# THE OLDEST SYNAGOGUE.

BY

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THE building in which we are meeting this afternoon is that of the oldest synagogue in the British Isles. As buildings go, it is not an ancient edifice, for it was completed only in 1702, but the present settlement of the Jews in England dates only from the Protectorate, and the Community which worships in this building is the same as that to which the original settlers in England belonged. This synagogue is consequently considered the Cathedral Synagogue of Anglo-Jewry.

The Jews of England as of the World are divided into two communities: the *Ashkenazim* and the *Sephardim*. The former, who compose the overwhelming majority, are those who follow the German ritual. They originate not only from the German lands but from the whole of Northern, Central and Eastern Europe. In England they compose about 247,500 out of a total Jewish population of about a quarter of a million. The *Sephardim* or Jews who worship in accordance with the Spanish ritual came originally from Spain and Portugal. On the expulsion from Spain in 1492 they scattered around the shores of the Mediterranean, while a few found their

way into France, Holland and the North Sea ports. Numbers of secret Jews, however, remained behind and were known as Marranos. These were gradually traced by the Inquisition, and to escape the terrors of this Office as many of them as could fled to more hospitable shores. The emigration of the Marranos from Spain lasted for the greater part of two centuries, for the ruthless policy of the Inquisition prevented not only the converts but even their remote descendants from merging in the general population.

The founders of the Anglo-Jewish Community in the seventeenth century were practically without an exception of Marrano stock. They consisted of wealthy merchants and their dependents and they assisted in making London the centre of a worldwide trade. The first of these Spanish Jewish merchants came to England early in the seventeenth century, and their number gradually increased until by the time of the Commonwealth there was quite a relatively considerable colony of these crypto-Jews. Most of them were politically in sympathy with the Protector, and their international connections enabled them to render valuable services to him in his secret service. The principal of these London Marranos was Antonio Fernandez Carvajal, who has been entitled "The First English Jew," for he and his sons were the first members of the colony to receive letters of denization. The Jewish Colony of those days all lived within almost a stone's throw of this Synagogue. Carvajal lived in Leadenhall Street, co-religionists took up their residence in Cree

Church Lane, Fenchurch Street, Great St. Helens, St. Mary Axe and Dukes Place. In the last named lived Augustine Coronel Chacon, a royalist agent, whose services were recognised after the Restoration by the conferment on him of a Knighthood. Sir Augustine Coronel, as he was known, was consequently the first Jew to enjoy an English title. The Synagogue, outwardly the private house of Moses Athias, a relative and employee of Carvajal, was in Cree Church Lane. Services were conducted here in great secrecy with Athias as rabbi. The following description has been given of this secret synagogue:—

"It was a tall private house, and its entrance was protected by three double-locking doors. Two rooms on the first floor were reserved for prayer, the smaller being appropriated to the women and separated from the larger by a partition fitted with a long and narrow latticed window. In the larger room four long forms—two on each side—were provided for the male worshippers. The *banco* or warden's pew consisted of a sort of desk raised high above the other seats, and occupying the west end of the room. Six feet in front of the *banco* and on a slightly lower level was the reading desk, with two steps on each side, and brass candlesticks at each corner. The ark was little more than a plain cupboard flanked by 'mighty' brass candlesticks. Two perpetual lamps of 'christal glass' hung before it. The walls were fitted with drawers in which worshippers kept their Prayer Books and Talithim."

The impetus for the formal readmission of the

Jews to England did not come from the crypto-Jews already settled in this country, but from without. The principal advocate of the Readmission was Menasseh ben Israel, an Amsterdam rabbi, with a European reputation for scholarship. He came to London in 1655 for the express purpose of securing for the Jews freedom of residence in England. His mission was a failure, but not a complete one, for the seed sown by him bore fruit within a very few years, and before the end of the Cromwellian régime freedom of residence and movement in England was practically assured to the Jews. The Restoration of the House of Stuart had no influence on the fortunes of the Jews. All the privileges they had hitherto enjoyed were confirmed to them, and henceforward the right of Jews to live in England has seldom been questioned, and whenever the question has been raised it has immediately been dismissed. Even before the Restoration the secrecy in which Jewish worship had hitherto been shrouded was raised, and the synagogue seems to have been practically open to the public. In 1663 Pepys visited the synagogue, which was then in King Street, Aldgate, and wrote:

"I saw the men and boys in their vayles and the women behind a lattice out of sight; and some things stand up which I believe is their law, in a press, to which all coming in bow; and at the putting on their vayles do say something, to which others that hear the priest do cry amen, and the party do kiss his vayle. . . . . And anon their laws that they take out of the press are carried by several men, four or five burthens in all, and they do relieve

one another, and whether it is everyone desires to have the carrying of it, thus they carried it round about the room while such a service is singing."

As soon as the position of the Jews in the country was secure, they set about organising a formal community. The Constitution or *Ascamoth* was based on those of Venice and Amsterdam. The laws were very stringent and concerned the religious services, the administration of the affairs of the congregation, and the relations between Jew and Jew and Jew and Christian. Jews were not allowed to proceed against one another in the courts of the land, but had to bring their causes before the Wardens. No member of the congregation was allowed to print religious books in any language without the consent of the *Mahamad* or Governing Council, which was seldom if ever granted. Worshippers were forbidden to pray so loudly as to drown the voice of the Reader. Religious discussions with or attempts to convert Christians were prohibited, as was also all participation in politics. The Jews of England were satisfied to devote themselves to their own private affairs, and asked for nothing more than that they should be allowed to do so undisturbed. For the upkeep of the synagogal institutions a *finta* or income tax was levied on the members. The revenue of the synagogue still rests on the same basis. The laws of the Congregation were written in Spanish and were not translated into the vernacular until 1819.

Immediately after the establishment of the congregation a *Haham* or Chief Rabbi was appointed, in the person of Jacob Sasportas, a scholar and

controversialist, who had had an adventurous career as prisoner and afterwards ambassador of the Sultan of Morocco, and still later as a member of the Mission of Menasseh ben Israel. His salary was at the rate of £50 per annum. Educational institutions were also established in connection with the Synagogue, and the "Gates of Hope" School, founded in 1664, still flourishes in the neighbourhood of Bevis Marks. Among the honorary officers of the congregation was the Warden of the Captives, whose duty it was to succour and, as far as possible, secure the release of Jewish captives in foreign lands.

As the number of Jews in London increased, the enlarged synagogue in King Street became uncomfortably crowded, and it was decided, in 1699, to erect a new and larger building. A suitable site was obtained in Plough Yard, about two hundred yards from the then existing synagogue. The property belonged to Sir Thomas and Lady Littleton, the former of whom was at the time Speaker at the House of Commons. There were also several tenants whose interests had to be acquired. The contract with the builder, Joseph Aris, "Citizen and Merchant Tailor," and a Quaker, was for £2,650. He undertook that no work should be pursued on the building on Sabbaths or the Jewish festivals. When the work was completed, he refunded the profit he had made, as, he explained, he desired no personal advantage out of the erection of a house of prayer. The total cost of the new synagogue amounted to £4496 4*s.* 0*d.* Queen Anne took an interest in the building, and presented a beam, which was incorporated in the

roof. Some of the handsome brass candelabra came from Holland, and some of the benches from the old synagogue. The Synagogue, which is the building in which we now stand, was opened for worship in 1702.

The external history of the Synagogue was henceforward uneventful. It consists only of a series of biographies. The congregation, during the subsequent two hundred years of its history, has enriched English public life with many a valuable personality. In the eighteenth century there was Fernando Mendes, a distinguished Portuguese physician, whose grandson was Moses Mendez, the poet and dramatist. From Moses Mendez are descended the Marquis of Crewe and Sir Robert Head—the sons of Moses Mendez changed their name to Head. From Fernando Mendes was also descended the distinguished Anglo-Jewish family of Mendes da Costa, among whose sons have been included scientists as well as philanthropists. Almost the last of the family was Mrs. Brydges-Williams, who romantically bequeathed a fortune to Lord Beaconsfield.

The outstanding English Jew of the eighteenth century was, however, Sampson Gideon. Gideon was one of those patriotic financiers who placed the interest of the commonweal before their own personal advantage. At the time of the South Sea Bubble he was a pillar of strength in the City, on account of his calmness and common sense in the midst of panic. At the time of the Forty-five he repeated his services of the earlier period, and by the confidence he displayed, supported successfully

the credit of the State. He had already previously become the trusted adviser of the British Government, whom he supplied with funds for the conduct of the war. Henceforward he devoted the whole of his energies to the public service, which was under obligations to him that no money could repay. Gideon was not only a financier; he was also a man of letters. His son, who was not a member of the Jewish community, was raised to the peerage as Lord Eardley. He left no male issue, but from him are descended the Childers family—the best known member of which was one of Mr. Gladstone's Chancellors of the Exchequer—the twelfth Lord Saye and Sele, and Sir Culling Eardley, who was prominent in political and philanthropic circles last century.

Quite a different character was the Baron d'Aguilar, a great Viennese contractor and imperial court official, who settled in England in the middle of the century, and married a Mendes da Costa. His town house was in Broad Street, and he had country places at Bethnal Green, Twickenham and Sydenham, and a farm at Colebrook Row, Islington. Loss of a considerable estate in America apparently turned his mind. He left his wife, became a miser, and lived on his farm, which became popularly known as "Starvecrow Farm." Nevertheless, when he died, in 1802, he left behind him a great fortune. Side by side with his eccentricities and his cruelty to his wife, d'Aguilar was remarkably charitable, and supported a home for the poor entirely out of his own pocket. General Sir Charles d'Aguilar, who

died last year, was a direct descendant of the eccentric Baron. A daughter married Admiral Keith Steward.

Joseph Salvador was a prince among merchants and philanthropists. He was the first Jewish director of the Dutch East India Company, and his firm, Francis and Joseph Salvador, took the place in the City of Sampson Gideon, on the death of the latter. His palatial residence, Salvador House—demolished not very many years ago—was in White Hart Court, Bishopsgate Street, and he had a country place at Tooting. Salvador suffered very great losses by the earthquake at Lisbon and the failure of the Dutch East India Company. One of the consequences of these misfortunes was the emigration to America of his nephew and son-in-law, Francis Salvador, who went there in connection with some vast estates which the family owned in South Carolina. Francis Salvador landed at Charleston in 1773. On the outbreak of the Revolution he threw himself heart and soul into it. He became one of the most capable and most trusted of the leaders of the Revolutionary party in the colony, but fell in battle at an early age in 1776.

The foregoing all worshipped, during the course of the eighteenth century, in the building in which we are now met.

Throughout the eighteenth century the *Mahamad* continued to hold a very strict control over all the doings of the members. Their financial transactions were subject to very close supervision. Betting was prohibited, although the subject of the wagers was seldom other than the number of hours by which the

Dutch Mail would be late. All interference in parliamentary and municipal elections was forbidden. The punishment for these offences varied. One was the exclusion for a limited period from all participation in divine service.

The policy of the congregation to take no part in State affairs suffered a change towards the middle of the eighteenth century, when a measure was before the Irish Parliament for the naturalisation of the Jews. This Bill was on several occasions successfully piloted through the Irish House of Commons, but was overcome by the resistance of the Lords. The failures were in some quarters considered to be due to the absence of any movement by the Jews themselves, and, in consequence, in 1746, a "Committee of Diligence," with Benjamin Mendes da Costa, the philanthropist, as president, was formed to watch over the interests of the Jews of Great Britain and Ireland. The committee was only of a temporary nature, and was soon dissolved; but it proved the forerunner of a permanent body, on which both branches of English Jewry were ultimately represented, for the Board of Deputies commenced its career fourteen years later. Before the admission of the representatives of the German congregations, however, the duty fell to the "Deputies of the Portuguese Nation" to present an address to George III on his accession. For long the *Sephardim* took the leading part in the deliberations of the Board of Deputies, and the minutes of their meetings were kept in the same language as those of the Synagogue—the Portuguese.

The congregation, being one of the most important in Europe, was the recipient of frequent applications for assistance. Loans, a portion of which was never repaid, were made to the congregation at Venice, and financial assistance was rendered to the Jews of the Holy Land, Persia, Bohemia and elsewhere. The Jews at Newport, U.S.A., however, were informed that other calls were more pressing than theirs. But financial assistance was not the only benefit conferred by the Bevis Marks congregation on their brethren of both hemispheres. In 1736, when the Jews of Jamaica were groaning under the burden of special taxation, the London community interceded on their behalf and obtained redress for their grievances. On another occasion, disputes arose among the Jewish settlers in Barbados, and were referred to London for decision. Applications also came frequently both from the Colonies and the United States, for the supply of readers and ministers, and the Bevis Marks Synagogue always did its best to fill the appointments.

The founders of the London community of Spanish and Portuguese Jews were almost without exception either Marranos coming direct from the Peninsula, or the descendants of Marranos who had fled to Holland, Hamburg, or Italy. In course of time the number of Marranos dwindled, the descendants of the original New Christians at length being permitted to merge with the surrounding population. The supply of recruits from this source grew more feeble and still more feeble, but even before it had entirely ceased, their place was taken

by the descendants of those who had fled in the first instance from the Inquisition and had settled under the milder Mohammedan sway on both shores of the Mediterranean. In the siege of Gibraltar in 1781, the Jewish inhabitants who had crossed from the opposite shore on its acquisition by England underwent great privations, but some shiploads managed to escape and to reach England, where they settled. To this influx is due the English nationality of the Ben Oliels, the Ben Susans, and the Almosninos.

In the meanwhile, the congregation had gradually lost its boasted priority of which its members had been so proud. The German community, whose numbers had been insignificant for many years after the return of the Jews to this country, had continually increased, at first slowly, but afterwards by leaps and bounds, until, by the date that has been reached by this slight historical sketch, but a fraction of the Jews of England conformed to the ritual of the *Sephardim*. That fraction, however, still considered itself the aristocracy of the race.

The great event in the history of the congregation in the nineteenth century was the secession in 1840 of eighteen of the principal members, who joined with six of the leaders of the sister community to form the West London Synagogue of British Jews, in which the services were conducted in accordance with a reformed ritual, which was promptly denounced by the orthodox ecclesiastical authorities. Representatives of the best known Sephardi families—the Lousadas, who held a Spanish dukedom, the Henriques, some of the Montefiores and Mocattas,

and others—participated in the secession. These eighteen seceders gradually drew others around them. Those who remained at Bevis Marks had, however, been forced by the pressure of environment to move from the position occupied by their fathers. The stringency of the communal government of the eighteenth century had to be relaxed, and it was not long before a branch synagogue was opened in the West End. The censorship on publications also disappeared, and the ban on participation in non-Jewish public life was removed.

In the course of the nineteenth century Bevis Marks produced several distinguished sons, but unlike their predecessors of the preceding century, their activities were rather outside of their religious community than within it. David Ricardo did not attain to fame as an economist and politician until after his adoption of Christianity. The same may be said of Bernal Osborne, the wit and politician, and of his father Ralph Bernal, the Chairman of Committees of the House of Commons. Isaac d' Israeli, the man of letters, remained a Jew by religion until the end of his life, although he had many years previously resigned his membership of the Synagogue, and was ultimately buried in a Christian cemetery; but his far greater son, Lord Beaconsfield, formally divested himself of Judaism at the age of twelve. Throughout his life, however, his Jewish sympathies remained strong, as is evidenced by his writings. Sir Menasseh Lopez, the founder of the family now represented by Sir Henry Lopes and Lord Ludlow, was a famous figure

in his time. On two occasions he was sentenced to imprisonment and heavy fines for bribery and corruption in connection with parliamentary election contests. Nevertheless he ultimately became Recorder of Westbury, the representation of which borough he resigned in favour of Sir Robert Peel on the latter's rejection by the University of Oxford. In the early part of the nineteenth century Bevis Marks also produced quite a number of famous pugilists, of whom Daniel Mendoza, the Belascos, Samuel Elias and Dutch Sam and his son, Young Dutch Sam, are the best known.

The nineteenth century Jew of whom Bevis Marks and the whole of Anglo-Jewry is proudest, was Sir Moses Montefiore, the centenarian philanthropist, who, though he has now been dead a generation, is yet still living in the minds of innumerable Jews in all quarters of the globe. Until a few years ago individual Jews used occasionally still to find their way from the most distant parts to Ramsgate, where Sir Moses had made his home, to appeal for his influence and intercession on behalf of the oppressed. It took many years for some to grasp that he, whom they considered their father and protector, was indeed dead. In the course of his long and beneficent life the interests of his kindred drew him to Cairo, Damascus, Constantinople, St. Petersburg, Rome, Morocco and Roumania. On seven occasions—the last when he was ninety-one years old—he visited Palestine. From the Sultan he obtained a firman denouncing the Blood Accusation. At Damascus he secured

the release of the leaders of the local Jewish community who had been imprisoned on a false charge trumped up by the French Consul. In Morocco also he obtained from the Sultan more humane treatment for his co-religionists. The Czar, the Pope, and the ruler of Roumania were the only rulers who were deaf to his pleadings. When he died full of years in July, 1885, the whole of England and the whole of Jewry mourned for him.

Sir Moses left no children, but many of his close relatives are intimately connected to-day with the management of the Bevis Marks Synagogue. Other families that are prominent at Bevis Marks to-day are those of Sassoon, descended from Sir Albert Sassoon, the merchant-prince of Bombay and previously of Bagdad; Mocatta, of whom Frederic David Mocatta will always shine brightly in the annals of English philanthropy; Lindo, who have been for generations prominent in Anglo-Jewish life; Pinto, who trace their descent from the Marrano, Don Manuel Alvarez Pinto y Ribera, the great Spanish nobleman and landowner and Knight of St. Jago, who took refuge in Antwerp about the middle of the seventeenth century and there professed Judaism; and De Pass, members of which were among the pioneers of South African industry. The Sephardi community of England still has reason for pride, not only in its past but also in its present.