windows. As with all such undertakings, it needed someone dedicated to the task and it was the good fortune of our Congregation that Joseph Cohen took upon himself wholeheartedly to see this scheme through. He it was who co-ordinated the efforts of the Rev. Dr. Chaim Pearl, the Rev. Sidney Gold, Lionel Albury and the Hardman Studios. He it was who shepherded the whole scheme through its various channels and won for it the Council's blessing. He it was who felt that this Booklet should be published and a copy of it presented to every one of our members as a matter of record.

So, dear reader, you will see it is difficult to express all the gratitude we owe to Joseph Cohen and all the others I have mentioned. Let it be said "May these windows, whenever our gaze rests upon them, uplift our minds and gladden our hearts — a labour of love, well rewarded".

Foreword

by REV. DR. CHAIM PEARL, M.A. PH.D.

It was Dickens's Mr. Gradgrind who said "Never mind about the beautiful, give us the useful" and his sentiment expresses the view of those who are concerned entirely with utility and who find ornamentation an unnecessary extravagance. Something of this attitude undoubtedly influenced the physical character of synagogue building for many centuries. With notable exceptions they were simple even austere, and the most sympathetic student of synagogue architecture could hardly have found evidence of imaginative design or even proper planning. The physical archetype for the Jewish House of Worship throughout the centuries of exile particularly during the Middle Ages and until modern times, was the homely *Shool* not the elaborate Temple, the *shtiebel* not the ornate Sanctuary. Of course there were valid historical and social reasons for this unadorned simplicity of style. Nor must it ever be forgotten that what the little prayer room lacked in outward beauty or design was more than adequately redeemed by the intensity of its spiritual power and the religious devotion of its crowded congregations. Unlike the Ancient Greeks, the Jews refused to worship the beautiful as though it were holy. On the contrary, it was in things holy that they found the real secret and true meaning of the beautiful.

Nevertheless, there have been times when the Synagogue has also reflected the happier situation of Jewish Society. In lands of freedom and in periods of an expanding cultural horizon the Synagogue often became transformed from the simple little *Shool* to a building combining external physical beauty with spiritual force. Our historical records have references to impressive and ornate houses of Jewish worship in several lands and in different ages. In our own time the modern European and American Synagogues are ornaments of the life of Jews living in conditions of substantial freedom as well as evidence of their religious zeal. The famous Singers Hill Synagogue belongs to that tradition.

A student of synagogal architecture however cannot fail to remark on the comparative absence of stained glass even in the greater Synagogues. For the most part stained glass does not exist at all, and where it does exist it is often unimaginative in design and poorly executed. It has been often said that a major deterrent was the implication of the Second Commandment with its apparent prohibition of fashioning any figure of any living being, man or beast. Because of this, so the argument goes, Jews have not been prominent in the plastic arts. But honest scholars seriously question this assumption. However, whatever the cause, the facts of the case are clear enough to anyone who comes to study the interior decoration of European Synagogues.

Consequently, when it was decided to create a series of stained glass windows in Singers Hill, the plan became something of a challenge to do something new; to create something that would break with the dull uninspiring stereotyped productions which pass in so many other places. A scheme was worked out covering three subjects; The Sacred Land, the Sacred Days and the Sacred History. Each window had to pass two chief criteria. It had to add beauty to the Synagogue and it had to be educative in content. From the time the idea was conceived by Mr. Joseph Cohen, I was privileged to work on the project submitting plans, checking ideas, working out new illustrations and following them up step by step until each completed work of art was fixed in its proper place. Of the 26 windows in the Synagogue I was able to work with the designers of 18 of them as well as with the nine simple but charming windows in the Children's Synagogue. It was an exciting piece of work, and looking at the completed task one feels justified in saying that something significant in the history of Synagogue windows has been produced at Singers Hill. I would only add for the record, my own deep admiration of Mr. Joseph Cohen who was the main inspiration behind the entire project, from beginning to end. They now add an extra beauty to a famous Synagogue and in Jewish tradition they can be described as a religious act of *Hiddur Mitzvah* — the adornment of a religious object for the glory of God. May generations of Birmingham Jewry find in their beautiful House of Prayer a beautified and strengthened inspiration, moving their hearts to the eternal message of the Synagogue.

“A dream come true”

by JOSEPH COHEN

*What is a Great Life? It is the dream
of youth realised in old age . . .*

DE VIGNY

Singers Hill Synagogue in Birmingham was completed in 1856, having been built and inspired by a small but devout congregation of Jews. No efforts were spared by them in order to build a magnificent and imposing edifice to the Glory of God — a House of Worship for their own generation and for the generations yet to come.

Today, over one hundred years later, Singers Hill Synagogue maintains all the dignity and character that its Victorian forebears intended and remains one of the most beautiful places of worship in the City.

My earliest recollection of the Synagogue as a boy was my inattention to the Service. Yet my wandering eyes were enraptured with the beautiful edifice, its majestic columns reaching to the Heavens: for was not the curved canopy of the ceiling adorned with countless little stars? Then somehow, as my gaze came to rest on the windows, I shuddered — they seemed so out of place and not unlike the windows of some of those factories I passed daily on my way to school.

Nevertheless, they fascinated me; there were so many different kinds of obscure glass, and being of a mathematical turn of mind, I would count them — out of 12 squares of glass, perhaps 2 were alike in texture and even these were in odd positions, a veritable patchwork in glass.

These were the windows on both sides which ran along the whole length of the Synagogue. At either end, there were small windows in multi-coloured glass, and, at times, the rays of sunlight streaming through them in bright blues and reds, only seemed to accentuate the drabness of those along the sides.

How sad that this apparent neglect to finish in colour the side windows should mar the beauty of our lovely Synagogue. Could it be that our worthy forebears just were not “window” conscious?

So it was that those boyhood reflections lay dormant in my sub-conscious mind.

Some fifty years later, excitement grew as the Centenary Year of our beloved Synagogue approached. As an old member of the Executive of the Council, my attention had been drawn to our inadequate and outmoded Superannuation Scheme, which was designed to cover the needs of our Ministers and other officials on retirement — but due to changing values and economics — the sums provided were quite unrealistic in this modern age and a very serious problem confronted us. What could be done to remedy this and restore our Officials' peace of mind?

To produce a new pensions scheme was far beyond our means and could not benefit those most affected — those with the longest service. But, if a special Reserve Fund were to be created from which to provide supplementary grants to our superannuated Officials, this could be the solution. This it was that inspired the Window Scheme.

Properly handled with expert advice, not only would it greatly enhance the beauty of our Synagogue, but also be the means of creating that very necessary Reserve Fund, by inviting our members to “buy” the windows and have them dedicated to their loved ones; and on what better occasion could that scheme be launched than in its Centenary Year — 1956. And so it was that coloured illustrations of 2 typical windows were incorporated and published in the Centenary Brochure.

The scheme proved so popular that, despite the large sums raised by the Centenary Appeal itself, all the 12 windows at ground floor level were “sold” as soon as they were made and fixed, as were the 9 smaller ones in the newly erected Children's Synagogue.

So it has come to pass that in 1963, after 7 years of unremitting effort and intensive concentration, the period ascribed by the prophets of old to accomplish all great schemes, this unique panorama of 26 magnificent stained-glass windows adorns our Synagogue, thereby giving it a sense of fulfilment — of completing an unfinished symphony — yes, indeed, a dream come true.

Space permitting, what a story could be told of the many trials, tribulations and indeed frustrations and of a succession of problems which were met and overcome in the process of the work — suffice it to say that many ardent friends were ever at hand to render yeoman service and true devotion in the cause of art and beauty as well as in the search for Biblical, historical and theological knowledge on which the stories depicted by the windows are mainly based.

Foremost among those whose guidance and inspiration are gratefully acknowledged, and who made vital contributions to the success of the scheme, are Reverend Dr. Chaim Pearl, former Chief Minister of the Congregation, and later on his worthy successor, Reverend Sidney Gold. Indeed, this publication would not have been possible without their expert help in compiling all those very interesting and lucid descriptions alongside every design in this book.

Tribute must be paid to those two most excellent artists, the principals of Hardman Studios, who carried out the work with such infinite patience, care and ability, Messrs. P. A. Feeny and D. B. Taunton. Their faithful and beautiful interpretation of the chosen themes is beyond all praise.

Fullest acknowledgement is also due to all my colleagues on the Executive of the Council for their encouragement, enthusiasm and complete co-operation at all times, notably the late Mr. Ivan Shortt, former President of the Congregation, his worthy successor Mr. Philip Bloom and Mr. Lionel Albury, Chairman of the Council. The successful results of their perfect team work must be a source of immense satisfaction to all.

. . . And yet, on reflection, could it be possible that we have unwittingly provided an even greater diversion for those wandering eyes of restless youth?