

Years of Upheaval - 1940-1947

Despite the onset of the Second World War the previous autumn, the early part of 1940 saw the community growing in strength. The Annual Report of the year is most illuminating. Partly due to the setting up of a new Contacting Committee under the chairmanship first of Max Weinbaum and then of Captain Franks, and to energetic visitation work, the membership roll rose to over 300. The Shabbat services were being attended by close to 100 men. There was considerable cultural activity with many lectures and a regular study circle conducted by the Minister. A group also met at private houses every Friday night during the winter to listen to talks of Jewish interest and occasionally the attendance topped the 50 mark.

'Throughout the period the ladies of the (Synagogue) Women's Voluntary Service under the enthusiastic leadership of Miss Denhof and Mrs. S. Spanjer were meeting with clockwork regularity every weekday morning and afternoon, with some 103 ladies on the roll. A very promising Junior Social Section was successful in raising funds from concerts and dances. A concert, based on Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, was held in February 1940 and Board minutes record that this had proved a success socially, culturally and financially. Over 250 had attended, the music had been of a very high standard, and a profit of £28 had been made, £21 of which had gone to the classes and £7 to the W.V.S - this was thus an auspicious beginning for the use of the Communal Hall.

Then the Blitz hit London having the immediate effect of stemming progress in all directions. On 22nd September 1940 the Synagogue buildings sustained a direct hit from a high explosive bomb which severely damaged the old building (then the Hall and Classrooms). It affected the Synagogue itself only mildly but dislodged numerous tiles from the roof. This resulted in serious leakage from the roof on 1st day Rosh Hashanah and the Services came near to being abandoned due to flooding. The Annual Report states that 'All circumstances considered, the attendance at the High Festivals was very satisfactory, over 300 worshippers being present on Rosh Hashanah and considerably more on Yom Kippur. No lulavim were available for Succot but the Succah was duly prepared and decorated, albeit on a modest scale.'

The same Report relates that the membership was falling. People were evacuated or were serving with H.M.

Forces or otherwise involved in the country's service. 'The W.V.S. never ceased working for a day, though its roll of workers fell to 40. By the spring of 1941 it had produced no fewer than 3,800 articles for members of H.M. Forces, the Central Hospital Supply Services and for bombed and evacuated children. The Hebrew Classes continued to function throughout but the roll fell steeply from about 60 to 18. Another body which has continued to function is the Care Committee for Refugee Children. Mr Bamet Samuel, for a long time the devoted Chairman, had joined H.M. Forces and the work was now under the charge of Max Wolf, whose untiring work for this humane cause was deeply appreciated. 42 Children were being fully maintained by the Committee out of a total of 180 rescued from Germany through its agency.

The first official part-time Reader Rev. Nemeth had left the community in 1939 to take up a post in Highgate. In May 1940 Rev. M. Perlmann, formerly the Cantor of Carlsbad, Czechoslovakia, was appointed Part-Time Temporary Reader. The US had agreed to his appointment at a salary of £3 per week plus 12s 6d for weekend accommodation, if necessary. HGS Honorary Officers asked to be allowed to pay £4 per week inclusive on the basis that Rev. Perlmann would reside in the neighborhood and attend weekday services as well. The U.S replied 'until there is a very distinct improvement in the finances of the HGS Synagogue it is impossible to consider an increase'. He had officiated from Passover that year and stayed with the community until January 1941 when he was appointed First Reader at the Great Synagogue in Manchester.

After the departure of Rev. Perlmann, the Annual Report states 'a new Temporary Reader has been appointed in the person of Reverend N. Wilkomirski, who for many years was a renowned Cantor in Lelpzl and whose beautifully rendered prayer are highly prized'. HGS had wanted to appoint him on an earlier occasion. He was in his fifties, and was living locally but the U.S. Honorary Officers had stated that they 'could not view the appointment of an elderly man with satisfaction'. Now the HGS Honorary Officers were determined to have Rev. Wilkomirski and to be allowed to pay him a reasonable salary. Accordingly they met Sir Robert Waley Cohen early in 1941 to discuss the matter. This time they were permitted by the U.S. to have the Reader of their choice but were informed that £4 per week was now the maximum salary for temporary officials. Sir Robert did not object to the HGS Board making up the salary to £5, but not from offerings. When in June 1941 Rev. Wilkomirski received a 'call' from his previous congregation, Hendon Adath, who were offering a salary of £8 per week, the HGS Honorary Officers again met the U.S. to complain that the current salaries were totally inadequate - but to no avail. In the event the HGS Board raised £2 per week amongst themselves to augment the Chazan's salary, and the Chazan remained with the Community. The U.S. at this time were proving very difficult

where finances were concerned, largely because HGS income suffered during the war when numerous members were evacuated and did not pay their fees or paid reduced fees.

There were some interesting discussions at HGS Board Meetings during 1941. On the 24th August the Board decided that Shabbat services should start at 9.15 with the Reading of the Law at 10.00. The Reader was to be informed that the Services should in any case terminate by 12.00 in order that an adequate lesson might be given to the children afterwards. Even in 1984 services still traditionally finished at 12.00, but not for any such good reason! On the 30th November the Board considered 'the complaint ... that the Beadle (Mr. Harry Cohen appeared to be very often in conversation with members during the Services'. In fact Harry Cohen was a much liked Beadle. He did not always follow instructions regarding the allocation of mitzvahs - but often with good reason. Mr. Leo Rabinowicz recalls the occasion when Mr. Cohen was asked why the chosen man had not been asked to do Hagba. Mr. Cohen replied that he had been afraid that all the man's pens and pencils would fall out of his pockets as he reached to lift the Sefer! Harry Cohen devotedly served the Synagogue as Beadle from 1939 until shortly before his death in 1961.

Towards the end of 1941 Rev. Bornstein became a Chaplain with H.M. Forces and the Board, with the encouragement of Rev. Bornstein, appointed Rabbi Dr. Weinstock as Temporary Minister for the period that Rev. Bornstein would be away. Rabbi Weinstock was a brilliant man who had come to this country from Vienna in 1938. Having received nine rabbinical ordinations before the age of 19 in Poland he had then obtained a Doctorate in Oriental Languages and Philosophy at the University in Vienna and subsequently taught until 1938 at the Principal Jewish High School of Vienna. Since 1938 he had been living in the Suburb.

As Temporary Minister, Rabbi Weinstock was clearly more at home with the rabbinical and educational rather than the pastoral and secretarial side of the Ministry. The Rabbi strove with great zeal (perhaps too much zeal for some members) to encourage a greater religious observance in the community. He worked equally hard at reorganizing and revitalizing the Hebrew Classes. Although weekday morning services had always been arranged on an *ad hoc* basis (usually by mourners or those with Yahrzeit), it was Rabbi Weinstock who during the dark days of the war in 1942, instituted morning services on a permanent regular basis. In this, regular morning worshippers assisted him such as Mr. Max Weinbaum and Mr. Harry Kleiman (father of Alfred Kleiman, a past Warden and Chairman of the Jubilee Sub-Committee).

The secretarial duties were at long last removed from the Rabbi's province at this time. The Board Minutes

recall that Rabbi Weinstock had received a letter from the U.S. stating that he personally must contact those members who are in arrears with their fees for more than one year. The number of members so listed was 75, and these personal calls were to be completed within a fortnight and a report on them submitted to the U.S. Rabbi Weinstock informed the Board that he could not undertake this task without neglecting the educational work, which he had started in the community. Consequently in February 1942, the Board obtained the agreement of the U.S. to the appointment of a Temporary Secretary.

During the course of 1942, HGS representatives periodically met the U.S. Honorary Officers to ask for a salary increase for their officials. With regards to Rev. Wilkomirski, the U.S. took the view that the Chazan's poor English precluded him from carrying out communal visitation duties satisfactorily and that:

'Having regard to the very limited measure of service which this gentleman can render in the community, it is impossible to saddle the community with a higher payment for such limited service than £5 per week. If he is dissatisfied, his remedy is to obtain another post. As your Board are aware two years is the maximum period for a temporary appointment...Further extension could not possibly be ... (justified) in the case of a man already aged 5...My Honorary Officers regretted to hear that congregants had been encouraged to add to the official's salary a sum of £2 per week ... '

The U.S. Honorary Officers refused to meet HGS to discuss this matter again and accordingly HGS wrote to them in very direct terms as follows:

'An overwhelming majority of the members of our Synagogue not only approve of the measure and quality of the service which the Reader renders, but they consider themselves most privileged in having the service of so distinguished a Chazan. His full time is reserved for and freely given to the community. Not only is the Reader dissatisfied with the prevailing salary arrangements, but the Board feel that they are expressing the conviction of the great majority of the members when they state that it is a greater disgrace to them to pay the present salary than it is for the Reader to accept it...The regret expressed by you that the congregation had been encouraged to add £2 weekly to the Reader's salary indeed causes astonishment to the Board. It was with the knowledge and approval of you - the Honorary Officers - that this was done. It was considered the only way by which a "living" salary could be assured to the Reader; but the congregation resent the continuous indignity of having to treat with its officials in this manner...The Board of Management enjoys the full confidence of the congregation

to whom they have pledged their best endeavors, but apparently the Board does not enjoy the full confidence of the Honorary Officers of the U.S. and for this reason the members of the Board would prefer to resign in a body, rather than request our Reader to do so, for such would be the only alternative to paying him a proper salary...The Honorary Officers of the U.S. would then be free to make their own arrangements for the management of the affairs of our Synagogue.'

There being no satisfactory response to this letter, the whole of the HGS Board (except for Mr Spanjer who resigned) voted for a Resolution, sent to the U.S. which stated that unless the Honorary Officers of the U.S. reconsider their decision and place Rev. Wilkomirski on the same salary basis as the other married temporary Readers the entire Board would resign as a body. Sir Robert then agreed to meet Mr. Bamet Birk and Mr. Max Weinbaum, the HGS Wardens, and made a very close offer - the Reader's salary thus being increased to £315 per annum (all but £35 of the sum asked), and the HGS Board accepted. Sir Robert, writing to HGS on 19th November to confirm the new arrangement referred to '... misconceptions which have induced you and your colleagues to write such peculiar letters to the U.S., which have indeed marred ... relations.' He also referred to the fact that HGS had contributed not one penny to assist in meeting the deficits of less fortunate Synagogues; that other Synagogues were still out of pocket to the tune of £940 (Synagogue building costs) which HGS had promised to pay and that HGS had signed fewer covenants than any other shul in North-West London.