

Early Years of the Synagogue

Professor Cohen (Isaac Cohen) has good reason to remember the first services held in the new Synagogue. He had gone there the day before Rosh Hashana to practice his Shofar blowing. It sounded fine, but on the following morning, first day Yom Tov, when he raised the Shofar to his lips, no matter how hard he tried, he could not produce a single sound. All would-be blowers came up in turn to try but no one succeeded. One member, with perhaps more experience in these matters than the rest, said that the Shofar had probably become affected by the damp atmosphere during the night in the new building. Accordingly he took it home where it dried out over night. The young Isaac Cohen blew it perfectly on the second day. The problems of that first Rosh Hashana did not end with the Shofar. Isaac Cohen was to be Baal Shacharis and an elderly chazan from the East End had been engaged as Baal Musaf. His performance on the first day was such that the Honorary Officers decided to dispense with his services for the second day and asked Isaac Cohen to stand in as Baal Musaf in his place. Isaac Cohen refused, not wishing to be a party to the humiliation of the visiting chazan, so the Honorary Officers found someone else to officiate. Although Isaac Cohen was usually pleased to carry out any duties relating to the conducting of the services, to teaching children and giving shiurim, he drew the line when asked to perform the duties of a beadle. This brought him into conflict with the Honorary Officers who cut his Yom Tov stipend for refusing to pour the wine for kiddush in shul.

The first Synagogue elections were held on 24th November 1935. The following four men were elected to office (although the first two already occupied these positions): Dr. Sydney Blackman - President, Mr. Maurice Tanchen - Financial Representative, Mr. Ellis Josephs - Honorary Secretary, Mr. Bamet Birk - Warden. The Board of Management consisted of Mr M. Cohen, M. Freedman, H. Meckhonik, B. Samuel, S. Sanders, J. Segal, R. Tanchen and H. Wald.

In December 1935, relations with the U.S. Honorary Officers became severely strained. Because HGS insisted on certain amendments in the legal documentation regarding the building, they held back from signing them although they had previously undertaken to the U.S. so to do, and were causing the U.S. considerable embarrassment and irritation. The U.S. Honorary Officers began to lose patience with HGS to the point of considering the disaffiliation of the young community. A U.S. internal memo of the time states 'Sir Robert evinces a desire to have nothing more to do with them'. Matters were aggravated still more when HGS advertised for a Minister, contrary to

a specific agreement with the U.S. Since it was considered unlikely that Dr. Blackman and Sir Robert would ever meet peaceably to agree a solution it was left to Mr. Ellis Iosephs and Mr Maurice Tanchen to see Sir Robert, and only then were all the difficulties finally resolved.

On 14th February 1936, a calmer atmosphere now prevailing, HGS met the U.S. to discuss the possibility of a Minister for the community. HGS informed the U.S. that they now had 81 members and only one official - Mr Isaac Cohen (whose salary had by that time increased to £3 a week). HGS stated that they wanted as Minister Rev. Isaac (‘Harry’) Levy, then a student Minister at Hampstead under Dayan Gollop. By May 1936 Rev. Levy had become the first Minister at Norrice Lea. He was also the official Secretary as well as being Chazan and Headmaster of the Hebrew Classes. He had other jobs to do; for example, before officiating at weddings he first had to erect the Chupah, with the assistance of a caretaker. His duties did not end there; he was expected to devote much of his time to recruiting new members. To this end he was in close touch with the local builders and estate agents who would inform him of any possible Jewish newcomers to the area. As Rev. Levy puts it he ‘moved in with the furniture’, immediately calling on the new Jewish residents and where possible enrolling them as members.

At that time the vast majority of members were young married couples. Rev. Levy himself joined their ranks when, in 1937, he was married in the Shul, (after first putting up his own Chupah and arranging the chairs!). Dayan Gallop and Rev. Boyers of Hampstead officiated. Mr. Ellis Iosephs, an early member and Financial Representative, (and who incidentally planted the two willows at the side of the Shul premises) recalls that his daughter, Sally, was the first baby to be blessed in the Synagogue by Rev. Levy - a customary ceremony in those days.

There were geographical limits to the congregation - much narrower than today. Although a few members did live in the older part near the Institute, most lived in the new sections of the Suburb. Many roads, including Norrice Lea, were not yet made up. Conductors on buses stopping on Lyttelton Road at the junction with Norrice Lea would call out ‘anyone for the Lake District’ - so well known were the potholes in Norrice Lea, especially when filled with rainwater. Sidney Usiskin, another early member, who occupied the first house built in Kingsley Way, recalls that visitors, having once ventured into the area at night on the marshy and unlit roads, rarely came a second time.

Early in March 1937, Dr. Blackman bowed out of office. The Board of Management had decided to dispense with the office of President and instead to have two Wardens as Honorary Officers. In a letter to the Board Dr.

Blackman stated that this precluded him from taking office since it was his view, as his colleagues well knew, that Wardens should be gentlemen who were observant Jews and who could attend Synagogue fairly regularly. His profession, he said, would not allow him to be a candidate under such circumstances. At the Annual General Meeting held on the 2nd May 1937 tributes were expressed to Dr. Blackman for all the work he had done in the creation of the community. At the elections Mr. Maurice Tanchen became Senior Warden, Mr. Barnet Birk, Junior Warden and Mr. Ellis Josephs, Financial Representative.

In May 1937 the U.S. Council approved a scheme for enlarging the HGS Synagogue, the extension to take the form of four classrooms which, by removal of folding partitions, would serve also for communal gatherings and form part of the main building on special occasions, such as the High Holydays. Of the £2,000 required the community would raise £750, the balance being loaned by the U.S. The extension was necessitated by the steady influx of Jewish residents to the area. At the time the male membership was 140, but it was anticipated that by the Autumn of 1937 it would be about 200. The community worked hard to raise the necessary monies, for example, a successful Ball was held on 31st October 1937 at the Cafe Royal in aid of the Building Fund. The Re-consecration service of the Synagogue took place on 1st September 1937. The ceremony was performed by the Chief Rabbi, Dr. Hertz and was assisted by Rev. Levy and Rev. Mayerowitsch. The enlarged building was formally opened by Mr Oscar Deutsch (Chairman of Odeon Theatres) who was Mr. Tanchen's brother-in-law and a financial benefactor of the Synagogue.

Three days after they had been sent an invitation to attend the Re-consecration service the Shul's landlords, Co-Partnership Tenants Limited wrote to Rev. Levy complaining about the state of the Synagogue grounds: 'At the present time it is very untidy and the neighbours complain that it harbours rats which come up out of the brook'. Despite minor problems of this nature, Rev. Levy's ministry was relatively untroubled. He has very warm memories of his ministry at HGS. It was an exciting period in which he actively participated in the growth of the congregation. It was a very friendly community with that wonderful sense of intimacy that perhaps can exist only in a small close-knit kehilla. Most of the members, Rev. Levy recalls, were Shul-goers and when services finished at about 11.30 on Shabbat mornings, visiting numerous kiddushim was the order of the day. Rev. Levy's Ministry at HGS came to an end in 1939 when he received a call to the Bayswater Synagogue.