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Royal Jews: Jewish Life in Berkshire from the Readmission till Today

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In a previous article for *Transactions*,¹ I covered the remarkable history of the medieval river Jews – those who arrived after the Norman Conquest, settled in London and then gradually moved out along the River Thames to places where Jews today go for Sunday picnics (to Windsor, Marlow, Henley), which were certainly not high-density Jewish areas in the Middle Ages, but where there was a Jewish presence.

That came to an end following the expulsion of the Jews in 1290 and lasted until their readmission by Cromwell in 1656. In reality there were a few exceptions by those who made brief appearances in the area under examination, Berkshire (but occasionally straying across its borders to South Buckinghamshire and parts of Oxfordshire). One such individual was found in 1450 living near Eton College, which had been established ten years earlier by Henry VI. Once discovered, the only way he could remain in the country was to be baptized. This occurred under the auspices of the king and so he took the name Henry of Eton, presumably a way of reflecting both his loyalty to the monarch and his place of residence at the time. He went to live in the *Domus Conversorum* in London, but left after three years, after which his whereabouts are unknown.² A much longer resident was a Jew who converted and took the name Henry of Windsor, who stayed there from 1488 until his death in 1509.³

Everything changed after Cromwell: Jews emerged in London and later migrated to the Home Counties, the area west of London covering Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, and Oxfordshire. The first individual known about in Berkshire, which stretches from Slough to Hungerford, and whose major towns include Maidenhead and Reading, does not appear until 1725, though others may well have been there earlier. He

1 Jonathan Romain, “River Jews: medieval Jews along the Thames as a microcosm of Anglo-Jewry”, *Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* (hereafter, *Transactions*) 43 (2011): 21–42.

2 Michael Adler, “History of the *Domus Conversorum*”, *Transactions* 4 (1899–1901): 37.

3 *Ibid.*, 39.

was Joseph Collins, a Jewish Freemason, who is recorded as belonging to the Mitre Lodge in Reading in 1725. Whether he lived in the town, or just joined the Lodge because of an acquaintance who was a member, is open to conjecture.⁴ More certain is the fact that Lyon Nathan had been living in Reading at some stage, as that appears in his records when he was naturalized in 1763.⁵ It may not seem significant that Isaac Skitten came to Reading in the 1840s, until it is realized that his grandson was Rev. Dr Abraham Cohen, who was born in Reading and became a leading scholar, whose works included a commentary for the *Soncino Chumash* (known as the Cohen one, as distinct from the Hertz one). He was also the President of the Board of Deputies from 1949 to 1955 – a Berkshire boy who made good.⁶

Given the rarity of Jews locally, it is somewhat surprising that when Jews were admitted into Parliament in 1858, one of the earliest came from Reading: Francis Henry Goldsmid took the seat as a Liberal MP in 1860 and became only the fourth Jew to sit in the House of Commons. The family did have a local connection, as his father, Sir Isaac Lyon Goldsmid, had bought Whiteknights Park in Reading – grounds held by the family until 1947 when they were purchased by the University of Reading. Unlike some later Jewish MPs who preferred to ignore their roots, Francis Goldsmid was not afraid to stand up for Jewish causes and one of his first acts in the Commons was to draw attention to the case of Edgar Mortara, a Jewish child abducted from his home in Bologna and baptized in Rome. Goldsmid was active in Jewish communal life too, such as the West London Synagogue and the Anglo-Jewish Association. There had been a strong local antisemitic campaign against him during his first election contest, although it did not prevent him winning the seat. He remained as MP for Reading for the next eighteen years, winning three further elections until his death in 1878.

Still, individuals come and go. When one looks for a settled Jewish community in the area, none is found until 1886 when thirteen families joined together to form the Reading Hebrew Burial Society. It grew rapidly thereafter, with a place of worship established two years later that served

4 John M. Shaftesley, "Jews in English Regular Freemasonry 1717–1860", *Transactions* 25 (1973–75), 196.

5 W. S. Samuel, "A List of Jewish Persons Endenized and Naturalised 1609–1799", *Transactions* 22 (1968–69): 132.

6 Sue Krisman, *Portrait of a Community, Reading Synagogue 1900–2000* (Reading: Reading Synagogue, 2001), 4.

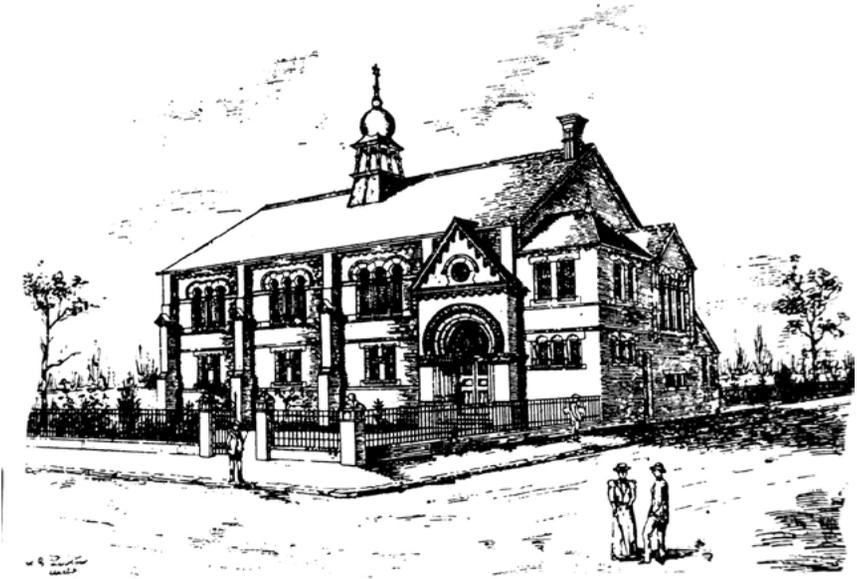


Plate 1 Reading Congregation, established in 1900.

a Jewish population of sixty to seventy adults.⁷ Further growth led to a splendid new synagogue being opened in October 1900 in Westfield Road (later renamed Goldsmid Road after a member of the Goldsmid family who had owned the plot of land and donated it to the community). But what was strange was that the inaugural service had a suspiciously high-profile guest list in terms of Jewish dignitaries attending. It included the Chief Rabbi, Hermann Adler, the President of the Federation of Synagogues, Sir Samuel Montagu, and the President of the Anglo-Jewish Association, Claude Montefiore.

Why so many grandees for an out-of-town community of tailors and shopkeepers? Their presence and the subsequent growth of the community owed much to an event far away from rural Berkshire and which was a key turning point in the history of British Jewry at large: the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, leading to a wave of antisemitic pogroms thought to be orchestrated by the Russian government. It resulted in the mass emigration of Jews from Russia, with about 100,000 arriving in Britain, a large number settling in the East End of London. While their presence eventually proved highly beneficial, in the short term it led to chronic overcrowding in unsanitary conditions, the growth of the

7 *Jewish Year Book* (London: 1896), 86.

notorious sweatshops, and accusations that the immigrants were taking away jobs from local people.

Nervous of the way in which the immigrants were bringing British Jewry under public scrutiny, the Jewish establishment was keen to solve these social problems as quickly as possible. Alongside various attempts to assimilate the newcomers by founding institutions to anglicize them, another answer was to break up the urban concentration and encourage their dispersal around the country. This was the reason why so many of London's Jewish elite were present at not only the launch of Reading's bid for a synagogue but also the laying of its foundation stone a year later and then again at its inaugural service. Speaking at the second of those events, another dignitary, Sir Hermann Gollancz, spelt out his motives:

During the past twelve months, in the course of my enlisting the sympathy of the [wider Jewish] community on behalf of Reading, I have often been asked: Why do you take such special interest in this movement? And my answer has been: Because I believe that a great social problem is involved in the history of the Reading Jews. They hail for the most part from the congested districts in the East End of London, being sensible enough to understand that any movement tending to relieve such congested districts is a boon not only to the Jews themselves but also to the general population in whose midst they dwell.⁸

In this respect, Reading was just one part of a general plan for the dispersal of East European immigrants out of London, with Montagu's Jewish Dispersion Committee trying to persuade families to go also to Leicester, Blackburn, Dover, and Stroud.⁹ However, none of the attempts to send East End Jews to those other locations proved a success.

There were several individual Jews scattered in other villages and towns in the area – Thame, Wendover, Windsor, Newbury¹⁰ – but the most exotic was David Ximenes, a Jewish stockbroker from London and a member of Bevis Marks Synagogue, who bought Bear Place in Wargrave in 1784, leading to much gossip among locals, including the rumour that, after buying the estate, the reason he then rebuilt the house on higher ground was that his hot Judaeo-Spanish blood was unable to stand the damp in low places.¹¹ After his death, we see a good example of those Jews who

8 Hermann Gollancz, *Sermons and Addresses* (London: Chapman and Hill, 1916), 139.

9 Geoffrey Alderman, *The Federation of Synagogues* (London: Federation of Synagogues, 1987), 37.

10 Jonathan Romain, *Royal Jews* (Maidenhead: Grenfell Press, 2013), 65–6.

11 Malcolm Brown, "Anglo-Jewish country houses from the Resettlement to 1800", *Transactions* 28 (1981–82): 31.

embraced wider society to such an extent that they abandoned Judaism altogether: the estate passed to his son Moses, also a stockbroker, who preferred to be known as Morris and who participated in social and cultural events locally. He raised a troop of territorials, known as the Wargrave Rangers, whom he commanded in the Peninsular War. Moses had long been a non-practising member of Bevis Marks Synagogue, but when he was asked to join the Mahammad, the synagogue council, this triggered his decision to resign and he converted to Christianity.¹²

Meanwhile, the origins of a long family association with the eastern side of Berkshire began through Lawrence Lazarus. He was born in the East End of London and worked there in the cigar trade, moving to Slough in 1865 to manage a pawn-broking shop. The family remained in the area, developing the business into a well-known furniture store – Isaacs – that continued up to 1987 under the guidance of six successive generations of the family.

Further up-river, the Jewish life of Maidenhead began with the arrival of the Great Western Railway, with the first train running to the town in 1838, providing a speedy and convenient way of transporting both goods and people from London. The journey took about an hour, whereas previously it had taken much of the day by horse. We do not know who was the first “Royal Jew” – a resident of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, in the Royal County of Berkshire. But it is telling that from 1874 onwards there were regular advertisements in the *Jewish Chronicle* (JC) of properties for sale or to rent, while twenty years later it was considered worthwhile to advertise in the JC dance classes taking place in Maidenhead.¹³ Moreover, fiction followed fact, in the form of Julia Frankau’s novel, *Dr Phillips: A Maida Vale Idyll* (written in 1887 under the pen-name of Frank Danby), which reflected, albeit in a highly critical way, the lifestyle of a particular group of affluent social-climbing West End Jews. Their visits to the area are hinted at in an episode in which the evil Dr Phillips takes his non-Jewish friend, Mary Cameron, out on the river: “He decided on staying at Skinner’s, at Maidenhead. Now whenever the Israelites assemble in any force on the river, Maidenhead is the point of departure. Elsewhere, he might have been certain, of escaping detection.

12 Todd Endelman, *Radical Assimilation in English Jewish History 1656–1945* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis University Press, 1990), 18; Rosemary Gray and Sue Griffiths *The Book of Wargrave* (Wargrave: Wargrave Local History Society, 1980), 195.

13 *Jewish Chronicle* (hereafter, JC), 8 May 1974, 80; 14 Sept. 1894, 2.



Plate 2 Sam Lewis, moneylender and philanthropist, c. 1890s.

At Maidenhead he would be running his neck right into the noose.”¹⁴ The first recorded Jewish marriage to have taken place in Maidenhead occurred on 28 June 1892, albeit for a London couple. No change of name was involved as Marie Cohen of Brixham married Joseph Cohen of Tavistock Square. What was curious, though, was that the officiant was Rabbi Dr Joseph Strauss, then the minister of Bradford (Reform) Synagogue.

The growing reputation of Maidenhead as “the place to be” applied to Sam and Ada Lewis, whose “rags to riches” story epitomized the way in which some Jews climbed the social hierarchy with astonishing rapidity. Sam was reared in poverty in Birmingham and started up as a pedlar of cheap jewellery. He changed to being a moneylender and specialized in loans to the aristocracy, who often needed funds to keep up their large estates, finances, and political ventures or to pay off gambling debts. Sam became wealthy, moving in high society and owning fashionable homes

¹⁴ Frank Danby, *Dr Phillips: A Maida Vale Idyll* (London: Vizetelly, 1887), 94.

in London and Hove. In 1895 he also acquired a property in Maidenhead. The object was to have a local residence for June and July of each year, when the cream of British society occupied houses on the river, with royalty visiting too – though he also opened his garden and river frontage to visits from the Jewish Lads' Brigade. At the time of his death, he was described as “the greatest private moneylender in the world” and left £2.7 million. As he had no children, much of it was given to charity, Jewish and non-Jewish, ranging from a hospital wing to a drinking trough for horses by Maidenhead bridge, which remains to this day.¹⁵

Given the small number of Jews living locally, it is a surprise to find that a Jewish boarding school was opened in Maidenhead in September 1897 – or maybe not, given the spacious area and good connections to London. It was Craufurd College, catering for Jewish boys from eight to thirteen years old, run according to Orthodox standards. Its principal was James Polack, previously the headmaster of West Hampstead School, London; he was the brother of Joseph Polack, the master of the Jewish House at Clifton College in Bristol. The great majority of pupils came from London but included boys from Liverpool and Birmingham, as well as a handful from New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa. The school lasted some twenty years.

A rare example of a rabbi who settled in Maidenhead, albeit in late age, was David Woolf Marks. He was the first minister of West London Synagogue, formed in 1840, and stayed there till his retirement fifty-three years later. In early 1908 he moved permanently from London to stay with his daughter Frances in Maidenhead, where he passed away the following year.¹⁶

The families of those mentioned so far have long ceased to have any contact with the area, but this is not the case with Louis Oppenheimer, who bought Waltham Place in Maidenhead in 1912 and whose relatives still occupy it. He was in the diamond business, whose brother Ernest was the chairman of De Beers in South Africa. Louis's wife Charlotte was a keen gardener who added greatly to the estate's lavish grounds, and horticulturists will know that the sweatpea *Carlota* is named after her.¹⁷

Perhaps the “Royal Jew” of most renown was Rufus Isaacs. He was born

15 Gerry Black, *Lender to the Lords, Giver to the Poor* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1992).

16 Curtis Cassell, “D. W. Marks: The Father of Anglo-Jewish Reform” (unpublished ms.), 130; JC, 14 May 1909.

17 Luke Over and Nicky Oppenheimer, *Waltham Place* (Maidenhead: Nicky Oppenheimer, 2001), 34–40.

in London in 1860 and grew up to become one of the highest peers in the realm. His local connection began when he entered Parliament as the MP for Reading in a bye-election there in 1904, representing the Liberals. When standing again two years later during the General Election, he was heckled by someone shouting “Down with the Jews”, but it was a lone voice and Isaacs was returned with an increased majority. He rose rapidly up the political ladder, becoming in turn Solicitor General, Attorney General, and Lord Chief Justice – taking the title Lord Reading. Isaacs went on to serve as Ambassador to the United States before being appointed Viceroy of India, from 1921 to 1926. In each of these positions, he was the first Jew to hold the office. On his return to England he became the Marquess of Reading, the highest honour ever held by a Jew. Moreover, before him, only two men who started life as commoners had reached the highest or second highest ranks of the peerage: John Churchill, the first Duke of Marlborough, and Arthur Wellesley, the first Duke of Wellington. A twelve-foot-high statue of him originally stood in New Delhi but, after India gained independence, it was transferred to Reading where it still stands. Reading is buried in Hoop Lane Cemetery in north London, even though his status might entitle him to Westminster Abbey.

It was the First World War that brought Jews in large numbers to Maidenhead. The outbreak of war led to fears of enemy attacks on London and many families headed out to the Home Counties. These included David Galinski who brought his wife and ten children from Stamford Hill; a strictly observant Jew, he was the President of the Federation of Synagogue’s rabbinic college, Etz Hayyim Yeshivah, in the East End of London. Galinski held regular services at his home in Maidenhead on Sabbaths and festivals and would invite some students from the college for the weekend to make up the necessary minyan. A teacher, Rabbi Green, stayed with the Galinskis to look after the children’s Jewish education.

There were occasional instances among the local population of those who harboured antisemitic feelings. Given the paucity of Jews in the area up to this point, it was not due to any acrimonious experiences. Instead it arose partly from the automatic “dislike of the unlike” that was natural to some people, and came to the fore particularly when a small semi-rural town received a large influx of strangers. It was also partly due to the then still prevalent anti-Jewish feelings embedded in Christianity. This was epitomized by a meeting of the Church of England Men’s Society at All Saints Church, Maidenhead, in November 1914. A paper was delivered by the churchwarden, during which he said:

It is a grave mistake to allow Jews to become Englishmen; wherever they go there is trouble ... they drain every community in which they settle. They are too greasy to point direct to their faults, but they exist nevertheless ... it behoves us to be beware, otherwise as a nation we shall be Jewed, just as they often Jew individuals, reaping where they have not sown.¹⁸

The issue of Jews lapsed thereafter, but resurfaced dramatically three years later when Zeppelin air raids led to the sudden flight of many Londoners to safer areas such as Brighton and parts of the Home Counties. It is estimated that about two thousand people came to Maidenhead, some even walking all the way, carrying mattresses and feather beds,¹⁹ but what excited particular attention were those described as “Russian Jews”. At first, the concern was that the influx would affect the town’s sugar apportionment, but then the tone in the local paper became more unpleasant, declaring that “Maidenhead has been invaded”, complaining about the impact of Jewish community, and that they went out shopping first thing in the morning before locals did and as a result “bacon is off, butter is unobtainable, tea-chests are empty, and other provisions are scarce. ‘Shop early and often’ is apparently the Jews’ motto.”²⁰ The reference to the lack of bacon implies either that the Jewish evacuees were extremely irreligious, or that the columnist was unfairly blaming the Jews for the faults of others.

The following year another piece about the presence of Jews was mischievously put next to a news item informing readers that the area was currently suffering an outbreak of smallpox.²¹ These concerns attracted national attention and reports from both the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* spoke of Russian Jews having “captured” Maidenhead and of them monopolizing the crowded evening trains from London to the town. This feeling was epitomized by a letter from a local resident referring to

the indignities to which our townspeople are being subjected by the horde of human vultures that has swooped down from the East End ... a race known throughout the civilised world for its selfishness, greed and dishonesty ... It is all ... nauseating to Maidenhead, this ill-smelling, churlish, gesticulating rabble that struts along its streets and behaves with all the effrontery of its race!²²

18 *Maidenhead Advertiser*, 25 Nov. 1914, 7.

19 Tom Middleton, *Royal Berkshire* (Buckingham: Barracuda Books, 1975), 59.

20 *Maidenhead Advertiser*, 31 Oct. 1917, 8.

21 *Ibid.*, 20 March 1918, 8.

22 *Ibid.*, 27 March 1918, 6.

The issue of Maidenhead's "alien invasion" was deemed to be sufficiently important to be mentioned in the House of Commons a number of times in April 1918. Still, it was not just based on prejudice; there was also a resentment that Russian Jews were not subject to conscription because they were foreign-born. Many were upset at the sight of able-bodied young Jews engaged in commerce or at leisure when most English people's sons were away fighting and dying at the Front.

Not that the disquiet was limited to Maidenhead: in other parts of the country it was translated into violence, such as in Leeds, where there was a street battle between Jewish and non-Jewish youths which led to a large mob attacking Jewish shops and smashing windows. Tensions were also reported in Manchester and Glasgow, particularly towards "the Russian Jew who won't fight, but does eat".²³ As for the internal life of the ad hoc Jewish community, the expectation of a quick return to London meant that little energy was put into developing local Jewish life other than services. Kosher meat was available, for the temporary community enjoyed the professional services of a *shochet*, who lived there during that period.²⁴ Once the war was over, most Jewish evacuees returned to London, and Maidenhead returned to being a town with a few Jews but no communal Jewish life.

The rise of Hitler and the Second World War meant that the pattern repeated itself: Jews left London to escape the bombs and sought refuge in the Home Counties, but this time with a difference, in that after the war they stayed. There were three separate groups of evacuees: first were the schoolchildren, who formed the greatest population migration of its kind in British history²⁵ (including the two royal princesses Elizabeth and Margaret, who stayed at Windsor Castle for the duration of the war). Most of the Jewish children were evacuated with their schools, such as Stepney Jewish School with some 350 pupils, who were relocated to Windsor, while their building in the East End was used as an emergency feeding centre. St Paul's School was evacuated to Crowthorne, with approximately 70 Jewish pupils among its 450 boys. They were billeted either in private homes in the village or some large hostels which the school had been able to rent. Meanwhile, the girls' division of St Paul's went to High Wycombe, where it shared the site of Wycombe Abbey School and a teacher was

23 JC, 8 June 1917, 14.

24 Ibid., 3 July 1931, 8.

25 Carlton Jackson, *Who Will Take Our Children?* (London: Methuen, 1960), 15.

hired to provide the religious education of the Jewish girls there.²⁶ The accommodation of two schools on one site was usually achieved by the local children having lessons in the morning, with games and “prep” in the afternoon, while the newcomers did the reverse.

Not all children came with their schools – some were sent away by their parents – but the move of so many Jewish children out of London did attract occasional criticism. One of the *dayanim* of the London Beth Din exhorted Jews in the East End to stay where they were with their children.²⁷ He argued that to send them away to the country would certainly destroy their Jewish identity, while to stay in London would create a doubt only about their physical security. Most parents were not impressed with the *dayan*’s theological observations and continued to evacuate their children. But in some ways he was right, for while Jewish education in Anglo-Jewry was never very good, during the war years it became a disaster, with children living in non-Jewish areas, often billeted with non-Jewish families, and only occasionally having access to Jewish classes. Celia Goodman typified the problems of maintaining a Jewish lifestyle. She attended a school in Bow, East London, and was evacuated with it. Acquiring kosher meat was impossible, so she became a vegetarian but, as this presented difficulties, she ended up eating non-kosher meat and avoiding specifically forbidden foods such as pork. However, she regularly ate rabbit, not realising that it was another of the forbidden foods.²⁸

The second category of evacuees were adults who moved to Maidenhead as a temporary stay to avoid the night-time bombs in London while they commuted back for their jobs by train every day. In fact, such was the number that if someone had a *yartzeit* and wanted to say *kaddish*, they would wait at the station platform for one of the evening trains from London so as to gather together a quorum and go off for prayers. Among the Jewish “celebrities” to come the area was the comedian Bud Flanagan, who settled in Wargrave. A third group were whole families who moved out together, some of whom did so with a decided sense of *déjà vu*, such as Rose Shackman who was living in West Hampstead with her husband. In 1940 she moved to Waltham St Lawrence because she was already familiar with the area, as she had been evacuated there when a child during the First World War.

26 JC, 8 Dec. 1939, 18.

27 Chaim Pearl, “Away and Home”, in *Manna* (Summer 1991), 26.

28 Author interview with Celia Goodman (n.d.).

Whatever sense of trauma felt by the evacuees, it was paltry compared to those who came to the area as foreign refugees, who also fell into those three categories of children, adults, and families. The best-known were those who had come to England via the Kindertransport: ten thousand children from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. The physical disruption to their lives was matched by the emotional dislocation they also suffered, cut off from their family, culture, and mother tongue, which they dared not speak in public as it was now associated with the enemy. Many faced a double evacuation, such as Beatrice Musgrave, who was sent to London from Germany with her sister in 1938. She then endured further upheaval when her school was evacuated to Reading. What is more, she typified the experience of both the best and worst of local families in the billeting lottery:

My sister and I were billeted with three different families, all of quite different backgrounds, two very hostile to having young girls dumped on them. One, an old clergyman and his wife, more or less forbade us to be in the house during the day. Another, a vicious father with a terrified daughter, accused us of scribbling graffiti on his lavatory walls and got rid of us that way. The third family – a post office sorter with wife and son – were kind and cosy and provided our first experience of simple grass-roots English life.²⁹

Some children arrived as a pre-formed group, such as the twenty-one children from the Flersheim-Sichel Stiftung, a boys' orphanage in Frankfurt, who were resettled at Cedars House in the grounds of Waddesdon Manor, near Aylesbury, the home of James de Rothschild. One of the boys, Hans Hellman (later Jack Helman), recalled the positive culture-shock he received there:

When we got to Cedars Lodge, the first thing we did was throw a soccer ball on the lawn and kick it around. The local boys came to see what was all of a sudden being brought into their village. They said, "We'll see you tomorrow." I was absolutely exuberant. I ran to my house mother and told her, "Somebody who is not Jewish wants to see us tomorrow."³⁰

Their refugee status did not stop some of them from having prejudices of their own. Another boy, Geoffrey Gert, remembered when a group of East European Jewish refugees was housed temporarily in Waddesdon recreation hall: "The hall was packed full one day with a motley, unwashed crew. We were told that they too were refugees, but from the East, Ostjuden

29 Ruth Inglis, *The Children's War* (London: Collins, 1989), 100.

30 Jeremy Godden, "The Steinhardts and the Cedar Boys" (unpublished ms.).

... They were given to talking and gesticulating unintelligibly and to haggling in the shops ... I remember disowning them, saying: "We (the German refugees) have nothing to do with them."³¹

The plight of children endangered by the spread of Nazism was a particular concern of Nicholas Winton, then a Londoner but shortly afterwards to become a Maidonian and one of its most famous modern citizens. His parents were both Jewish but he had been baptized as a child and had no consciousness of any Jewish identity. In December 1938, he became alerted to the serious danger facing the Jews in the Sudetenland, the Nazi-occupied part of Czechoslovakia, and focused on the need to rescue the endangered children. He returned to England to persuade the Home Office to grant entry permits for refugee children who were not part of the Kindertransport arrangement and for whom he personally would find sponsors. He organized foster parents to provide homes for them, as well as the transport to bring the children to England. Each child had to have a £50 guarantor in advance, along with a family who would look after them until they were seventeen.

Six trains were commissioned by Winton, bringing a total of 669 children to safety, most, but not all, of whom were Jewish.³² A bronze statue of him has been erected on one of the platforms at Maidenhead railway station. On his death in 2015 aged 106, the Post Office decided to issue a stamp to mark his achievements.

While special arrangements were made to rescue children from Europe, there were also many adults who managed to seek safety in Britain and who came to the Home Counties. Some worked in the area, others joined the British army, such as Fritz Lustig, who was born in Berlin and came to England in 1939. On the outbreak of war, he like many others was interned on the Isle of Man but later became part of the Pioneer Corps and was then transferred to the Intelligence Corps. He was sent to the prisoner-of-war camp Wilton Park in Beaconsfield, where his role was to eavesdrop on high-ranking prisoners through electronic devices placed in their cells, listening particularly to what they said after they had been formally interrogated: "On returning to the cell, they would tell their cell-mate what they had been asked about and what they had managed to conceal from the interrogating officer."³³

31 Ibid.

32 Muriel Emanuel and Vera Gissing, *Nicholas Winton and the Rescued Generation* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2002).

33 Helen Fry, *The King's Most Loyal Enemy Aliens* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007), 202.

For the civilian refugees, the most common jobs was as domestic servants, one of the few occupations for which a work permit was issued, even though they were often ill-prepared for it. As one of them, W.W. Brown, recorded on being appointed to a country home in Berkshire: “My wife had worked as a secretary in Vienna and knew little about cooking. I had spent my early life among books. Whatever I knew, it did not include the duties of a butler.”³⁴

Some refugees also came over as families, one of which was in the unusual position of receiving royal help in their departure. In Vienna, the Duke of Windsor, the abdicated Edward VIII, frequented the restaurant owned by Sophie Diener’s father, the Three Hussars. The Duke had such regard for him that he offered to act as guarantor for the family in England after the Anschluss took place. Moreover, the Duchess of Windsor brought jewellery belonging to Sophie’s mother out of Austria and deposited it for her at Barclay’s Bank in Knightsbridge, London. It was much needed, as the family arrived in England with only seventeen shillings. They moved to Wargrave and with the jewels opened a restaurant there, the Green Monkey.

What was the response of the central Jewish leadership to this mass migration of Jews out of London? In evacuation areas where there was a large concentration of Jews who had belonged to the United Synagogue in London, it felt obliged to act. This was both to help those concerned and to protect its membership, for it was anxious that the dispersed Jews should not cut off ties with it and suspend their fees. As a result, it set up local “Membership Groups” through which it channelled financial or ministerial help in return for the subscriptions that individuals continued to pay to their respective London congregations. Although the United Synagogue had always limited itself to London and the surroundings, its flock was now evacuated throughout the country, and so Membership Groups were set up as far as Torquay and Macclesfield, although they were particularly evident in the Home Counties.

These included towns such as Slough and Windsor, where there were only a handful of Jews before the war, which then expanded enormously, with both towns having their own temporary synagogue, and which were jointly served by an illustrious evacuee, Rabbi Dr Julius Jakobovits, who had been the head of the Rabbinical Court in Berlin (*Av Beth Din*) but came to England as a penniless refugee at the end of 1938. One of his sons,

34 AJR [Association of Jewish Refugees] Journal (Jan. 1988), 8.

Immanuel, helped teach at the Windsor *cheder* (synagogue classes) while he was a trainee minister – coming back to Windsor several decades later to visit the Queen as Chief Rabbi. In fact, he nearly did not make it: Julius Jakobovits would often take his family on Sabbath strolls along the Great Walk in Windsor Park and on two separate occasions they were “gently hooted out of the way by a car with King George VI at the wheel, the Queen in the passenger seat and two girl princesses in the back seat, who were driving the three miles from Windsor Castle to The Royal Lodge”.³⁵ The end of the war meant that many left the area, but by consolidating into the Slough, Windsor and District community, it was able to continue. It even purchased a house in Slough in 1952 as a permanent synagogue, but it was an act of faith that proved impossible to sustain as numbers dwindled; eventually the building was sold and the community disbanded.

High Wycombe provided a similar tale of war-time services and a flourishing Religion School. Among the evacuees was the *Jewish Chronicle*, which was transferred to the offices of the local newspaper, the *Bucks Free Press*, in September 1939. This was an inter-faith arrangement, as the *Jewish Chronicle* shared its new headquarters with the *Catholic Herald* and a Church of England journal, the *Guardian*.³⁶ It proved to be a wise move, as its main office in London was destroyed by fire during a bombing raid in December 1940. Jewish life thrived: when a Hanukah party was held at the end of 1940, about two hundred children attended,³⁷ while the Shavuot service the following year attracted almost four hundred people. The number of Jews in the area was swelled further by Americans who were stationed at the United States Air Force base nearby at Daws Hill. Nevertheless, the end of the war brought the same pattern of decline, retrenchment, and eventual dissolution.

So too with Marlow, Beaconsfield, Denham, and Thame where the United Synagogue established Membership Groups with services and classes – none of which survived the war, collapsing when members returned home. Chesham, incidentally, provided war-time refuge to a certain Rabbi Yisroel Ehrentreu, who had come from Germany to England just before the war with his wife and two sons, Meir Zvi and Chanoch: the two boys went to nearby Amersham Grammar School, a non-Jewish educational environment which did not prevent Chanoch Ehrentreu later becoming head of the London Beth Din.

35 Author's correspondence with Joseph Jacobs, n.d.

36 Cecil Roth, *The Jewish Chronicle 1841–1941* (London: Jewish Chronicle, 1949), 174.

37 JC, 3 Jan. 1941.

The only town in Berkshire to have a synagogue in existence before the war was Reading. It offered its facilities to the newcomers, with its hall being used as a hostel for those whose homes in London had been bombed. Later in the war, as Allied ground troops massed locally for the D-Day invasion of Europe, the synagogue organized a special *seder* for the Jewish soldiers among them in April 1944. The synagogue also had to take steps to look after its own safety, with a rota being drawn up of members who would volunteer for fire-watching duties. At the end of the war, the Jewish community acquired yet another local MP – its third, following in the footsteps of Francis Goldsmid and Rufus Isaacs. He was the London-born Ian Mikardo, who had come to live in the area during the war, where he worked in aircraft and armaments manufacturing at Woodley Aerodrome. In the general election of 1945, he won the Reading seat for the Labour party, overturning a large Conservative majority, and held it until 1959. He later returned to Parliament to represent Poplar, London (1964).

The other major town in the area was Maidenhead, which presents an entirely different picture. However, like most other places before 1939, there were individual Jews but no community; like them, a congregation was founded during the war but, unlike them, it did not collapse when everyone streamed back to London, and it later experienced a religious revolution. Services started off in a private home, then expanded into a rented hall off the High Street, appropriately enough (or not) called Oddfellows Hall. They were conducted under Orthodox auspices. The children fitted into local schools and those lucky enough to get into Maidenhead County School for Girls discovered that the headmistress was Miss Monica Wingate, the sister of General Orde Wingate. She would tell the Jewish pupils about her brother and his Zionist sympathies. Relations between the Jewish community and the wider population showed no sign of the public hostility with which Jewish evacuees in the First World War had been greeted. Perhaps they were judged as less uncouth than the “Russian Jews”, although some of them were the same families twenty years on.

Of course, many of the Jewish menfolk were not in any of these towns but part of the 60,000 Jewish men and women who served in the British Armed Forces during the Second World War. Some of the Maidenhead Jews did not come back alive. There was also an incident involving the town itself when it experienced the death of six RAF personnel, including two Jewish airmen, when their plane crashed in Pinkneys Green nearby.



Plate 3 The Maidenhead Synagogue ark.

The Halifax had left RAF Burn in Yorkshire in July 1944 as one of twenty-one bombers from 578 Squadron heading south to strike at targets in Normandy in support of troops engaged in the post-D-Day landings. It was about to fly over Reading when fire broke out in a starboard inner engine. Rather than bale out and leave the plane and its explosive cargo to crash into the densely populated housing below, the pilot – a thirty-three-year old Jewish Australian, Victor Starkoff – diverted away from the town and into the countryside. He circled over Pinkneys Green looking for open land in which to bring the plane down, but in the process lost vital minutes

and just as he gave the order to bale out, it exploded in mid-air. Only one person succeeded in parachuting to safety before the plane crashed into woodlands. The rest were killed, including the navigator, twenty-six-year old Jan Fink from Finchley. No bodies were ever recovered and a memorial plaque marks the site.

The arrival of peace meant there was a mass return to London, but sufficient numbers remained in the area for Jewish life to continue. One of the challenges facing the community was to decide what sort of synagogue it should be. It was not affiliated to any particular movement, but its services were conducted according to Orthodox rites, which had been the character of the original evacuees. However, the community that remained was much less meticulous, almost by definition, for they were content to remain in an area which was non-Jewish and lacked Jewish facilities. This description applied to many other small provincial or suburban congregations, who simply carried on in the same Orthodox manner as before, often out of habit rather than from conviction, or because they were locked into financial arrangements with the United Synagogue from which they could not easily extricate themselves.

The catalyst for change came when one of the local Jews, Sidney Rich, visited California in 1949 as he was thinking of possible emigration to the United States. He attended a Reform synagogue there, was deeply impressed, and on his return to Maidenhead (having decided to stay in England after all), he proposed that the synagogue change affiliation. There was a long debate: some members felt the Reform approach chimed better with their own attitude and lifestyle; others wanted to carry on in the traditional manner. Eventually a motion was passed in 1952 to change to the Reform. On one level, it was just a local decision. On another level, it was a “first” in British Jewry. Other synagogues experienced break-away groups who left the congregation to go off and set up a Reform community, but never before had an entire congregation changed its religious affiliation. It is notable that this has only happened twice since then (Swindon in 1986 and Darlington in 1989).

This change to Reform began a process that led to Maidenhead acquiring a building, appointing a part-time minister (Erwin Rosenblum, who later went to Brighton), and joining a national movement, the Reform. Still, the real sign of a permanent community is not so much a *shul*, which could be in a rented hall, but a cemetery – a burial ground meant you had a lasting presence – and that did not occur until 1971 when a sizable section of the municipal cemetery (enough for 350 graves) was dedicated as a

Jewish one. Until that point members had been buried in London, since they still saw themselves as Londoners temporarily living elsewhere. The acquisition of a cemetery indicated a change of attitude, in that members were there to stay and, literally, put down roots.

Another landmark came in 1980 when the community appointed a permanent rabbi, the author of this article. Up to that point, it had been served by students rabbis from Leo Baeck College, but it then felt that having a full-time minister would enable the community to grow. That did happen, and the seventy-eight households expanded to the current 803 households, albeit covering a wide radius, including the neighbouring towns mentioned already. The spurt in growth led to the Synagogue being knocked down in 1987 and rebuilt on site to accommodate larger numbers; with the membership still increasing, it had to move to larger premises in 2001.

Bearing in mind that two-thirds of British Jewry is in London, with sizable chunks in Manchester, Leeds, and Glasgow, Maidenhead is now the largest non-metropolitan synagogue in the country. Analysis of records from 1980 to 2010 reveal some dramatic changes in both social trends and cycle of life rituals, some of which may be unique to Maidenhead but others may be replicated elsewhere in British Jewry, or may be pointers to the future. Seven areas stand out:

1. Baby blessings, which are common elsewhere for girls as an equivalent welcoming ceremony to that of circumcision for boys, but are done for both sexes. These came about largely because some parents found circumcision nerve-racking and wanted to enjoy the more relaxed atmosphere of a baby blessing.

2. The number of parents who opted not to circumcise their sons in the first place, feeling that it was no longer an appropriate ritual. That decision was rare before 2000, but in the following decade the number of male children known not to be circumcised was nineteen out of the ninety-three males born in the community, a rate of just over 20%. However, it is noticeable that in virtually all these cases, the father was not Jewish and may have been reluctant to permit a ceremony that was not only alien to him personally but often labelled in wider society as “barbaric” or “mutilation”. The increase in non-circumcision may therefore be directly related to the increase in mixed-faith marriages.

3. Another development was the number of adults having a bar/batmitzvah. In many cases, this was by proselytes who were not Jewish when they were thirteen years old; or it was by women who had belonged

to Orthodox synagogues in their childhood, thus not permitted to have a full batmitzvah, and who now wished to reclaim the Jewish opportunity they felt had been denied them. In many instances this was prompted by their own daughter approaching (or having recently had) their batmitzvah and awakening the realization of mothers that they had “missed out” on theirs.

4. There was an average of four marriages a year over the last three decades. This was small compared to the number of bar/batmitzvahs a year (fifteen), and almost certainly reflected the high rate of Jews who entered mixed-faith relationships and who therefore could not have a synagogue marriage. Even more telling is that the figures indicate that seventy-five of the 115 weddings involved one partner who had converted to Judaism, a proportion of 65%. If this is reflected elsewhere, then it means that the Board of Deputies figures about marriage statistics give a false picture of the current marriage rates, because they do not ask if both partners were born Jewish.

5. In many cases, the bride and groom were not only living together beforehand but had done so for many years. The wedding was increasingly seen as a confirmation of a well-established relationship rather than the start of it. Moreover, there was a noticeable rise in each succeeding decade: in the 1980s, 7 out of the 21 couples having a civil wedding under the synagogue’s auspices were registered as having the same address; in the 1990s, it rose dramatically to 28 out of 33 couples; and in the 2000s it was 26 out of the 29 couples.

6. There are a significant number of proselytes in the community. Of the 800 households, 113 included someone who had converted; in 20 cases, they were males, in 93 cases they were females. This imbalance is not surprising given that Jewish status is handed down through the maternal line and therefore there is a far greater incentive for a woman to convert if Jewish children are desired. In addition, prospective male converts have to face the hurdle of undergoing circumcision, which discourages some applicants who might otherwise apply.³⁸

7. As for end of life statistics, they show that the funerals were almost evenly split between burials and cremations (214/207), which is a far higher proportion of cremations than took place under the auspices of other Reform synagogues. While the type of funeral was very much a matter of personal choice, there were two distinct groups of members

38 Jonathan Romain, *Your God Shall Be My God* (London: SCM, 2000), 21ff.



Plate 4 Princess Margaret, who visited Maidenhead synagogue on its Golden Jubilee in 1990, with a member, Jessica Blooman.

who tended to opt for a cremation. One was Continental Jews who had come to England in the 1930s to escape the growing Nazi menace. It might have been thought that, as many of their generation had been killed subsequently in extermination camps and then cremated, they might have shied away from cremation. However, it was common among Reform Jews in Germany and Austria long before Hitler and so they merely carried on an existing custom. The other group was mixed-faith couples, who were faced with the dilemma of deciding in which cemetery to be buried – Jewish, Christian, or non-denominational. This was compounded by the added complication that most Jewish cemeteries permit only Jews to be buried in them, which meant dividing the couple. Being cremated solved the territorial problem, as crematoria are operated by the local authorities and open to those of all faiths.

Whatever their idiosyncrasies, the Royal Jews along the Thames – who first came as medieval traders and were then expelled, who returned primarily as First World War evacuees and then melted away, who came back as Second World War evacuees and stayed – are now thoroughly etched into the Jewish map of England.