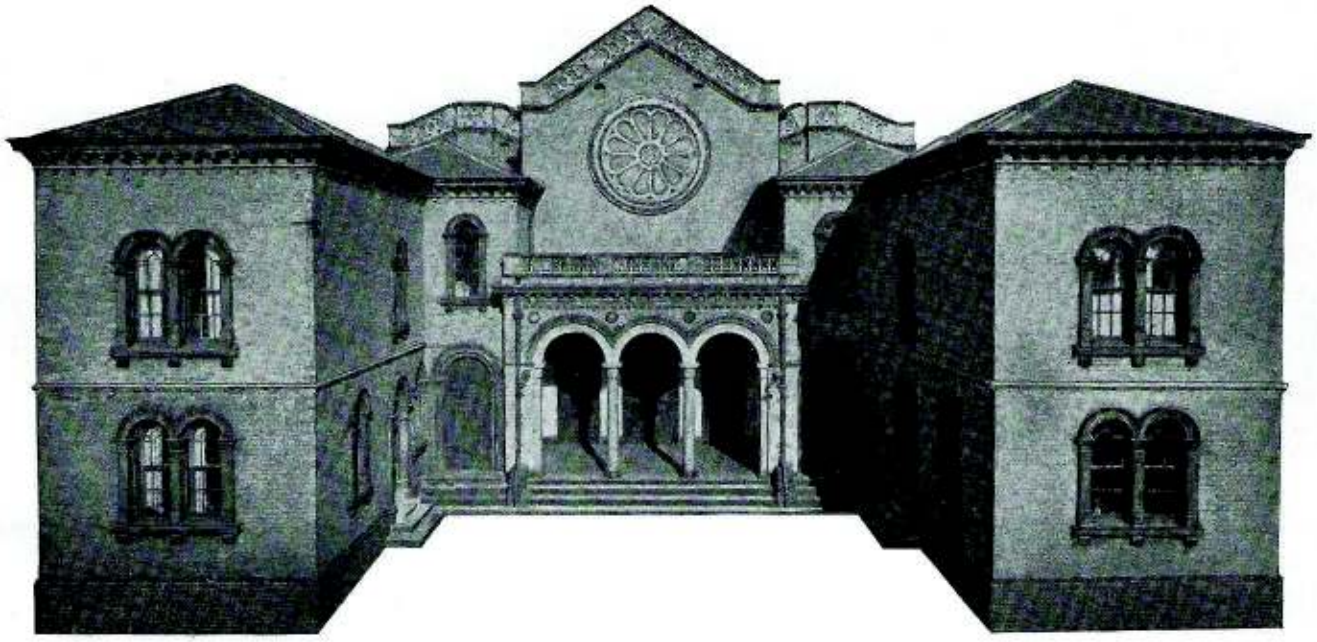
SINGERS HILL SYNAGOGUE

1956-1981 5716-5741

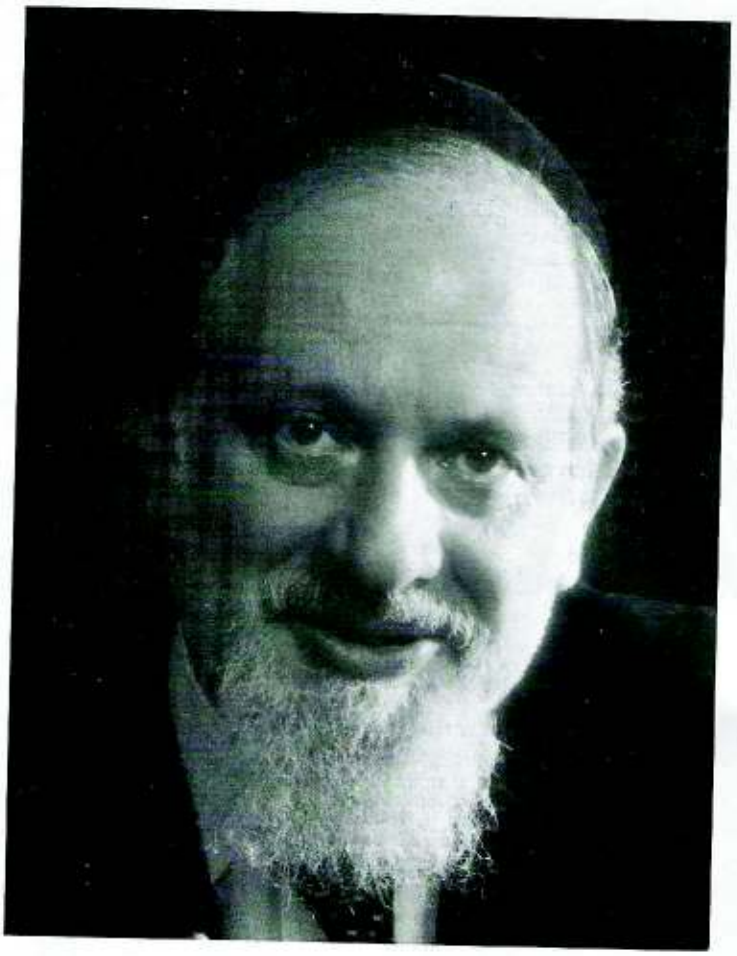


Twenty-five Years On from the Centenary of 1956

A Short History of the Birmingham Hebrew Congregation

Photographs by courtesy of Simon Livingstone

Message from The Chief Rabbi, SIR IMMANUEL JAKOBOVITS



In anticipation of the festivities which I look forward to share with you, I have much pleasure in adding my warmest greetings to the Brochure marking the 125th Anniversary of your Congregation.

There are only very few congregations in this country which can look back to such a long and rich history. The event is even more significant when set against the dark background of the thousands of synagogues destroyed in the European Holocaust and the countless others elsewhere which have ceased to function and closed their doors because the communities they once proudly served have disappeared or are no longer viable.

Our joy is great indeed, therefore, in saluting a Congregation which has gained and retained its commanding position as a leading citadel of Jewish life over a period of a century and a quarter. The distinction of your enviable record lies not only in the exceptional roll of Anglo-Jewish notables, both spiritual and lay, who have been associated with Singers Hill, but in the immense contributions made by your Congregation to the enrichment and continuity of our Anglo-Jewish heritage.

I hope the Anniversary will serve both as a monument of thanksgiving for the past and as a source of re-dedication for the future.

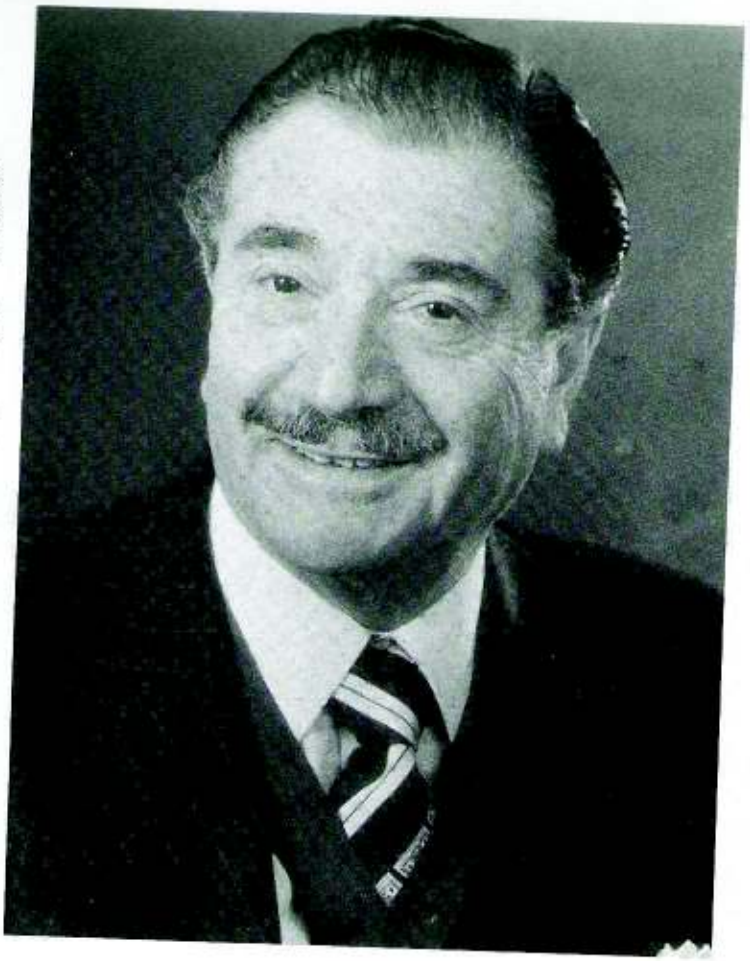
Heartily congratulating your spiritual and lay leaders as well as all your members on reaching this notable milestone, I pray that your beautiful and venerable Synagogue will continue for long to be a sacred bastion of vibrant Jewish life, preserving our hallowed traditions, promoting every worthy Jewish cause and radiating blessing to the entire House of Israel.

Message from Councillor KEN BARTON Lord Mayor of Birmingham

It is a great tribute to the continuity of the Birmingham Hebrew Congregation that I should be able now to extend Civic Greetings to them on the 125th Anniversary of their Synagogue at Singers Hill. As my predecessor said on the occasion of the Centenary, the Jewish Community in Birmingham forms a highly respected part of the Community, and I am able, from first hand knowledge to applaud and acknowledge their contribution to the public life of the City in a variety of fields of activity.

May I hope that the Community itself will draw great strength and pride from this anniversary and will move forward with the City to deal with the many problems that lie before us in the future.

Message from ROLAND DIAMOND — President



I am very honoured and proud to be President of a Congregation which has maintained and enhanced the traditions of Anglo-Jewry in general, and in particular, the good name of Jews in this City. Our present day members continue to follow the example set by their forefathers over the past 125 years.

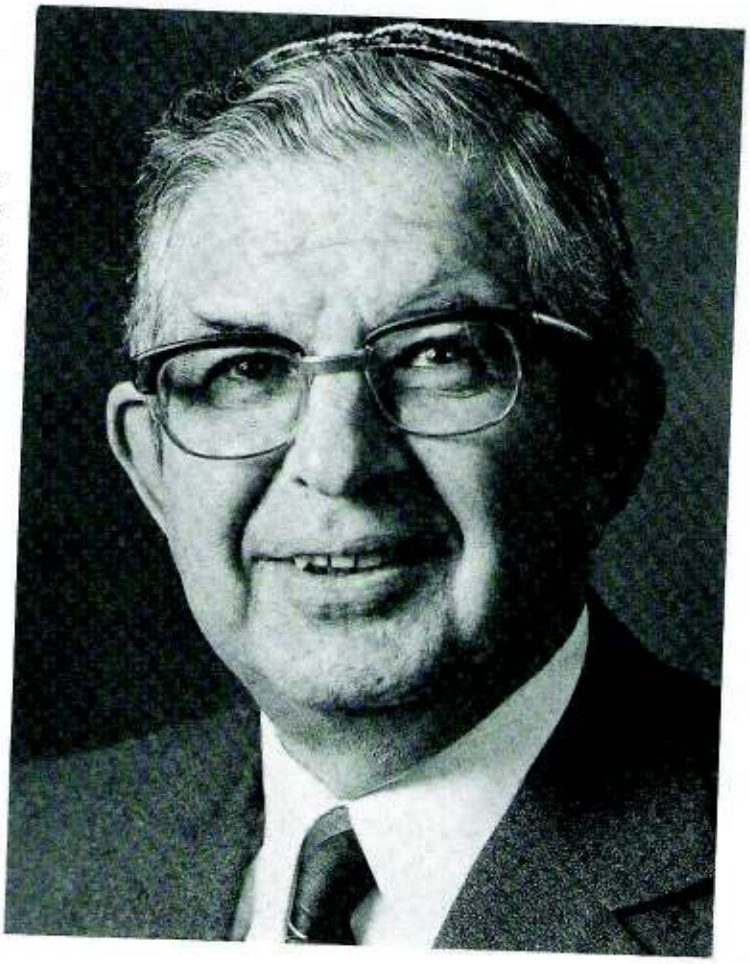
We do well to recall with gratitude those who have gone before us. Generation after generation of far seeing men were ever mindful of the needs of the future.

I am sure that all of us would acknowledge that the Reputation enjoyed by the Congregation today is due to the foundations laid by our early pioneers.

I feel it is our duty to go "FORWARD" and honour their memory, by continuing to provide both spiritual and social facilities for the future, with the same generosity as those who have gone before us.

If we can inspire ourselves with this thought, we shall indeed have an honourable future as well as being proud of the past.

Message from The Rev. SIDNEY GOLD



"Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begat us".

The small community of Jews in Birmingham, courageously undertaking the vast enterprise of erecting our magnificent synagogue, can hardly have conceived the sweeping changes that were to take place in the ensuing 125 years — certainly among the most momentous in Jewish history. Mass emigration from Eastern Europe and, later, the Nazi massacres brought large numbers of Jews to Britain's hospitable shores, many of them settling in Birmingham. Additionally, two world wars, the emergence of Israel and significant changes within Anglo-Jewry's internal structure taxed the ability of the congregation to meet unforeseen challenges. Yet, so firmly had our predecessors laid the foundations of our community, that Singers Hill was able to adapt itself to its greater role and develop into what Chief Rabbi Sir Israel Brodie once termed a "model congregation". Great leaders, religious and lay have, during this last century and a quarter, played an outstanding role both in Anglo-Jewry at large and within the great city of Birmingham.

We have a record of achievement of which we are justifiably proud. Our fervent prayer is that we shall be worthy of our forebearer's endeavours, to continue and enlarge their noble example, to the glory of God and our faith.

THE CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS OF 1956

Welcoming the guests at the Reception.

Twenty-five years ago, the Birmingham Jewish community celebrated the Centenary year of the consecration of Singers Hill Synagogue, which, in 1856, had been described by the Chief Rabbi, Dr. NATHAN ADLER, as *"an honour to the architect, a glory to the community, and an ornament to the town"*.

The Birmingham Hebrew Congregation, conscious of the splendour and magnificence of its house of worship, left no stone unturned to make the occasion of its Centenary one of lasting memory. The well determined plans of the Council to build for the future were outlined at the Celebration Banquet which was held at the Grand Hotel on Sunday, 14th October, 1956 in the presence of the Chief Rabbi, the Very Rev. ISRAEL BRODIE and a large gathering of important dignitaries, as well as a host of members of the community.

The main headings under which the Centenary Appeal for £50,000 was launched consisted of:-

A CHILDREN'S SYNAGOGUE

NEW STAINED GLASS WINDOWS FOR THE SYNAGOGUE

ALTERATIONS TO THE COMMUNAL HALL AND SYNAGOGUE BUILDINGS

In the event, the Appeal itself proved highly successful, the required money was more than raised, and the work was commenced. Even so, it was to take several years before the accomplishment of all these plans, and, accordingly it will be seen that the first decade of the next 25 years was largely taken up by the ultimate completion of these schemes.

THE HISTORY OF SINGERS HILL

If bricks and mortar were to be the essence of the Council's grandiose plans, the Centenary Year also marked the fulfilment of 100 years of historic growth and development. The Council had long had the desire to commemorate the occasion with the publication of a History of Singers Hill 1856-1956 and with considerable foresight, had prepared this a long time in advance so that copies could be distributed at the Banquet.

A local historian, Mr. HARRY LEVINE, was commissioned to write the History, and Minister Emeritus, Rev. Dr. A. COHEN, was invited to edit it so that a shortened version might be published in book form. As these gentlemen no longer resided in the City at that time the entire project had to be co-ordinated and largely achieved by correspondence. One of the Council's newest and youngest members, Mr. STANLEY F. COHEN, was appointed to liaise and finally to publish the book, of which this is a continuation that he has also written.

Mr. Philip Bloom, President of the Congregation, presents an antique silver ink stand to the Lord Mayor as a gift to the City of Birmingham.

The Lord Mayor is presented with a miniature Menorah.

Guests at the Banquet.

1956-1968

THE CHILDREN'S SYNAGOGUE
A NEW CHIEF MINISTER — THE STAINED GLASS WINDOWS — THE KING DAVID SCHOOL
ALTERATIONS TO THE SYNAGOGUE

THE CHILDREN'S SYNAGOGUE

The forebears of the Birmingham Hebrew Congregation in 1856 had built a synagogue for their children's children. They had been small in numbers but they had built wisely and well. The congregation was to grow in numbers so that by the turn of the century what had apparently been far too large an edifice for so small a community was filled to capacity.

Singers Hill had been blessed with wise counsellors both in the Ministry and amongst the lay leaders of its Council, whose greatest honour was to achieve a place in so select a company. The history of the first hundred years is replete with the names of men of outstanding calibre who were to leave the indelible mark of their authority and genius.

Not least amongst these were the men who devised the Centenary projects. The Children's Synagogue was to be built as a small sanctuary in which the children would conduct their own religious services on Sabbaths and Festivals. It was to be beautifully furnished with all the appurtenances of a Jewish house of worship. There the children of the congregation would grow up to love their Jewish heritage and become familar with the traditions of their people; there they would be provided with a training ground which would strengthen their loyalties to their ancient faith.

The Children's Synagogue was also intended to be used for a Beth Midrash and for week-day services. Adjoining would be located a new vestry for the ministers which would enable the clergy to pass directly from the main Synagogue to the Children's Synagogue without leaving the building. The new wings to the main building also served to provide other amenities for the sexton and caretaker as well as to re-arrange their accommodation.

By October, 1958, all these works had been completed and the President was able to announce to the Council that the consecration of the Children's Synagogue could shortly take place. Due to the unfortunate indisposition of the Chief Rabbi, this consecration was postponed and ultimately took place on 3rd May, 1959. The consecration was performed by Rev. Dr. CHAIM PEARL and the opening ceremony by Mr. IVAN SHORTT.

The new Synagogue was named the ABRAHAM COHEN CHILDREN'S SYNAGOGUE, in memory of the Minister Emeritus, who had died in May, 1957. From the day of its consecration the Children's Synagogue was to fulfil its main purpose of attracting the young members of the congregation to Sabbath and Festival Services. Many were the devoted members of the Council who gave their time in the supervision for these children, in particular Mr. PHILIP FYNE, and the ministers under whose guidance they were held.

Mr. Ivan Shortt opens the door at the consecration of the new Children's Synagogue — 3rd May, 1959.

A NEW CHIEF MINISTER

Late in 1959, the President, Mr. PHILIP BLOOM, intimated to the Council that the

Presentation to Rev. Dr. Chiam Pearl and Mrs. Pearl on leaving for London — 26th June, 1960.

Induction Service for Rev. Sidney Gold — September, 1960.

Chief Minister, Rev. Dr. CHAIM PEARL, was considering the call he had received to become the Minister of one of London's leading synagogues. Dr. Pearl had served the congregation with great distinction as its Chief Minister since 1949 and had been Assistant Minister to Rev. Dr. ABRAHAM COHEN for several years previously. However, Dr. Pearl had made it clear that he would only take up his new appointment at a time convenient for Singers Hill.

The office of Chief Minister had always been held by men of outstanding ability and the year 1960 presented the Executive with the difficult task of finding a worthy successor to Dr. Pearl. That this was achieved by them within a period of only nine months was a further sign of their great ability. In September, 1960, the Rev. SIDNEY GOLD, previously Minister of the Bayswater Synagogue, London, was inducted as Chief Minister, and happily remains in office to this day, further enhancing the status of Singers Hill and adding to the prestige and dignity of his worthy predecessors. Thus, the remarkable record of almost seventy years with only three Chief Ministers is one with which Singers Hill can be very proud.

Equally long has been the record of Assistant Ministers. Rev. Dr. REUBEN BROOKES who joined the Congregation in 1950 served also as Education Officer until his death in 1979. The cantors included the name of Rev. W. LEWI, who, for 32 years from 1933 until his retirement in 1965, delighted the congregation with his magnificent tenor voice, and today remains the Chazan Emeritus. In 1971, the Rev. STANLEY BRICKMAN was inducted as cantor and holds the office today, also displaying great musical ability.

THE STAINED GLASS WINDOWS

The entire concept of Stained Glass Windows for Singers Hill was the brain-child of Mr. JOSEPH COHEN, who, in 1956, was Vice-President, and had served on the Executive of the Council for many years. The task of designing and creating the 26 beautifully coloured windows in the main Synagogue and the nine smaller ones in the Abraham Cohen Children's Synagogue was to take seven long years. These years of unremitting effort and intense concentration on the part of Mr. Cohen, ably assisted by the Chief Minister, Rev. Dr. Pearl initially and subsequently Rev. Gold, were completed in 1963. A magnificent coloured brochure telling the story of the new windows in great detail was published by the Congregation in 1964.

These windows were inspired by the need to create a special Reserve Fund to supplement grants to superannuated officials of the Congregation. Accordingly they were endowed so that they might each be dedicated by families in memory of their loved ones. This proved to be highly successful in that all twelve windows at ground floor level had been taken up as soon as they had been made and fixed, as were the nine smaller ones in the Children's Synagogue.

Meanwhile, by 1958, the much loved Minister Emeritus, Rev. Dr. ABRAHAM COHEN, had died and among the many stained glass windows was one dedicated to him and to his equally beloved wife, Bessie.

During this period, it should also be mentioned that the Laws and Constitution, which had originally been settled by Mr. JOSEPH COHEN, were the subject of much revision and re-writing. From 1963, a small sub-committee met weekly for almost two years before this difficult task was completed.

THE KING DAVID SCHOOL

At a meeting of the Council on 30th December, 1959, Mr. S. P. ABRAMS reported that the Hebrew School in St. Lukes Road no longer met the requirements of the community. The Jewish population had largely moved away from the area and consideration should be given to its transfer to a more convenient location. It is of interest that the Hebrew School, whose own Centenary had taken place in 1943, had been built in St. Lukes Road by the Hebrew Congregation in 1931, and amongst its Foundation Managers were the stalwarts of the Birmingham Hebrew Congregation who had ever recognised the prime importance of Jewish education. The part played by Singers Hill Synagogue in the administration should be recorded and is worthy of acknowledgment.

It was not until 1964 that the contract for the building of the new school was signed. The COTTON family had generously defrayed the congregation's share of the cost of the new building for which a fine site in Moseley had been found. A committee was then set up to be responsible for all matters relating to the new school. The name KING DAVID SCHOOL was

Rev. Dr. and Mrs. Abraham Cohen — a life time of service.

Signing the contract for the King David School — 1964.

adopted. Meanwhile, the freehold of the old school in St. Lukes Road was acquired by the Congregation, again through the generosity of the COTTON family. Many years later, the wisdom of the purchase of this freehold was to become apparent. In 1965, the old school was let to the Local Education Authorities.

The headmaster of the King David School was Mr. R. E. LEVY, from 1950 until his retirement in 1979 when the new headmaster, Mr. H. J. GOLLAM was appointed.

The new King David School was completed in June, 1966 and officially opened by SIR LIONEL RUSSELL in June of that year. The Hebrew and Religious Classes, which had hitherto been scattered throughout the city, were centralised in the new building.

ALTERATIONS TO SYNAGOGUE AND COMMUNAL HALL

The third stage of the Centenary plans was for alterations to the adjoining Communal Hall and other synagogual buildings. Not all the intended works were completely carried out, but by 1958, the re-constructed hall was opened by Mr. JOSEPH COHEN. The former kitchen, and the Succah alongside the main hall, had been converted into a new lounge with direct approach from an improved entrance lobby. A larger modern kitchen had been installed and various other small alterations had been made.

But, by 1961, a more important matter had arisen which was to take priority over any further work which had been envisaged for the Communal Hall. The main structure of the synagogue itself was in need of vital repairs, which had to be carried out at a cost of £20,000, whilst it was also in urgent need of re-decoration. At this time much thought was also being given to a plan to completely reconstruct the Bimah area.

By the end of 1962, work had commenced on an elaborate scheme of re-decoration and a reconstruction of the Bimah, so that the Ark, the focal point of the Synagogue, could be more easily seen. The work on the Bimah area was completed within the remarkably short period of only ten weeks, thus minimising the disturbance of congregational services, and the costs were generously defrayed by Mr. STANLEY COHEN.

Singers Hill Synagogue, interior looking towards the new Bimah.

The new King David School, Moseley.

At this time it was discovered that the elaborate heating installation for the main Synagogue was likely to need attention, as the system was old. However, its ultimate replacement was postponed and did not take place until another 17 years later.

In 1967, the City of Birmingham officially recognised the classic Victorian architecture and beauty of Singers Hill Synagogue. It was listed as a Building of Historic interest. This will ever protect it against the redevelopment plans which surround it. Indeed, in the heart of the old city, it is a protected building which, in all its dignity, remains a place for visitors to admire and respect more and more as the years pass by.

1969-1981

THE ELLIS STREET LAND
EXTENSION TO KING DAVID SCHOOL — THE NEW HEATING SYSTEM
A 'WINDFALL' — TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ON

THE ELLIS STREET LAND

Although the Congregation owned the synagogue buildings, the land adjoining the Communal Hall belonged to the city. Intensive negotiations for the purchase of this land were finalised in 1969, when the site was purchased for £3,300. It had been the intention to introduce a grandiose scheme for the entire re-building of the Communal Hall with the provision of a Youth Centre and new congregational offices. This plan was abandoned when it was found that the cost would be quite prohibitive.

However, the land adjoining the hall was landscaped and turned into a car park, the cost of which was generously contributed by Mr. JOSEPH COHEN.

EXTENSION TO KING DAVID SCHOOL

During 1971, plans were announced for the extension of the King David School by the re-instatement of the Nursery Class Project. Two classrooms were enlarged and the necessary additional cloakrooms provided. Future further extensions were proposed should children remain at the school until twelve or thirteen plus. By 1972, part of this scheme had met with the approval of the Education Authority and entailed the Congregation in an expenditure of £10,000. The new Nursery Unit was officially opened in September, 1974.

Many innovations in the field of education were undertaken during all these years, with varying degrees of success, by the Congregation. Adult Study Groups were formed, offering both modern Hebrew and general Jewish knowledge. Sunday morning services and brunch for teen-agers had been, for a time, extremely popular. During summer-time, Friday night choral services were extended to include Kiddush and Zemirot, with members and their children encouraged to take an active part. Visiting ministers were occasionally invited to address these special services. A new concept of pre-Barmitzvah training was introduced involving new standards of preliminary preparation.

Perhaps the proudest aspect of synagogual activity was the greater involvement in inter-faith relationships within the city. In the course of the years very many hundreds of members of other denominations visited the synagogue and were able to learn something of Judaism.

THE NEW HEATING SYSTEM

Not until 1979 did the Congregation face any difficulty which would entail very large capital expenditure. However, it should be mentioned that during 1977, the choir, which was now difficult to accommodate in the Bimah area, was moved to a new stall at the rear of the synagogue. The cost of the stall had been generously defrayed by Mrs. AUDREY HAWKINS. At the same time, a new organ was acquired for weddings, donated by Mr. DEREK COTTON.

In April, 1979, it became apparent that the ancient heating system of the synagogue had not only broken down but had served its full life. By July, the estimates for the provision of a completely new and improved system were received and totalled no less than £40,000. By the end of the year, the urgency of the work was such that drastic measures had to be taken to put the work in hand and to raise the money. A "compulsory levy" was made on all members and it is to their credit that, within two years, the entire amount required had been raised.

A 'WINDFALL'

In June, 1980, the Local Education Authority decided not to renew its lease of the old St. Lukes Road School. This meant that the freehold property, so wisely acquired for a small sum only 16 years earlier, could now be sold with vacant possession. Negotiations were entered into with the City Estates Department at a figure of £75,000. This was successful and provided Singers Hill with a most unexpected "windfall" with very much needed funds at a time when economic conditions were causing serious grounds for concern.

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ON

So the salient features of 25 years following the Centenary of 1956 have been recorded. Not recorded are the personalities who, in the passage of the years, have passed on to a higher plane. Sadly, they are too many, even over a period as short as a mere 25 years, to detail in any depth. The names of the Executive and Council as printed in the Centenary Brochure have changed beyond recognition, for, with very few exceptions, hardly a name remains the same.

Great men have come and gone, both in the lay leadership and the clergy of Singers Hill. Even so, the tradition of this great congregation lives on.

The world has changed as well over these years. In 1956 the advent of the State of Israel was still almost a novelty. Today we acknowledge its growth to manhood after triumphing in several terrible wars. Part of our contribution is the heavy toil of our small community, for there are many who have accepted the challenge of Aliyah and whole families have left Singers Hill for a new life in Eretz Israel.

Those who remain behind are left to carry on the tradition and history of Singers Hill. We do so in humility and love. We plan for the future and for our children. We do so in the knowledge that our small community is growing smaller still and that our great synagogue is now reverting back to its beginning . . . a house of prayer built too large for its day. Who knows whether the future will restore the size of our community? It seems unlikely, yet the ways of the Almighty are strange indeed. It may happen that there will come to us yet again refugees from other unhappier lands to live and build with us in peace, and that thereby new blood will be injected into us as is flowing to Israel. These things we are not given to forsee. Our task is to accept an ingathering of the exiles to the Holy Land. If that be the will of God, then we accept it graciously and we shall struggle on despite all difficulties in the knowledge that our "children's children" will be taken care of, in exactly the same way as our forebears built Singers Hill for their "children's children".

It was in this context that His Excellency the Israeli Ambassador, Mr. SHLOMO ARGOV, following an official visit to the city in January, 1981, wrote thanking the community for its hospitality in these terms: "The deep commitment of your community to Israel expressed in so many ways, but above all in the great number of "olim" from your city, was deeply heartwarming. I realise full well the depletion this causes but was deeply touched that you should nonetheless recognise the centrality of "aliyah" to our common cause".

These thoughts were far from the mind of the author of the Centenary History when he wrote:— *"It will be another hand which will turn the pages of the Minutes so meticuously written by the present Secretary; it will be another mind which will select the facts, and appraise the work, the achievements, the progress and development. But, without indulging in flights of fancy, nor entering in the hazardous field of prophecy, it can confidently be asserted that the Birmingham Hebrew Congregation, fortified by the knowledge of past trials and tribulations, encouraged by happy results in previous crises, and strengthened by the exertions and example of its honoured worthies, will still emerge as a model community for Anglo-Jewry, and Singers Hill still remain the centre, round which all movements and activities revolve, and to which the community will ever look for guidance and leadership".*

So be it.

WARDENS AND HONORARY OFFICERS OF THE TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

1956-1981

PRESIDENT

1955-64	Philip Bloom, J.P.
1964-69	Harry Gompertz
1969-76	David Zissman
1976-	Roland Diamond

TREASURER

Joseph Cohen	1955-57
Harry Gompertz	1957-62
Gerald Blumenthal, J.P.	1962-69
Isaac Cohen	1969-81
Gerald Abrahams	1981-

CHAIRMEN OF THE COUNCIL

1955-57	Harry Gompertz
1957-65	Lionel Albury
1965-69	David Zissman
1969-72	Gerald Blumenthal, J.P.
1973-80	Derek E. Cotton
1980-	Lester Marks

MINISTERS AND OFFICIALS OF THE CONGREGATION

CHIEF MINISTERS

1949-60	Rev. Dr. Chaim Pearl, M.A.
1960-	Rev. Sidney Gold, B.A.

ASSISTANT MINISTER

1950-79	Rev. Dr. R. S. Brookes

FIRST READERS

1933-65	Rev. W. Lewi
1965-69	Rev. M. Katz
1969-71	Rev. M. Forscher
1971-	Rev. S. Brickman

SECRETARIES

1946-59	Samuel Goldberg
1959-	Ronald Singer