

Impressions of a Liberal Jewish Service.

By MARCIA LEVITT.

I have never found it easy to rise on a Sunday morning, but I was eager to attend a Liberal Jewish Service and I decided that for once I would make the effort and be there in time.

And so one Sunday morning I set out for the Liberal Jewish Synagogue. But I had forgotten whether the Service began at eleven or eleven-thirty, and it was already eleven-thirty-five when I arrived at the attractive pillared brick building in St. John's Wood Road, London. A large number of handsome limousines were lined up outside it and several liveried chauffeurs were idly chatting to one another. To enter or not to enter? I deliberated with myself until my eye chanced to fall on a board which announced that a "Confirmation Service" would commence at 11.30. Well, five minutes was not very late. I mounted the steps and entered the vestibule. A woman gave me a slip of paper. "To the left," she whispered.

To the left a number of men and women were grouped outside a closed door. They were all holding in one hand slips of paper such as I had been given and in the other a prayer-book. Over a red electric sign on one side of the door a notice asked us, the late-comers, to wait until the sign showed green before we entered.

I examined the slip of paper. It was the Order of Service and from it I gathered that the Service of Confirmation had already begun. Fourteen boys and girls were to be confirmed that day. Their names, printed on the back of the slip, were conspicuously Anglo-Saxon: Donald Philip, Peter Hugh, Henry, Peter David, Hazel, Peter Horace, Unity Ann, May Joan, Seymour James, Lewis Elliot, Patricia Elizabeth, David Laurence, Raymond Albert, Peter Harold. I wondered why Peter was so popular among the members of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue.

The sound of an organ and choir drifted to us faintly from within, then died down. The light showed green and the door opened. Silently we entered the Synagogue.

My first impression was one of light and air. No dim religious atmosphere here. It was a fairly large Synagogue, but for all its dome and coloured glass windows (not stained glass), Ark of the Law and eternal lamp, it reminded me more of a large public hall than a Synagogue. At one end, facing the Congregation, was a raised platform and in the centre of it a desk (or what looked very much like it) which served both as reader's table and pulpit. On the platform, forming a semi-circular wall to it, was the Ark of the Law. The platform—to have called it a *bima* would not have been quite correct—was covered with flowers, and to the right and left of the pulpit sat the boys and girls to be confirmed—the boys in dark suits, the girls in white, long-sleeved dresses.

There was the briefest pause in the Service while the latecomers seated themselves. Then it proceeded. They were now at the reading from the Scroll, which was the Ten Commandments. Mouthing his words somewhat exaggeratedly, giving his Hebrew an accent so English that it failed at times to sound like Hebrew, the Minister read aloud the Commandments, the Confirmation Class

translating it aloud into English after him, commandment after commandment. The same proceeding followed with a reading from Isaiah.

I looked round the Congregation. It had seemed to me at first that there was a fairly large gathering but I began to perceive that it was not really larger than the gathering which usually attends an orthodox service on a Saturday morning. The gallery and side seats were empty, and if one had separated the men and women instead of letting them sit together they would not have even given the impression of being many. Some of the men wore hats, some not. And I did not see as many young faces as I had thought I would. Yes, there was a quiet and order one did not see at an orthodox service. Most worshippers looked serious, attentive—and yet, was I wrong in believing I saw an expression of smug respectability on some of those faces? That young woman standing next to her husband—obviously she was feeling "good." Her clothes proclaimed her a resident of the fashionable neighbourhood of St. John's Wood. She led an easy, comfortable existence during the week and the handsome Rolls which was undoubtedly waiting for her outside did much service in driving her from shop to shop and theatre to theatre and party to party. And now on Sunday, content and secure, she was performing her weekly rite of service to God. . . .

But now someone was playing the organ again, playing beautifully. And then the Confirmation Class one by one came up to the pulpit and delivered a special prayer. There were prayers to God to make them unselfish and considerate, prayers for the Jews suffering on account of sickness or persecution. One girl announced her decision to believe in the help of God when she was in trouble, and a youth, not so trusting, asked the All-High, in this scientific world in which we were living, always to put science to the best uses. . . . Interspersed among the prayers was the playing of the organ and the singing of the choir. It was a very lovely choir and as music a delight to listen to. A woman rendered a solo so well that I just kept myself from applauding at the end. Beautiful music—the melodies not what one was accustomed to in a Synagogue, maybe a little churchy, but beautiful. . . .

After the prayers, the slip of paper in my hand announced, the next item was to be a hymn sung by the choir. A hymn it was. Many years ago we used to sing hymns at school. We were all—Jewish and Gentile pupils alike—compelled to sing them, because, no reference being made in them to Jesus and all praises being to the Lord of the Old Testament, no one could possibly raise any objection to them. But even in those days I detested them because to me, just becoming aware of the beauty of words and rhythm and colour in poetry, they seemed to be devoid of any of these. Even then they struck me merely as doggerel and failed to elevate my spirit to those exalted regions which, at the age of fourteen, I firmly believed all hymn-singing should do. The hymn of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue reminded me strongly of those early days,

except that it was sung not to the bad accompaniment of a bad pianist on a badly tuned piano, but by an excellently trained choir to a well-played organ. But the words were there, written on the slip of paper before me:—

"Upon thy statutes my delight
Shall constantly be set,
And by Thy grace I never will
Thy holy law forget."

And other verses in a similar strain.

More prayers followed, and then the "address and blessing." I say address and not sermon because so my Order of Service described it. But even the term "address" was somehow wrong. The Minister rose to speak to the Confirmation Class, the Congregation listening intently. This was obviously a speech for young people. There was none of the elaborate, verbose, vowel-lengthened manner of the sermoniser. He used phrases like "jolly hard" and other colloquialisms apparently more understandable by the young than those not to be found on the cricket or hockey field. And he turned to his young listeners as he spoke, looking at them individually. But I wondered. . . . If I were fourteen or fifteen again, would I feel that this mask-faced individual, speaking so slowly and unemotionally, really understood what I as a young schoolgirl was thinking, could he really enter my mind and feelings? Was he at that moment in tune with me?

The address lasted no longer than about eight minutes. Judaism, he said, gave to them in the measure of what they gave to it. What should they give to it? The cultivation of the highest and best ideals. Never were they to be anything shabby or tawdry or cheap in their ideals (I am reproducing his words as far as possible), they were always to maintain the highest and the best. They had to be decent—jolly decent—in their acts to others and in themselves. But just as a brilliant pianist had to be constantly practising to maintain his high standard, so Judaism required special acts every day. Those special acts could be described in two words—acts of prayer and worship. He warned them, it was going to be jolly hard to perform these acts. Prayer and worship were unfashionable and it was easier to do the things that were omitted by all than those which were omitted by a few. . . . Then he blessed them and the Congregation rose. There was a "concluding anthem" in English by the choir in which the Congregation joined. The music swept on magnificently. But my thoughts had wandered.

Was this, then, all he had to say to young Jews and Jewesses entering officially the ranks of Judaism? All he had to say to young people living in one of the most difficult periods of history, in a world torn by strife and bitterness, in which the shadows of a ghastly war were growing larger and blacker, in which Jews were being torn physically and spiritually into little insignificant pieces. . . in which doubts and despair in the individual were growing daily and in which young Jews could well ask themselves: What is the purpose of my life as a Jew, what the meaning?" Was

he at this most impressionable period of their lives only able to give them a pretty, public-school-headmaster-on-prize-giving-day-address, telling them vaguely to maintain the "highest and the best"—whatever that might be—and to be "jolly decent?" Could he answer if one of them should ask how "jolly decent" Jews had been rewarded in Germany and elsewhere? How utterly empty, how utterly, utterly meaningless. Words, words, words. . . .

And yet, I rambled on to myself, try to be fair. What does the orthodox synagogue give in place of words? Does it give more hope and understanding, more answer to the questionings of youth? And I had to admit that it did not. Then why did I feel so strongly about this Service and the sermon—I beg pardon, the address—of a really well-meaning Minister? I did not know, except that it seemed to me that if one made radical changes in the life of a people, if one discarded worn-out rites and traditions, if one all but denied one's own language, then it had to be for something better, more worth-while. I felt a warmth for the old traditional service through which I had sat so many dull and weary hours, a tolerance, almost affection, for its disorderly ways and its subdued chatter in the women's galleries, for the old bearded men with *yarmelkes* and *taleithim*, and there came back to me something of real beauty, albeit without the assistance of the organ, in the remembrance of certain parts of the service, such as the rich majesty preceding the opening of the Ark, or the Kol Nidre Service on Yom Kippur Eve.

I am not religious and I am not a shul-goer, but I know that if I had to make my choice between that comfortable, friendly God of the orthodox synagogue who seems not so very far away, rather tolerant and humorous, even a little human, and the aloof stuffy God of the Liberal Synagogue, superior in his heavenly heights complete with angels, lilies and harps, then I should have no doubt whatsoever which way my choice would go. And if it were not a question of choosing a god but merely a service, then I should undoubtedly choose the one which, whatever its ultimate value, has individuality and a respect for those things which have become part and parcel of the Jewish people instead of trying hard to put a vague and emasculated thing called Judaism into vessels prepared by other races for other creeds.

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Economic Boycott of Jews in Poland.

POLISH DEPUTY ATTACKS GOVERNMENT.

Warsaw.

The Jewish deputy Dr. Emil Sommerstein attacked the Polish Government for its toleration of the economic boycott against the Jews and declared that he would vote against the Government.

Deputy Sommerstein spoke in the debate on the Bill seeking to give the Government special powers. He reminded the Sejm that ten years ago Premier Bartel declared himself against economic anti-Semitism because it was an injustice against the Jew. To-day, however, the Prime Minister stated that he was not against an economic fight against the Jews, which was an act of injustice against the Jews of which everyone was well aware.

The Endeks, Deputy Sommerstein went on, have their own laboratories where they concocted their plots against the Jews. He claimed that the Endeks placed pickets in front of Jewish stores. Jews, he went on, were accused of Communism, but it was poverty that drove Jews to Communism, poverty which was caused by the campaign of economic extermination which was being waged against them.

Deputy Sommerstein finally declared that the Deputies of the Jewish Club of Deputies, e.g., himself, Deputy Rubinstein and Dr. Gottlieb would vote against granting special powers to the Government.—J.T.A.

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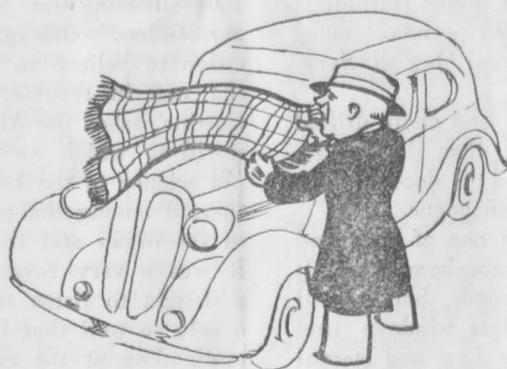


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