

MEMORIES OF FRANKFURT

(Aus der Schuetzenstrasse)

Hermann Schwab¹

I

THE RABBI

Forty years ago on a summer morning, we children were taken for a walk along the "Promenaden", the green belt which surrounded the old town of Frankfurt-on-Main. We were not far from the "Schoene Aussicht", close to the bank of the River Main where Samson Raphael Hirsch lived, when my brother, my senior by two years, took hold of my arm and whispered: "The Rabbi". We stopped. Accompanied by one of his granddaughters, Samson Raphael Hirsch, stooping slightly, but with firm steps, passed by. He raised his hat to the two small boys who stared at him with curiosity. His dark eyes were lit up by a kindly smile on beholding two members of the third generation of his community. I have never forgotten the friendly gesture of the Rabbi, whose venerable figure had become part of my life at a very early stage. He had arrived at Frankfurt, so I was told, when my father himself was a little boy. The Synagogue of our community, the so-called "Religions-Gesellschaft", rose in the beginning of the 1850's, but about twenty years later the Rabbi called upon his "Kehillah" to rebuild it for a growing congregation. Above its main entrance there was an inscription "Bet Tefillath Jeshurun" in gold letters, the word Jeshurun written with two "vavim", explained by the Rabbi as an expression of devotion and piety. The Synagogue was not only the spiritual home of the community, it was also their cherished possession, and few of its members would miss a service.

The founding of a secondary school followed that of the Synagogue, and the Rabbi at first took on all the necessary functions as

1. Herman Schwab was an uncle of our Rav Shimon Schwab. He wrote this article about 80 years ago in memory of his parents, and it was translated and published in London in 1955. It is cited in the biography of Rav S. R. Hirsch, written by Rabbi E. M. Klugmann and published recently.

into the sunset of the Rabbi's life. He stood before us, surrounded by the love and admiration of his community. We were told once again that he was the founder of a new epoch in the history of German Jewry, that his were the works of a genius, and we were proud and happy that he was our Rabbi. We heard his sonorous voice when he was called up to the Torah, when he recited the prayer for the "Kaiser", and when he read the Shofar sounds to the Baal Tekiah in the solemn hour of Rosh Hashanah. When he followed the three-fold call on Simchat Torah and ascended the steps of the Almemar as Chatan Torah - then our shyness disappeared before his friendly smile. And then his sermons. We boys gathered round the pulpit. The Shamash, also an old man, carefully closed the back door of the pulpit, which was fitted with a seat, but the Rabbi never sat down. He stood upright, in his hands a small Tanach. It did not matter that we could not understand all the Rabbi was saying; some things we did, especially the addresses to the Bar Mitzvah boys. On these occasions we made a particular effort to get as near as possible to the pulpit, but the Shamash, in a silent but threatening gesture, turned us back.

There was, however, one sermon which I could fully understand and which I have not forgotten. It was on Yom Kippur, 1888, a few minutes before nightfall. Over a thousand men and women were standing in silence. The majesty of the departing day filled the Synagogue, and from the gas candelabra rose waves of dim light to the ceiling, veiled in shadow. From my father's seat in the middle of the Synagogue I could see that the pulpit was set up, and there was a whisper that the Rabbi would preach. I hastened to the foot of the pulpit. This time there were no boys, except myself. The Rabbi stood in his Kittel and Tallis. I saw his eyes wandering silently through the synagogue. Then he spoke. He spoke of the last Amen of the last Kaddish. He asked his Kehillah not to forget it. "Whenever there may be an hour of fear and sorrow, when good intentions and faithful promises might fade in the coming year, then say 'Amen', my brothers and sisters, and Yom Kippur will return to you with all its blessings." "Say 'Amen', my brothers and sisters." Once again his voice came with deep emotion from the pulpit and, helped by the Shamash, he descended the steps and went to his seat. The sound of the Shofar rang through the synagogue. It was the Rabbi's last sermon.

In the month of Teveth of the same year, the life of the Rabbi

came to its end. On the eve of the twenty-seventh my father went out after supper, and my mother told us that the Rabbi was very ill and the community had assembled to say Tehillim. The next morning we learned that my father had come home very late, and although we were on holiday, we did not dare raise our voices. A hush had fallen over the house. When we went out on that dreary December morning we learned that the Rabbi had died. The news of his death silenced the praying voices in the Synagogue. A child knows little of life and death, but I suddenly felt that the Rabbi had left us forever. Twenty-four hours later, the pupils of our school stood among the thousands from Frankfurt and many towns and villages in Germany in front of the Rabbi's house. The vast crowd was in deep mourning. There are not many hours like this in the life of man, and those who waited for the Aron, which was slowly coming down, must have had the feeling that a light was extinguished before their eyes to be kindled anew in the realm of immortality.

The funeral procession started. In front of the hearse walked the pupils of the top form of our school. Behind it, after the Rabbi's sons and relatives, we boys walked, in a curious mixture of pride and embarrassment. When we had turned into the "Schuetzenstrasse", I suddenly understood the real meaning of this mighty procession. The doors of our synagogue were thrown open. I saw the lights glowing through the daylight, but there was no one in its corridors or halls. The building stood in deep solitude and silence when its Rabbi was passing for the last time.

The funeral was like a black ribbon drawn through the town of Frankfurt. We children had to leave it at the first crossroad - so I was unable to listen to the Hespelim at the Bet Olam. But the small boy who might not have understood the words of grief and wisdom near the open grave, had felt the grief of the synagogue in its audible stillness. When the multitude surrounded the Bet Olam, the Chevra Kadisha saw only one way by which it could enter, and part of the wooden fences, which enclosed the cemetery, had to be pulled down. Then the Hespelim began, but before they came to an end, it was time for the Minchah prayer. In the light of the setting sun they buried the Rabbi in the first row of the silent mounds. They put a Sefer Torah near him, its letters yellowed.

II

THE SYNAGOGUE

I do not know when I saw the Synagogue first. It belonged to us, and we loved it. The Synagogue was not a work of architectural beauty, but for us children there was nothing on earth that was more beautiful than the Holy House in the "Schuetzenstrasse". We admired its imposing height, the noble feature of the Holy Ark and the pillars, which at the same time served as girders of the women's gallery. We took pride in the curtains of the Holy Ark in velvet and brocade, blue and red, not to forget the white ones for the Yamim Hanoraim. We gazed at their golden embroidery and their sparkling stones, and watched eagerly when the passing days of the year brought them to the front of the Synagogue. We carefully touched the big gilded Menorah standing near the Holy Ark, and enjoyed the light streaming from the Ner Tamid.

There was no end of talking about the garlands and flowers on Shavuot; the Lulavim, wandering like a forest of palm branches on Succoth; and the procession of the Sefarim with all their ornaments on Simchat Torah. We tried in vain to sit on one of the padded seats in the front row of the Synagogue which were reserved for Baron Rothschild who, however, never came, as he had his own private Synagogue.

No less inspiring was the sale of the Aliyoth and Mitzvoth on Fridays and the days before the Yamim Tovim after the morning service; we were always very pleased to learn that prices were going up. Indeed, there was no great or small thing in "Shool" which did not invite our attention and our affection, and there was not a stone in its walls which was not dear to us. On weekdays we never used the front entrance, but a small side door which brought us more quickly to our seats.

The Synagogue seat was of great importance. The best ones were situated near the front, but those in the center also had their special value. In the front, one sat near to the Chazzan, but in the center one had a better view of the Almemar. In my childhood our father's seat was in the shadow of the Almemar, and I was able to see and hear every part of Krias Hatorah. Generally I sat on my father's knee, shared his Chumash, and felt very comfortable. This was a much better position than that I occupied in later years, when I had to wander from one seat to another,

always hoping that the seat holder would not appear. My hopes were often disappointed, and I was left between the aisles, but my love for the spiritual and the more earthly affairs of the Synagogue was not impaired.

The large corridor of the Synagogue changed on Sabbaths and Yamim Tovim into a cloakroom, and its attendants were our friends. Both these gentlemen were good humored, knew everything about the congregation and even understood some Hebrew words. There was also the courtyard of the Synagogue, which was of importance to us. On every Erev Pesach one big fire was burning and the whole congregation brought the remnants of Chametz to be burned before saying Kol Chamirah. We watched the flames; its smoke very often disappeared into a blue spring sky. On the eve of Hoshana Rabbah water tubs filled with Hoshanot stood in the courtyard, and we came to collect them for the next morning.

As time went on the child's love for the Synagogue changed into a deeper understanding. There were now problems of a different kind which filled the heart of the young man. One far-off day I stood longingly outside the closed Synagogue. Through its windows I saw the Ner Tamid, like a star, peacefully shining through the Holy House.

I left my native town in 1900. But the memories of my childhood accompanied me like a melody which died away, but still filled my heart. Seven years later the Kehilla took leave of its Synagogue. The "Grossschul" was no longer large enough, and they moved to the beautiful Synagogue in the "Friedberger Anlage". I could not say goodbye to the "Shool" in the Schuetzenstrasse, but I was told of the solemn farewell service. Julius Frieslaender, the famous Chazzan, chose for the Kaddish of the weekday Mincha service the tune of Neilah; the grandeur of Yom Kippur rested over the Shool when its gates were closed for the last time.

The old Synagogue remained empty, but the love of its children kept its memory alive in many parts of the world. After the first World War, however, it became another victim of the inflation of the Mark - and had to be sold, and now we had really lost it. But not only the "Shool". Together with it died the generation of our childhood, with its Tefilloth, its hopes and its sorrows, its smiles and its tears.

The golden letters on the wall fell to the ground, and the last of

its splendor disappeared.

But still, dear old Shool! You stand before my eyes imperishable, and I hear the prophet's words: "Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me."

III

THE COMMUNITY

It was not only the Synagogue - its members also were dear to us.

We knew them all and we also knew their hobbies, their whims and their habits. We loved them, and most of all, those who were kind and indulgent to us. We knew those who were the last to finish the Shemoneh Esreh, who recited the Berachoth when called up to the Torah with special kevanah, and who danced best with the Sefer on Simchat Torah; we knew those whose Lulavim had the tallest Hadassim and those who beat their Hashanot on Hoshanah Rabbah till the last leaf had dropped. What we did not know, and what was more than a child could understand, was the secret of the golden age of the Kehillah, the youthful enthusiasm for everything that belonged to it. "It is and it is good" - was the foundation stone whereon the Kehillah rose to its greatness. Compared with other German Jewish communities, the Kehillath Jeschurun in Frankfurt was but young, about half a century old, but, nevertheless, it had the character of an old Kehilla with all its established institutions. Any newcomer would soon be captivated by its spirit and regard himself as a "Frankfurter", defending vehemently even the most unimportant Minhag. There were occasions, too, for grumbling and criticism, but on the whole there was "peace to him that is far off, and to him that is near".

Among the members of the Synagogue, the members of the Committee were looked up to by us children with awe and respect, although we knew nothing of their duties, which were performed behind closed doors. But there was one distinguished gentleman, the so-called "Deputy" of the Synagogue Committee, who held our deepest interest and admiration. He had his special seat in front of the Synagogue, opposite that of the Rabbi. He was the first to follow the Sefer Torah when it was taken from the Ark, and the last when it was brought back to

it. Needless to say, we children wished in our heart of hearts to be in his place. Every month another warden took his place, and among them was one gentleman who, year after year, stood at the Omed a quarter of an hour before the beginning of the service, to recite the daily portion of Tehillim. And from Pesach till after Succoth the morning service started at 6 a.m! Another "deputy" was a "specialist" who prepared the three Sifrei Torah on Simchat Torah eve for the coming morning with the greatest skill and fervor. We gathered round the Almemar, not to miss any of his movements. But there were also many members without title or office who were old and respected, and the whole congregation rose when they slowly walked to their seats. No less admired were the Chazzanim on Rosh Hashonoh and Yom Kippur who, without real musical training, nevertheless trained a whole generation in Chazzanuth. More than a thousand members listened to their Tefillah, distinguished alike by devotion and harmony.

There were few empty seats when the service started. There was no difference between Monday or Tuesday morning and none between Sunday afternoon or any other. On Rosh Chodesh or Chanukah, on Purim or Chol HaMoed, only back seats were available. That there were no vacant seats on festivals was accepted as a matter of course.

The community, however, not only stood together in brotherly understanding in their Synagogue; the third pillar of the lofty fabric of the Kehilla, Tzedakah, also rose before our eyes in all its greatness. Our congregation was like a High School of Gemilut Chesed, and we children were the youngest students. We witnessed many a conversation, after the service, in one corner of the Synagogue or another. Sometimes a word escaped from the whispering voices, and it was always help and assistance which was discussed in those small circles.

In the Synagogue as well as outside it, we were one great family who celebrated our joyful events together, and mourning in one house was felt in many houses. Small wonder that the tender flower of gratitude could readily develop in so fertile a soil. Not only the words and the deeds of those who had passed were not forgotten, but the merits of the men and women of the present were willingly acknowledged. Thus I grew up in the spirit of such appreciation, and I learned to understand the wisdom of our teachers, "a community is never poor and will not die". Here was such a community, built up on the love and

devotion of hundreds of people who saw in its institutions the happiness and the center of their life. For us children, indeed, it was the symbol of eternity.

IV

THE CHAZZAN

Every Friday afternoon, an hour before Minchah, a gentleman, meticulously dressed in a black suit, used to walk slowly the short distance from his house through the "Promenaden" to the Synagogue. The distinguished gentleman in his shining top hat was our Chazzan, Julius Frieslaender.

Generally a Chazzan is an official who has an agreement with his Board of Management which he terminates if a better position is offered to him. It was not so with Mr. Frieslaender. Of course he was a Chazzan, and surely one of the best Chazzanim in Germany during the last century. But he also was one of the prominent figures of the Synagogue and a friend of its Rabbi. Without Frieslaender, the work of the Rabbi would have lacked the beauty of Sabbath and Festival and the solemnity of the Yamim Hanoraim. To him, Chazzanuth was not a profession - it was a call which led him to the steps of the Omed. In his heart he was not an official of his Kehilla, but their servant before the throne of the Almighty and interpreter of their prayers. His Kehillah took pride in him, and generation after generation shared this feeling.

Frieslaender himself often said that he had never been a great singer. But his Chazzanuth was of high perfection. And so was his appearance: his progress through the Synagogue and his dignified stand before the Omed; his opening and closing of the Holy Ark, his hand raising the Kiddush cup or shaking the Lulav - "every inch a king" in the realm of the Tefillah.

My childhood memories are interwoven with Frieslaender's melodies. There was the first Selichot day. My brother and I rushing in the early morning to reach the "Shool" at 4 o'clock. We arrived a few minutes too late, and when we entered, Frieslaender's voice in prayer welcomed us. I well remember how the brightness of the "Shool" contrasted with the darkness of the silent street. The voices of the Holy Assembly were like a flood which rose and fell. The "Pizmon" started.

Like a praying child Frieslaender's voice began softly to rise from verse to verse till it embraced the Kehilla with the greatest fervor.

There are no words for the feelings which filled my heart. I had forgotten that outside the Synagogue a new day was dawning, and the holy words carried me away to a world which is beyond time and space. From the first of the Selichot days, the way went on to the sacred hours of Rosh Hashanah and the holiness of Yom Kippur. Again it was Frieslaender who led us from the first blessing till the last Kaddish. His melodies were also sung at home, and I shall never forget how my mother, coming from "Shool" on Kol Nidre, sang the dreamy melody of Frieslaender's "Yigdal", when I was still too little to go to the Synagogue.

The Yamim Hanoraim over, Succoth came with its songs, crowned by a Simchat Torah embellished by Frieslaender with the joyous Polish Minhag. It was unforgettable for a child to watch him with the dignity of a High Priest conducting the service on Yom Kippur, and some weeks later his dance with the Sefer on Simchat Torah, the serene expression of "Simcha shel Mitzvah" on his face.

But it was not only in the months of Elul and Tishri that Julius Frieslaender's greatness appeared; it was also demonstrated on every Sabbath. It never seemed to be the same "Lechu Nerananu" on Sabbath eve, and Frieslaender taught us at the Almemar the words of our sages, always to say a Tefillah as if it were being said for the first time. The same festive tranquility which was spread over the arrival of the Sabbath returned at the hour of its departure with the singing of Shir Hamaaloth (Psalm 128) composed by I. M. Japhet. I do not know whether there was another synagogue in Germany where the Sabbath ended in such solemnity. Frieslaender stood in his Sabbath robes on the Almemar just as on Friday evening, his song accompanied by the Synagogue choir, conducted by Japhet himself. The community stood in silence in winter and summer and joined the last words: "And see thy children's children. Peace be upon Israel". Sometimes even weekdays were turned into festival days for us children, when the other Chazzanim, for one reason or another, were not available. Not to mention those weekdays of a special character like Rosh Chodesh or Chanukah, when the services were always Frieslaender's prerogative.

Gone are those days of childhood, gone are Frieslaender's tunes, but very often in the twilight hours of life fragments of those beautiful songs come back to me. Be it the melancholy tune of "Av Harachamim" or the Kiddush of the festival or the Berachoth of Chanukah which was one of the greatest events of our Jewish year. During the repetition of the Shemoneh Esreh we children looked yearningly to the big Menorah. Frieslaender ascended slowly upon its steps; he was no longer a young man, and his hand with the large candle trembled a little. But his voice was still beautiful, and we listened to the miracle of Chanukah as if we had seen it ourselves.

For more than half a century Julius Frieslaender stood at the Omud of the Synagogue in Frankfurt but in Iyar 5678, "he was gathered to his people". According to his wish, not a word of praise was spoken when he was laid to his rest. But even so, there was mourning without lamentation. His Kehilla were so imbued with grief about his passing that they thought to hear his unforgettable melodies in the stillness of the Bet Olam as a last farewell.

V

THE BET OLAM

United as they were in prayer and devotion, they went the same way for their last journey, the members of our Kehillah - the way to the Bet Olam.

I was still a boy when it was my fate to follow the coffin of my dear mother. I went as in a dream. I saw the wheels of the black carriage turn unceasingly. We went through streets which I had never seen, and after an hour the houses were left behind, and the town disappeared. Suddenly, the carriage stopped. A door was opened, and the Aron carried into the Prayer Hall which stood at the entrance of the "Good Place".

First there was silence; then, after the prayer "Hazur Tamim", words of mourning and thankfulness were spoken, and there were tears also in the eyes of strangers.

From this hour I knew the way to the Bet Olam and I also knew those who served the messenger of death in humility, the members of the

"Kippe", the Holy Brotherhood. Very often death crossed their way; they bowed before its majesty but they did not fear it any longer. In my childish imagination they seemed to be immortal. People passed away, old and young and even children who were pupils of our school, but they always stayed at their places; upright, serene, even smiling, and in my heart I wished to be one of them.

When my father, my brother and I visited the cemetery every year, we went silently. There were not many graves on the Bet Olam, as no more than about twenty years had passed since the first of the members of the community had been laid to rest. In the first row there was the resting place of the Rabbi, his tombstone crowded with big and small stones, placed there by loving and devoted relatives and friends. Not far from the Rabbi's grave there rested our friends, neighbors or acquaintances. On their tombstones we read of wisdom or knowledge of Torah and of loving kindness to the living and the dead. We read of the grief of a wife for her husband, of children for their parents. There were stones which mourned the benefactor or the president of our Kehilla, and also one which told of the teacher who till the last days of his life had taught the Alef Bet to the beginners of our school. We had known them all who once walked like us in the sunshine, which now spread consolingly upon the solemn stillness of their graves.

All this went with the years of my childhood. Very often my longing thoughts were with the Bet Olam in Frankfurt. When I saw it again it was summer, sometimes Tammuz, on the Yahrzeit of my parents, and a friendly sky looked down upon the lonely wanderer. My foot rested before the tombstones, the borderline of "the Day which is wholly a Sabbath." Golden threads from beyond those pillars of stone bind our lives together with the souls of those who had left us.

A large part of the Bet Olam is no longer known to me, and I am a stranger among its paths. The names inscribed on the tombstones, however, are those of the generation of my childhood, and I walk between their places of rest as I did once between their seats in our synagogue.

It was the same road which they took, the members of our Kehillah - from the earthly peace of the Schuetzenstrasse to the eternal peace of the Bet Olam.