

The Beginning - Services at the Institute

In 1930 there was no Synagogue and no Jewish community, and indeed much of the eastern area of the Garden Suburb, including what are now Kingsley Way, Linden Lea, Norrice Lea and Winnington Road, was open fields. The beginnings of the community lie in the first years of the 1930s when a few Jewish families living in the Suburb decided to hold services for the High Holydays. Opinions differ as to the year in which they started but it was probably 1932.

The services were held in a room at the Henrietta Barnett School, part of the Hampstead Garden Suburb Institute, and henceforth services took place regularly there on Shabbat mornings. Amongst those who attended services were Maurice Cohen, his son Sam Cohen (father of Alan Cohen, the present Financial Representative), Maurice and Reuben Tanchen, Barnet Samuel and Dr. Sydney Blackman, who was a major driving force behind the foundation of the community. The man appointed to conduct the Services was Isaac Cohen (now Professor John Cohen), who was at that time a post-graduate student of psychology and physiology at London University. He had earlier attended Yeshivot in London and Manchester and was recommended for the position by his cousin Barnet Samuel. Professor Cohen remembers being interviewed by a committee at Dr Blackman's home and being appointed at 23 shillings a week. Living in Highgate he would walk over the Heath every Shabbat to the Institute where he was the Baal Tefilah and Baal Koreh, and at appropriate times of the year read Megillot or blew Shofar. He also started the Hebrew Classes for children aged 4 to 14, endeavouring to teach all of them in one class at the same time.

In the files of the U.S. there is a report (unsigned but presumably written by one of the honorary officers of the U.S.) entitled 'Attendance at HGS Hebrew Congregation 16.2.35', where the writer had obviously attended incognito. The Report, biased in a manner, reflected the prevailing U.S. view that a Synagogue in the Suburb was unnecessary:

'Attended the Service which is held in Room 14 on the first floor of the HGS Institute. Arrived at 10.20 am: 6 men were present, one young girl and a small boy (one of the men present looked a positive beggar and his appearance was quite disgusting for a Shabbos. Shacharis had finished and a general talk was going on whilst waiting for a minyan ... The girl handed me a Singers Prayer Book ..The room was apparently used for some demonstration purposes during the ordinary school period. It had a platform against the wall, running from end to end, upon which the Ark stood. There was a picture of Mona Lisa on the wall, and another picture was reversed. A Mr. Samuels spoke to me and asked me whether I lived in the locality. He told me that Minyans were very erratic. Generally managed to get a Minyan on Saturday. The maximum attendance

of men was about 14...At 10.30 a Mr. Cohen (Warden) arrived with a little boy, followed by a young man. A few minutes later Mr Webber (Barrister) arrived and the Reading of the Law commenced. They had one normal size Sefer Torah and a very small one in the Ark. A youngish man (Mr Cohen) conducted the service. He was apparently the general factotum. I was called up, and before the conclusion of the Reading another man arrived ... A grannie arrived followed by a young woman. Mr Webber read Maftir. Musaph finished at 11.25 am. During Musaph a number of children arrived intermittently...Mr Cohen (?Minister) then motioned to a gentleman sitting on the left, who nodded back. Mr Cohen then gave rather a disjointed talk on the important features of the week's Sedra. (It struck me as rather a novel idea, if only well done. It gave one an insight as to the week's reading and of its religious and moral value). This talk lasted 20 minutes.'