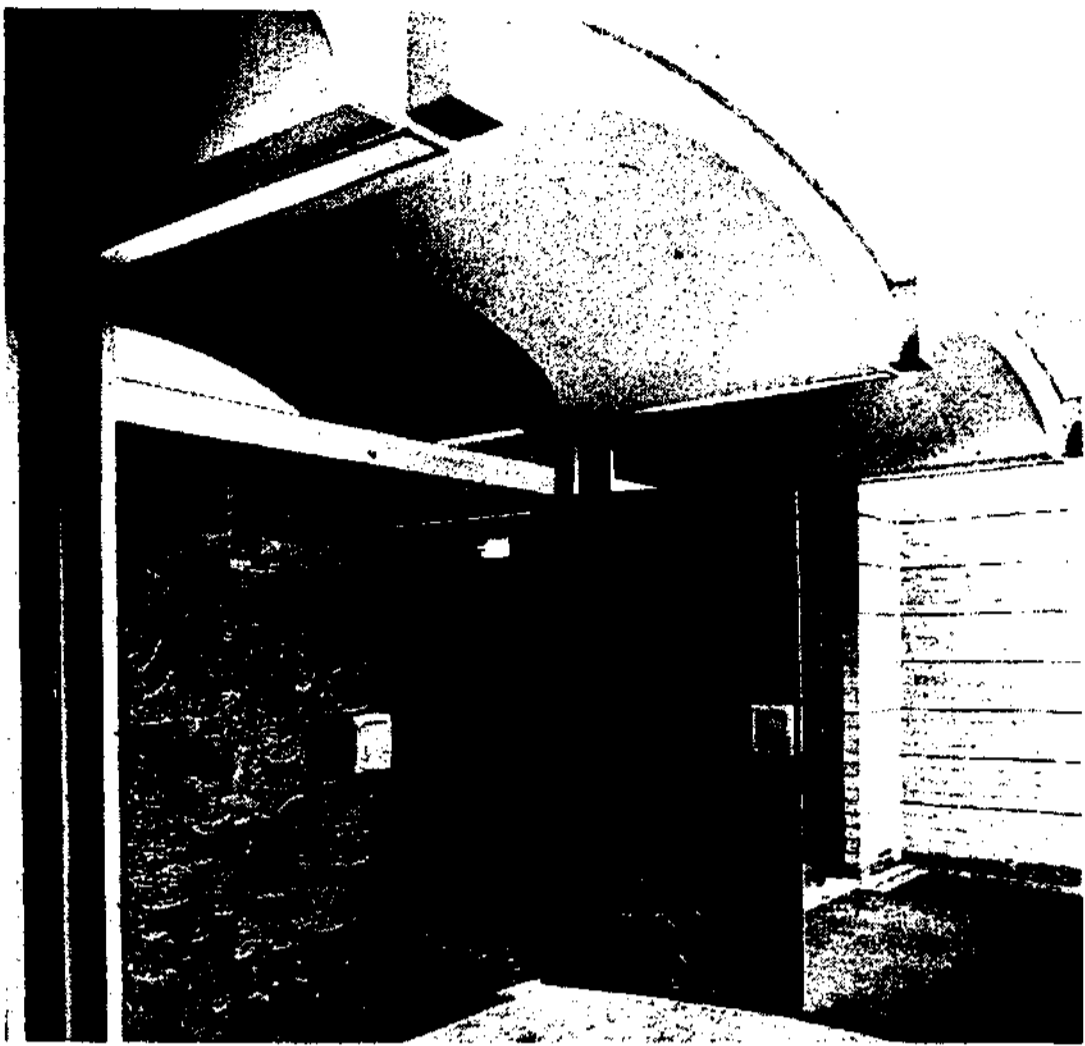
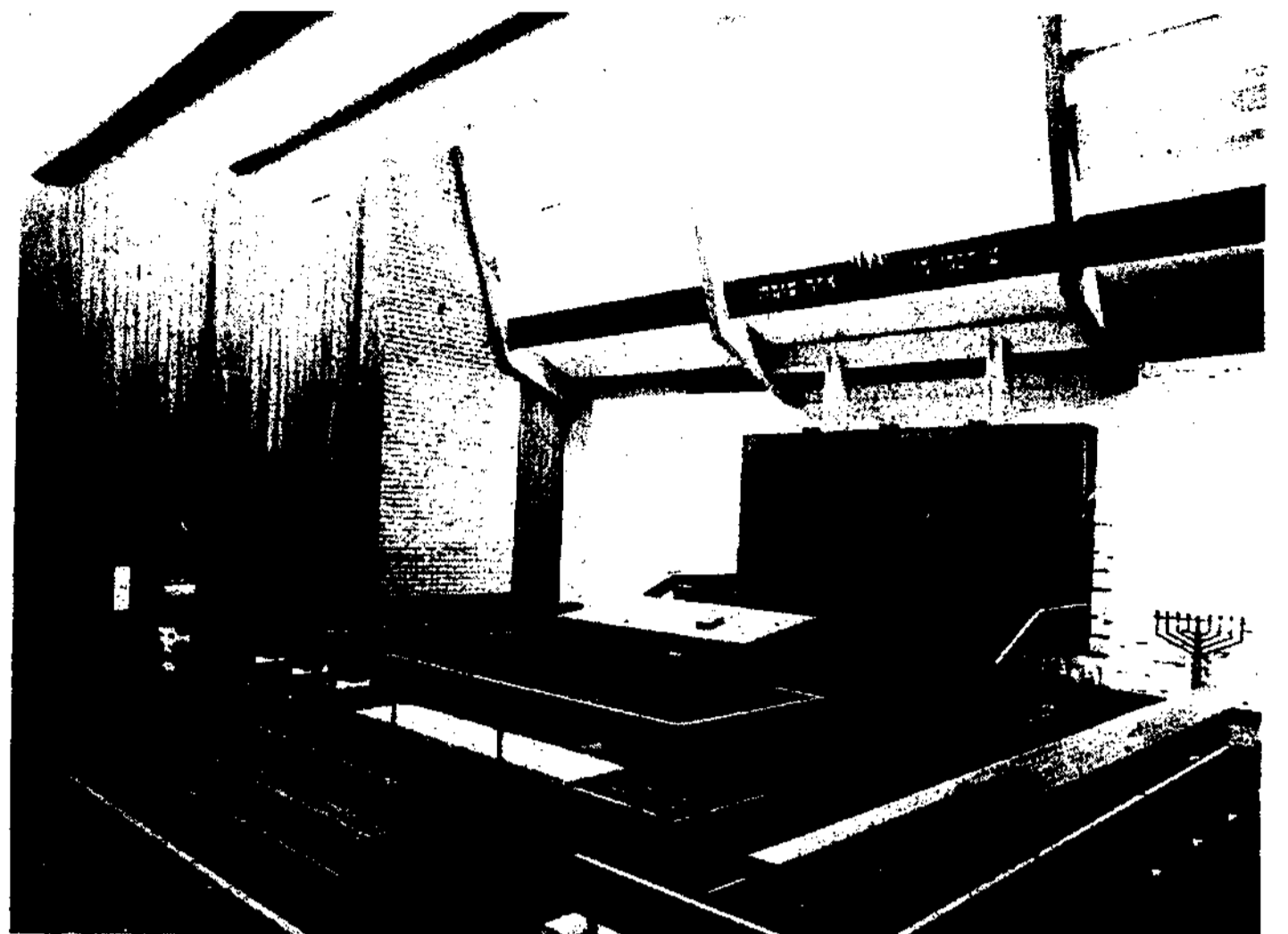




City of sweetness



Left: The entrance and sculptured doors of Oxford's magnificent synagogue and communal centre in Richmond Road, designed by David Stern and Partners and opened three years ago. The interior view (on the right) shows the bima and Ark



WHEN JEWS started to arrive in England in the wake of William the Conqueror, they chose Oxford as one of the first places in which to settle. Later on its university became the first to admit Jews as teachers (Cambridge had the first Jewish students, but they were unable to proceed to a degree). Another, lesser-known, though still notable, "first" for the city of dreaming spires was the opening in 1650 of England's earliest coffee house by "one Jacob, a Jew."

Both Jews and Oxford have come a long way since then and nowadays a thriving residential community co-exists with a well-established university Jewish Society, coming together at the bright, modern synagogue and communal centre in Richmond Road, a modest little street on the west side of the town, not too far from the station.

The centre's completion in 1975 meant that the labours of several generations of students, academics, townspeople and others had borne fruit. The necessary funds were obtained through the efforts of a number of worthies, among them Lord Segal, deputy speaker of the House of Lords and still an Oxford resident; and George Silver, a successful restaurateur and the congregation's president throughout the 'sixties.

Mr Silver, whose former restaurant, "Long John Silver's," provided kosher meals for students in the days before they ran their own canteen, is perhaps the modern counterpart of that seventeenth-century coffee-house proprietor. He has also been described as "a natural successor to Sidney Greenstreet," having appeared in numerous acting roles since he was spotted in the street by some movie talent scouts on the lookout for a heavy gangster type—which, I am assured, is far removed from his real-life personality.

Probably the most colourful of all Oxford Jewish characters in recent memory was, of course, Cecil Roth, who held the readership in post-biblical Hebrew studies for many years after establishing the post in the 1930s. He and his wife held regular open house on Shabbat afternoons, and were the focal point for all visiting Jewish VIPs. The Rev Malcolm Weisman, now Jewish chaplain to the university, recalls an occasion during his own undergraduate days when visiting the Roth household just after Pierre Mendes-France had been elected Premier of France. "We were rather an aloof bunch, as Oxford students unfortunately can be, and tended to ignore the Roths' other visitors. So I was suitably taken aback when, having asked Cecil if he had ever met the new French Premier, I was pointedly informed that Mendes-France was the quiet man in the corner of the room whom we had all snubbed the previous Shabbat!"

Many prominent Jewish celebrities are Oxford graduates, including Esther Rantzen, who read English and did a lot of revue and cabaret; film director John Schlesinger, a former Balliol man,

responsible for such successes as "Sunday, Bloody Sunday," "Far From the Madding Crowd" and "Marathon Man"; and Alan Coren, editor of "Punch" and one of the country's leading humorous writers.

This term's president of the university Jewish Society is Michael Gillis, whose elder brother is a former president. Educated at Gateshead Yeshiva, Michael experienced a profound "culture shock" on first coming up to Oxford. Indeed, for many a young Jew accustomed to a close, structured home life, that first rudderless exposure to the vast flux of the university can be overwhelming. And this is where the Jewish Society is so valuable. As Michael Gillis put it, "the J.Soc." (as it's invariably referred to by its members) is "unlike most other undergraduate Societies within the multitude to be found throughout Oxford—a total Society, offering cultural, religious and social activities." It embraces all shades of religious—and non-religious—opinion, and recent presidents have ranged freely between male and female, Orthodox and Progressive. All elements seem to blend well, as indeed appears to be the case within the Oxford Jewish community at large, which Malcolm Weisman describes as "completely inter-denominational."

One former "Progressive" president of the J.Soc. is 20-year-old Wendy Pollecoff, whose parents had actually first met while students at Oxford. Wendy encountered a certain amount of unease at her appointment, but succeeded in attracting several lively new members. She was followed as president in the Hilary (Spring) term of 1978 by Philip Klipstein, an Orthodox student from Bradford. He put a lot of effort into initiating an informal Jewish studies programme for people with little or no reli-

gious knowledge. This was actively taken up by his successor, Sue Samson, a student at Oxford Polytechnic and a keen Progressive whose easy co-operation with both Philip Klipstein and Michael Gillis seems to demonstrate the integrated nature of Oxford student Jewry.

Two other Societies that command support among Jewish students in Oxford are the Israel Society, which is concerned to promote understanding of all aspects of Israel and Israeli life; and, more eccentrically, the "Cholent Society." This latter is an exclusively male dining club which has been in existence for over twenty years. It holds one meal a term which is attended by various senior members of the university.

The residents' current president is David Lewis, a don at Christ Church College. Other notable locals include Laurie Bloom, formerly secretary of the congregation for half a century and largely responsible for keeping it together during the 'twenties and 'thirties; Lionel Kochan, who is, in fact, Bearsted Reader in Jewish History at Warwick University, and his wife, Miriam, with whom he recently published a "Pictorial History of Jews in Eastern Europe." Very much in evidence, too, is Sir Isaiah Berlin, Fellow of All Souls College, and one of the most distinguished of living philosophy scholars. An Isaiah Berlin lecture is always an exciting and popular occasion and his quickfire manner of delivery has been compared by Professor Chimen Abramsky (of University College, London) to the "speed of a racing driver who knows the track, confident in that his machine will bring him to the goal."

Five miles beyond Oxford, to the north west, lies the imposing seventeenth-century Manor House of Yarnton. Today this is the home of the Oxford Centre

for Post-Graduate Hebrew Studies, under the direction of the eminent Hebrew lecturer, Dr David Patterson. With access to an outstanding collection of Hebrew and Yiddish books and manuscripts in the university Bodleian Library, and its own Kressel Archive and Library containing more modern material, the Centre makes an important contribution to contemporary Jewish scholarship. Many undergraduates take advantage of the Modern Hebrew and Yiddish classes that are offered at the Post-Graduate Centre.

Oxford's other "Centre"—the one in Richmond Road—belongs to the residential community, who allow the student J.Soc. free use of it. Kosher meals are available there every Friday evening during term time, and on one or two week-days. There is a guest speaker each Friday, who then faces a fairly informal question time.

The students organise services in term, primarily of an Orthodox nature, although Progressive services are also held on the premises or sometimes in college rooms. The light, airy shul boasts an elegant set of scrolls which were brought to Oxford from Canterbury Synagogue when it closed in 1931.

Even though the different groups within the Society operate in quiet harmony, both Wendy Pollecoff and Philip Klipstein feel that there could be a more fruitful exchange of viewpoints; and Michael Gillis detects a certain lack of vitality at some of the Friday-night meetings as a result of the absence of non-observant Jews. He puts this down to what he sees as "the strange but inevitable distrust shown by the non-religious to the religious, whether their leanings be Orthodox or Progressive." And each of the presidents I spoke to lamented the fact that, out of an estimated 800 Jewish students in Oxford, the Society's mailing-list rarely exceeds 300, while there is a nucleus of 30 or so stalwarts in a reasonably steady membership of around 70 or 80. Perhaps the uncommitted find Oxford's abundant charms just too seductive.

Even so, the city and university of Oxford are steeped in Jewish history, and many Jews have played their parts in creating the special atmosphere of the place. This is not really surprising in view of the reverence for learning and beauty common to both Oxford and Judaism. Far gone are the days of confinement within the medieval Jewry (or "Judaismus") between Carfax, St Aldate's and the Great Gate of Christ Church, and the Jewish presence in Oxford has become as diverse, positive and cosmopolitan as most others.

Despite its lack of conventional and identifiable communal facilities, many Jews for many years have discovered in Oxford a welcoming and stimulating environment. And to be in "that sweet city" on a Sabbath eve is to find it easy to feel about Oxford as Matthew Arnold did 100 years ago that "Lovely all times she lies, lovely tonight!"



Sir Isaac Wolfson (centre) pictured at the opening of Wolfson College, Oxford, with Professor Sir Isaiah Berlin (left), then president of the college, and Mr Harold Macmillan, chancellor of the university