

**A  
BRIEF  
HISTORY  
OF**



**THE WEST CENTRAL  
LIBERAL SYNAGOGUE**

109 WHITFIELD STREET. LONDON W.1.

**1928 - 1978.**

by Rev. Lawrence Rigal B.A.

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## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WEST CENTRAL LIBERAL SYNAGOGUE:**

The Golden Jubilee of the Congregation takes place officially in 1978, but its history goes back many more than 50 years, for although the Congregation was formally founded in 1928, it was the direct result of many years of Liberal Jewish activities.

The key figures in the establishment of the Congregation were the sisters Lily Montagu and Marian Montagu. They were the daughters of a strictly Orthodox Jew, Samuel Montagu, M.P., a banker who later became the first Lord Swaythling.

In 1893, Lily Montagu began to help run a Bible Class in Bloomsbury, and from this Bible Class the two sisters developed the West Central Jewish Girls' Club. All Club meetings contained Jewish prayers, and Lily Montagu's approach to prayer was Liberal, although at the time she had not realised this.

Brought up in an observant Jewish home, Lily Montagu became aware that the traditional form of Judaism had no appeal for many of the young people of the day, who were therefore giving up their Jewish heritage. In 1899, she wrote an article for the Jewish Quarterly Review in which she expressed the great need for Judaism to be presented in a way that would be in harmony with the thought of the period and which would give meaning and guidance to many who were living without Jewish religious teaching. This article aroused the interest of a number of prominent Jews and with their help the Jewish Religious Union was formed in

1902. The Services of the Jewish Religious Union were held in an hotel in Marylebone, and were the first Services in this country to have many of the prayers in English. Some of the girls from the West Central Jewish Girls' Club used to attend the Services regularly.

### WEST CENTRAL SECTION OF THE J.R.U.

The Liberal Jewish Synagogue was established in 1911, and in 1913, Lily Montagu started the West Central Section of the J.R.U. This was really the birth of the Congregation which reached its maturity at the age of confirmation 15 years later. The original members of the Section came mostly from the West Central Jewish Girls' Club. The Section carried on most of the functions of a Congregation. It held Sabbath and Festival Services which took place at the Club premises in Alfred Place. There were regular speakers on various Jewish topics and attendances at these meetings reached over 100. Children's religion classes were started under the guidance of Mrs. Netta Franklin, another sister of the Misses Montagu. The first Secretary of the Section was Miss Lily Court.

### WEST CENTRAL LIBERAL SYNAGOGUE:

The West Central area of London was well populated with Jews. A mainly Jewish market and Jewish shops and restaurants abounded in the area. The interest in the West Central Jewish Section continued to grow despite the four years of the first world war. The Section was hampered by two things. The first was a lack of money, for most of their members were far from prosperous; The second was that membership came mostly from the members and ex-members of the West Central Jewish Girls' Club, and so they had few men. For these reasons they were not strong

enough to form a Congregation, nor could they afford to engage a Minister. The Services were conducted mainly by Lily Montagu, but she also received help and support from Dr. Claude Montefiore, and from the Ministers of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, Rabbi Dr. I.I. Mattuck and the Rev. Maurice Perlzweig.

In 1928, both of these difficulties were overcome when the Liberal Jewish Synagogue appointed Rabbi Solomon Starrels as their third Minister, and he was permitted by them to serve as Minister to the West Central Section.

The first service of the Congregation took place on September 8th, 1928, and from then on regular Services were held which included choral and organ music, with prayers in Hebrew and English. From the early days of the Section, when most of those who attended were women working a five and a half day week, including Saturday morning, it was the practice to hold the Service on Saturday afternoon, as were the original Services of the J.R.U. This custom has continued throughout the life of the Congregation.

During the 50 years, hundreds of people have become members and been influenced by Lily Montagu's personality and by the modern interpretation of Judaism. Women members have always taken part in the Services and served on the Council and Committees of the Congregation. Besides normal Synagogue activities, there was a burial, funeral and cremation scheme. There was a large and flourishing religion school, and every year a number of young people went through an impressive confirmation service conducted by one of the leaders of the Movement. Barmitzvah Services were also arranged, provided they were later followed by confirmation. An unusual feature of the Congregation's life was the open air service followed by

tea and the annual general meeting which was held in the garden of the Hon. Mrs. Franklin's home. Plays were especially written by the teachers to be presented by the pupils at Chanukah celebrations. The Congregation was glad to receive sincere proselytes, and one of our outstanding teachers for courses in conversion, as well as serving in the religion school, was Miss Olga Lazarus. The annual Sedarim which never ceased even during the war years were well attended and provided an emotional link with the history of our people. The Sukkot celebrations with the tables overflowing with fruit and vegetables were joyful occasions. There was a Library, an active young people's group, a women's society, a men's society, a social committee under the direction of Mr. Bryan Montagu and Miss Mabel Wilson, who combined their efforts successfully with the raising of funds to build a Synagogue. Noteworthy were the large annual Bazaars for the same purpose.

Practically all the work of the Synagogue was done by voluntary service of a very high order, by a great many devoted devoted helpers, While after 50 years, it would not be possible to name them all, we are listing at the end some of these past and present members and friends, whose names are not mentioned elsewhere in this brief historical record. We thank especially those who have helped the Synagogue by serving as Officers and as members of the Council. An Officer who has been closely associated with the Congregation for more than 50 years is our Vice-President, Miss Zaire Novack.

Although Lily Montagu was the prime mover of both the Synagogue and the Club, she kept the two organisations quite separate. The Synagogue held their Services in the Club building because they had no other premises. The main hall was transformed into a Synagogue by bringing in a movable Ark and Reading Desk.

## THE 1939 WAR:

On the night of April 16th/17th, 1941, a German landmine completely destroyed the Club building in Alfred Place. The 27 people staying there over night were killed. The Congregation was now without a home. Services were held in the Whitfields Tabernacle (now the American Church) and for many years at the Mary Ward Settlement.

After the war, the West Central Club was awarded compensation for war damage. Miss Nellie Levy, the Club Leader, who had been closely associated with the Congregation since its inception, insisted that part of the money should come to the Congregation and be used to build a new Synagogue.

In 1947, our Hon. Architect, Mr. Ernest Joseph, besides designing our simple but beautiful Synagogue, found a bombed site at the corner of Whitfield and Maple Streets and supervised the negotiations which culminated in our obtaining a 99 year lease, so that we could erect our Synagogue building. The energetic Building Committee, under the chairmanship of Mr. W. Soester, together with the Social Committee and the members worked tremendously hard to raise money for each brick and stone. Eventually, sufficient was obtained to make a start, and when planning permission was given, the first floor was built and consecrated in 1954. Further money was raised by continuous efforts and a second floor was added in 1959. The Synagogue sanctuary with the Ark, Desk and Perpetual Lamp were brought upstairs, leaving the lower floor free to be used as a communal hall.

## THE HON. LILY HELEN MONTAGU:

In 1943, the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues

decided to recognise officially the position of certain men and women who were then conducting Services and leading Congregations. Among these was Lily Montagu. She was awarded the title of Lay Minister, and now officially continued to carry on all the duties of a Minister, including officiating at weddings and funerals. She therefore became the first Jewish woman Minister in Great Britain. She conducted Services in a gown and hat, but without a Tallit.

In 1929, she had been awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Hebrew Letters by the Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati. She was awarded the Order of the British Empire in 1937 for outstanding social work, and in 1955 was made a Commander of the British Empire for her services to Jewish organisations. She was one of the first women in England to be a Justice of the Peace, and for many years served as a Magistrate in the Borough of St. Pancras and a Chairman of the London Juvenile Courts. She was a founder of the Women's Industrial Council, an Officer in the National Council of Women, and active in the Association of Women Workers. She was a founder of the National Organisations of Girls' Clubs.

Lily Montagu was a most remarkable person. She had at very deep sincere belief in Judaism. She had a strong personality, and was well able to share that belief with others. She was an excellent organiser and could inspire others to work with her. She helped to found the West Central Jewish Girls Club, later Mixed Club, the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, the union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, the West Central Liberal Synagogue, most of the Liberal Congregations in Great Britain and many abroad, the World Union for Progressive Judaism, and the London Society of Jews and Christians.

She always tried to apply her Jewish beliefs in her own life

and she did much social work both inside and outside the Jewish community. She was responsible for starting the Maude Nathan Home for Jewish Children, and always interested herself in the cases of people in need.

In all this work she was greatly assisted by her elder sister Marian who quietly and efficiently helped her to achieve so much in her life's work. She died in 1963 in her 90th year, and Marian died two years later aged 96.

### RECENT HISTORY:

The Congregation naturally felt her loss very greatly; but in her many years of leadership, she had gathered around her many who could carry on her work. The religious leadership was in the hands of Mr. Joseph Ascher, another Lay Minister of the Union who had already been assisting Lily Montagu for several years. The Presidency was given to Miss Nellie Levy, a deeply religious Jewess and a foundation member of the Synagogue. The organisation of the daily running of the Congregation fell to the Secretary, Miss Jessie Levy, who had been Lily Montagu's Secretary for many years.

Over the years, the Congregation has had other religious leaders. For a time Rabbi David Jacobson and Rabbi Dr. F. Solomonski assisted Miss Montagu. Rabbi Dr. Leslie I. Edgar was always ready to help when required, and in later years all the Ministers of the Union gave valuable assistance. More recently they were led by Rabbi Roger Pavey, and in 1973, their present Minister, the Rev. Lawrence Rigal came to serve the Congregation.

The movement of the population away from the centre of London had adversely affected the Congregation. The numbers have dropped to 300. However, the members, although now nearly all elderly, are very loyal and travel long

distances in order to worship with the Congregation.

In 1970, the Congregation gave their lease and building to the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues for their headquarters, on condition that they would have continued use of it for their Services and all other Congregational activities. The building was appropriately renamed The Montagu Centre after Lily and Marian Montagu. Besides the offices of the U. L.P.S., the building also houses the office of the European Board of the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

### THE PRESENT CONGREGATION:

The Congregation holds regular Sabbath and Festival Services at which the attendances continue to be good. There is an active Women's Society, which provides tea after the Sabbath Services, an Israel Committee, and social and educational programmes. Visitors to the Congregation are usually impressed by the unpretentious friendly atmosphere which has been preserved since the early days, and by the warmth of the Services. The present President is Mr. Jeremy Montagu, who has inherited much of the energy and enthusiasm of his illustrious relatives Lily and Marian Montagu.

OFFICERS AND COUNCIL MEMBERS, 1978:

- Minister: The Rev. Lawrence A. Rigal, B.A.  
President: Jeremy P.S. Montagu.  
Vice-presidents: Jessie Levy, Zaire Novack, William Soester.  
Treasurers: Henry Berman, Jessie Levy.  
Secretary: Jessie Levy.  
Trustees: Elizabeth Ginsbury, J. Montagu, W. Soester.  
Council Members: David Berman, Maurice Cohen, Peggy Day, Louise Lopata, Edward Measure, Gwen Montagu, Jack Weston, Mabel Wilson, Anne Kwintner, representing the Women's Society.

Women's Society Officers:

- Chairman: Gwen Montagu.  
Secretary: Anne Kwintner.  
Treasurer: Mabel Wilson.

Members of the 50th Anniversary Committee:

- Chairman: The Rev. Lawrence A. Rigal.  
Secretary: Mabel Wilson.  
Sadie Baum, David Berman, Elizabeth Ginsbury, Anne Kwintner, Gwen Montagu, Jeremy Montagu, Marion Ross, William Soester.

We would recall with gratitude the lives and work of those who have died:

Henry & Antoinette Antrich, Susan Asch, Morris Beerman, Betty Belinfante, Millie Blindt, Mary Bonin, Lionel Cohen, Albert Drigant, Rebecca Feldman, Jose Glynn, Freda Gossels, Dora Issacs, Julian & Lillie Joseph, Harry Landau, Barnett Levison, David Levy, Jack Levy, Constance Lewis, Solomon Marofsky, Abraham Mintz, Isidore & Pauline Phillips, Rosie Robinson, Kate Sapper, Hyman Sherman, Esther Solomons, Lyddie Tasch, Beatrice Walters, Ivor Warren.

We also express our appreciation to those who are still with us:

Cissie Addy, Esther Bloom, Jean Cowan, Rose Garnham, Basil Grant, David Grant, Elizabeth Grant, Tottie Isaacs, Paul & Johanna Lichtenstern, Lisbet Meyer, Marie Rhodes, Wallace & Frances Rubin, Iris Soester, Tommy & Ada Thompson, Isadore Waterman, and to all the members of the Synagogue who have given loyal service, but are too numerous to name in this short history.



DEDICATION OF WHITFIELD STREET SYNAGOGUE. 1954  
 LILY MONTAGU, J. JOSEPH, D. GRANT, RABBI EDGAR, H. SHERMAN AND L. MENDEL.



THE COUNCIL c. 1931, back: H. ANTRICH, H. LANDAU, MR JACOBS, N. LEVY  
 H. SHERMAN, D. ISAACS & RABBI STARRELS, seated: MR J. LEVY, MISS J. LEVY  
 MRS HOLT, L. MONTAGU, MRS. HOLT & M. MONTAGU, front: L. COHEN & L. TASCH.

For more information about Rabbi Lawrence Rigal see:

[www.exploringeastlondon.co.uk/lar/](http://www.exploringeastlondon.co.uk/lar/)

For up-to-date information about West Central Liberal Synagogue see:

[www.wcls.org.uk](http://www.wcls.org.uk)