

## London Jewry Seventy Years Ago.

INTERVIEW FOR THE JEWISH CHRONICLE WITH  
MR. MYER DAVIS.

Mr. Myer Davis, although he retired from work some years ago, is still a familiar and ever welcome figure in a large circle. In the calm and placid evening of his days he devotes himself to advising and assisting the younger pilgrims along the paths which he himself trod in the days that are now, in many cases, long ago, and many a young and eager student has reason to be grateful to him for his sympathetic encouragement and kindly assistance when threatened by difficulties or stricken by disappointment. The father of Anglo-Jewish History is essentially the person to whom the student of that entrancing subject might be expected to go for information, and when that father in his own lifetime, still happily incomplete, covers the last eighty years, and those by far the fullest and most important, of the history of his people in this country, and was, moreover, during seventy of them intimately connected with the life of the community, he is essentially the person from whom to seek material for rebuilding Anglo-Jewry as it was sixty and seventy years ago.



Mr. Myer Davis.

Mr. Davis is always more than courteous, and a representative of the JEWISH CHRONICLE understood no difficulty when once he had made his mission known to his genial host. Right heartily did Mr. Davis respond to the invitation to supply some of his reminiscences of his boyhood to this journal for a second time. It will be recollected that an interview with Mr. Davis appeared in this journal some three years ago.

Rabbi Solomon Herschell.

"I was born in 1830," he said, "and my recollection commences eight or nine years later. The first person of note whom I happen to remember was Rabbi Solomon Herschell, who then filled an office which has since developed into that of the present Chief Rabbi. He was a man of dignified presence, with large features but well-proportioned. His portrait was to be seen in many Jewish houses, and numbers of copies of it still survive. He acted as Sandak at a function which took place at my father's house about seventy-two years ago, and I remember him taking me up in his arms and showing me the handsome embroidered chair which had been brought into the room and asking me how much of the Shema I could repeat. I remember to this day the exact point I reached in the prayer. He was quite satisfied, for he gave me a penny. I saw him frequently afterwards, but I was always too shy to go up and speak to him. Many witty tales are told of Rabbi Herschell. He was full of fun and humour. For a few years he was accustomed to read *Neilah* on the Day of Atonement. His gruff sonorous voice could on those occasions be heard throughout the entire synagogue. On Sabbaths and holidays, at the conclusion of divine service, the children in the synagogue used to troop round him, begging for his blessing, and even after he had left the building he used to be pestered in the neighbouring streets by children bent on the same errand. No matter how great the pressure, Rabbi Herschell never lost his smile, for he was especially indulgent to children. He was on most friendly terms with the then Secretary of the Great Synagogue, Moses Ansell, whom, as far as I know, I never saw, but whose niece I eventually married. On one occasion, there happened to be an unusual number of weddings at the Great Synagogue, and the Rabbi, turning to Ansell, punningly remarked, *יוס כלתו משה* (Moses, a day of Callas). To the Hebrew student the wit of this remark will be manifest. I remember the death of Herschell, and I was one of the four boys who were selected to hold large lighted candles by the side of his coffin."

The Oppenheims and Hyams.

Who were the other officials of the community at that time?

"The successor of Moses Ansell at the Great Synagogue was Simeon Oppenheim, the father of the late Mr. Samuel Oppenheim. One of Simeon Oppenheim's sons, Maurice, was Secretary of Sussex Hall, a sort of Jewish Polytechnic. He subsequently developed into a barrister. As a member of the Board of Deputies, Maurice Oppenheim was inclined to be diffuse and prosy, and there was on this account frequently friction between him and Henry Harris, the Treasurer of the Board. Mr. Harris was a wonderfully smart lawyer and one of the cleverest men I ever met. He used to get very impatient at Oppenheim's long drawn out statements and generally, sooner or later, interrupted him with the remark 'This is what you want to say, Maurice,' and then followed in a dozen words the gist of the speaker's hundreds."

Who were the people of note then associated with the Great Synagogue?

"There was Mr. Isaac Hyam, the father of a large family of sons and daughters. The eldest of them was that excellent Mr. David Hyam who died quite recently and of whom one cannot speak too highly. He conducted a large business in Houndsditch, but much of his time was devoted to public work for the welfare of the community. His father, Isaac Hyam, was known as Hymy Painter. He lived in a house in Bevis Marks at the corner of Heneage Lane. The exterior of the house was a picture of neatness and beauty, but when the front door was opened, a chaos of pails, brushes and other things connected with the painting trade was displayed. Jews being clannish, Mr. Hyam had the pick of contracts in connection with the repair and decoration of Jewish schools and other institutions. He was a tall man, good-looking and dignified. Hymy Painter was the delight of the Talmud Torah boys, who used to be penned in a box in the left corner of the Great

Synagogue. Isaac Hyam was the *Mohel par excellence* of the community. Wealthy people and members of the middle class invariably employed him, and from them he of course received his fees, but he never failed to give his services without fee to the poor, and frequently assisted them in addition from his own pocket. Frequently a B'rith took place in the synagogue itself, the local being between the Wardens' bench and the Ark. On these occasions a portion of the daily prayers was remitted, and the Chazan of the day indulged in a little extra chanting. These two variations used to delight the Talmud Torah boys. Moreover, when the service was concluded and a B'rith had taken place, there was a large goblet of wine to be shared among the boys, and I still remember the manner in which we used to smack our lips at the treat."

The Great Synagogue.

What of the Great Synagogue itself?

"Seventy years ago or thereabouts, the reading platform at the Great Synagogue accommodated, on all ordinary occasions, three of the paid officials, the premier Chazan, the Rev. Simon Ascher, the second Chazan, the Rev. Moss Myers, and the beadle, Mr. Pyke. The last-mentioned evidently held a post of higher rank than that of the beadle of to-day, because he habitually took a part in the services. He was a man greatly respected, and deservedly so. He used to live at 3, Herring Court, Crechurch Lane, close to the synagogue. One of his sons was totally blind, and after my Barmitzvah I was engaged to teach him the prayers by rote. Thus I had more than the ordinary opportunities of becoming acquainted with the family of Mr. Pyke. My pupil, the blind boy, was for some two or three years a bone of contention in the synagogue. The Talmud Torah boys used to occupy an enclosure separated from the other congregants by an iron bar. Within the enclosure, which was usually termed 'the box,' was one particular seat, in the interior of which were deposited prayer books, tallim, tephillin, etc. Mr. Pyke, poaching on the preserves of the Talmud Torah boys, allotted this seat to his son, and the other boys, on their part, resented the encroachment."

Chazan Ascher.

Can you tell me anything about Chazan Ascher?

"The Rev. Simon Ascher, the premier Chazan, was a brother of the Rev. Benjamin Ascher, who acted for many years as Kabronim Rabbi. The latter was an excellent scholar and a good preacher, but a very indifferent Chazan. The Rev. S. Ascher, on the other hand, was not noted for his Hebrew lore, and it used to be said of the two brothers that if Simon were to retain his voice and yet possess his brother's learning, while Benjamin retained his learning and at the same time acquired his brother's voice, the two would make an incomparable pair. Simon Ascher was by far the best chanting Chazan ever heard in London. Curiously, however, I do not remember a single occasion when he conducted service in a synagogue other than his own. He gloried in Chazonuth. He chanted not for the glory of Simon Ascher nor for the gratification of the congregation. His heart and soul were in his work, and he chanted for the glory of the Almighty. On Sabbath and holidays he was supported in his chanting by what were popularly called the Bass and Singer (Bass and Tenor). Julius Mombach was the tenor. The name of the bass I forget, although I remember his face and figure well. At a later date, Sam Lewis, who is still alive, became the colleague of Mombach. I am speaking now, of course, of the period before the introduction of the choir."

The Second Chazan.

The second Reader I believe you said was the Rev. Moss Myers?

"Yes. In the Rev. Moss Myers we are dealing with an interesting personality. Besides being second Chazan in the synagogue, he was also Talmud Torah Rabbi, and he shone in both capacities. He was one of four or five brothers, well known in the community in their day. One of them, the Rev. Isaac Myers, lived at Ramsgate for several years, and acted as so-called Chaplain to Sir Moses Montefiore. Another brother, Emanuel, also resided at Ramsgate and acted as Chazan at the proprietary synagogue there. A third Lewis was for some years Headmaster of the N'vei Tzedek, in the days before the amalgamation of the Jews' Hospital with the Orphan Asylum, a position from which he retired in middle age. The Rev. Moss Myers married a daughter of a member of the Western Synagogue, Victor Abraham, who lived in Lyell Street, Leicester Square. One of Mr. Abraham's sons was Philip Abraham, the author of 'Curiosities of Judaism,' a work compiled on the lines of Isaac D'Israeli's 'Curiosities of Literature.' Copies of this book are seldom seen nowadays. Mr. Philip Abraham was the father of the well-known present-day singer, Miss Leonora Braham."

What sort of reader was Mr. Myers?

"He read with a nicety and clearness which charmed everyone. His reading of the Torah was excellent. He never slurred over any passage, and he knew well all the traditional tricks and turns attaching to the cantillation—the raising of the voice in one passage and the lowering of it in another, or the long drawing-out of a word. When he used to chant the Song of Moses the worshippers were enraptured, and the solemn way in which he used to declaim the Ten Commandments met with universal approval. For years he used to blow the Shophar on Rosh Hashonah, and he was never known to make a slip. He was a dear old gentleman, and I revere his memory. In the schoolroom of the Talmud Torah he was much liked. He possessed a cane, it is true, but it was on only very rare occasions that he used it. The hours devoted to the teaching of Hebrew, which were in excess of those devoted to the same subject to-day, were, indeed, well spent, and under the guidance of this able teacher the Talmud Torah boys acquired a large amount of useful information."

**LONDON UNIVERSITY.**—The following have passed the recent matriculation examination:—First division: Miriam Landsau, Ephraim Sakochansky and Esther Tcherniac; Second division: Lazarus Cohen, Moss Dancyger, Burnett Leon Elman, Mordecai J. Erdberg, Judah S. Goller, Lillian M. Grossman, Joseph Harris, Jacob Mann, Eric C. Moses, Joseph Pereira-Mendoza, Ethel Pimstein, Mary Samuels, Lewis S. Wolf, S. S. Zilva. Lionel L. Benké and Arthur E. Cohen have been awarded University entrance exhibitions. Victor Feldman and Samuel L. Green have passed the second examination for medical degree (part I); Michael J. Cronin and Lionel G. Crossman have passed the same examination (part II).

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY.**—In the final honours school of *Literae Humaniores*, the following were placed in Class I.: M. Platnauer (New) and L. J. Stein (Balliol).

**FREEMASONRY.**—The M.W. Grand Master H.R.H. the Duke of Connaught and Strathearn, K.G., etc., has conferred the honour of London Rank upon Mr. Deputy Heilbut, who is the Secretary of the Guildhall Lodge No. 3116 and a Past Master of the Alliance Lodge No. 1827.

Mr. ARTHUR COHEN, K.C., contributed a Paper on "The Declaration of London," at the proceedings of the International Law Association.