

MEMORIES OF OXFORD SYNAGOGUE

By K. R. A. HART

"YOU should join the college on Wednesday, October 8." Thus Mr. J. U. Powell, senior tutor of St. John's, in a letter to me towards the end of September, 1919. I did join the college on the date he mentioned, going up as a freshman: and on the evening of Friday, October 10, I made my way to Oxford Synagogue.

There was at once something dignified yet warm, austere yet inviting, about the stone Gothic porchway, with its Hebrew inscription, "Beth Ha-knesset," along a massive stone slab which was then, if memory serves, wholly exposed and not, as shown in the accompanying photograph, bricked up to reveal only the letters and their immediate surround.

Rather surprisingly, I felt, the porchway opened on to a footpath leading not to a synagogue of any sort of conventional design or structure, but to what I had been always taught to call an "iron church." Less surprisingly, I soon held the building in deep affection for its very unpretentiousness, and had good reason to believe that my fellow-members of the university and congregants did likewise.

Most of them were in fact there that Friday night. Of the senior members of the university were present only two, Ephraim Lipson, reader in economic history, and the Rev. H. M. Segal (afterwards Rabbi Segal and Professor of Mishnaic Hebrew at Jerusalem). The undergraduates present included a young, recently demobilised chaplain, who, as the Rev. Israel Brodie, was at Balliol; the Rev. M. S. Simmons, who had the great distinction of being "letter perfect" in his final examination some two years later; the brothers Leon and Cecil Roth, both names, indeed, to conjure with in Jewish and secular learning and culture; Jacob Isaacs (now Professor of English at Queen Mary College, London); and Michael Siderski, a Cambridge graduate of considerable distinction in the Oriental Languages tripos, and at this time engaged at

Oxford in Assyriological studies, which were to earn him his B.Litt.

Indeed, a galaxy of talent was here: but he who was for many of us the brightest light of all was not added until the beginning of next term, when, in January, 1920,

Herbert Loewe returned from active service in India to resume his work as Cowley Lecturer in Rabbinic Hebrew.

Shabbos afternoon hospitality at the Loewe's was one of the events of the week, which no undergraduate who went regularly to synagogue could miss without giving some degree of offence. To be present when Loewe made Havdala was a pleasure in itself and stimulated at least one of those who heard him to that active participation in the conduct of Friday night and Sabbath morning services that was felt so desirable.

Foremost among the celebrants was M. S. Simmons, already a graduate of London University and a minister whose renderings of the Friday evening service were magnificent and, indeed, enabled me, by paying the closest attention to his melodies week by week, ultimately to take my turn regularly at reading that service myself.

Leon Roth, too, generously conducted, either in his own rooms at Exeter or in Cecil Roth's rooms at Merton, Talmudical study circles for the benefit of all who liked to attend

them: and he minded not at all that at least one or two of these had no knowledge whatever of the subject. His translations and expositions were invariably such as could appeal directly and simply to the most untutored mind: and one never left his study circle without a feeling that something had been gained.

Those who came to lecture in the



synagogue (and, in most cases, to the Adler Society, as it then was, on Friday night), included Haham Dr. Moses Gaster (at whose lectures non-Jewish dons were often present), the late Chief Rabbi, Dr. Hertz, Dayan Mendelsohn, the Rev. A. A. Green, and Rabbi Dr. Mattuck. Claude Montefiore, too, came on one occasion. Observing, while he was lec-

turing, studied intently on the faces of youthful disapprovers of Liberal Judaism, he suddenly said, without batting an eyelid: "Yes, I know all this sounds very difficult, but when you're grown up you'll understand what I mean."

About three years after I had gone down, and at a time when I was a very young barrister, I used to see poor Loewe fairly dashing about Fleet Street in the course of his work as assistant editor of the JEWISH GUARDIAN, edited by Laurie Magnus. This work necessitated his travelling from Oxford to London and back two or three times a week, and I remember well that, much as he loved Oxford, it was something of a relief to him when, in the course of time, he received an appointment at Cambridge, where he had been an undergraduate, and was able to give up the arduous journalistic work.

Neubauer Centenary

At least one notable event, however, was to take place before that. In 1931 came the centenary of Neubauer, who had in his time been Bodley's Librarian at Oxford. It was made the occasion of celebrations mostly organised and directed by Loewe himself. They included a pilgrimage to the site of the martyrdom of Haggai the proselyte, a service attended by the Vice-Chancellor, Holmes-Dudden of Pembroke, during which the synagogue was packed to capacity and the already burdened atmosphere was not improved by a congregant's inadvertently turning on the tap of a gas-stove and causing a considerable escape; and, finally, a scholarly and attractive dissertation by Adolph Büchler on Neubauer's life and work.

This was the last but one of my visits to Oxford, during which I was able to revive happy memories by walking or driving past the synagogue's old stone porchway. The very last was on June 25 of this year, when a happy afternoon and evening were spent in the quadrangles and garden of St. John's, where something like 2,000 people celebrated the college's quatercentenary. The occasion still left time for driving about Oxford: and it was while we did so that the friend who was with me took the photograph that prompted and accompanies these recollections.

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