THE JEWS OF CALCUTTA

FLOWER ELIAS AND JUDITH ELIAS COOPER

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משה
שמעון
Moses Doweck Cohen.
Chief Priest of the Israelites, Calcutta.—Native of Aleppo.
This Sketch was taken in
55th year of his age—Deceased this life aged 76 at
Calcutta.

THE JEWS OF CALCUTTA

BY FLOWER ELIAS AND JUDITH ELIAS COOPER

The Autobiography of a Community

1798—1972

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To everything there is a Season,
and a time to every purpose
under the heaven :

A time to be born, and a time
to die . . .

Ecclesiastes, 3 : 1, 2.

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It is impossible adequately to thank all the many people who have given us their help during this survey.

Initially, we must thank Rabbi Solomon David Sassoon who allowed us to have copies made of the diaries of Shalom Cohen and Moses Duek Cohen;

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Most of all we wish to thank the Calcutta Jewish community, particularly those members of it who answered our questionnaire, for bearing with us patiently and goodnaturedly and giving us so generously their close attention and wholehearted cooperation. We might say the community wrote this book. We only put it down.

FOREWORD

Authors are required to "declare their interest". We are a mother and daugter, members of the community about which we write. We conducted an enquiry based on an elaborate questionnaire consisting of eight sections with about 150 questions compiled by several people. This survey took us about two years, talking to other members of our community in London, asking them questions, writing down or taping their answers. One or two of the interviews lasted three hours, but most of them took eight or ten hours each, over several days. We used the questionnaire on people of both sexes, equally divided among the age groups, and additional information was collected from a number of other members of the community with whom we spoke. Our oldest respondent was 87, our youngest, 20. Those over 50 we refer to as the "older generation", those below 50, as the "younger generation". The majority of our respondents were from areas in North-West London, such as Maida Vale, St. John's Wood, West Hampstead, Hampstead, Golders Green and Hendon. A few were from Stamford Hill. Our findings are not scientific, possibly arbitrary; our only qualifications, the knowledge that many of us wanted this record to be made and we were interested enough to make it. In the event, we enjoyed doing it and hope it will serve its purpose.

Contents

Acknowledgments		Page vii
Foreword		ix
List of Illustrations		xiii
CHAPTER I	Background	1
CHAPTER II	The Family	23
CHAPTER III	Marriage	47
CHAPTER IV	The Community	78
CHAPTER V	Religious Observances	109
CHAPTER VI	Habits and Customs	147
CHAPTER VII	Social Life	172
CHAPTER VIII	Education and Work	191
CHAPTER IX	Identity	207
	Postscript	243

List of Illustrations

Moses Simon Duek Cohen, who came to Calcutta from Aleppo, in 1806, at the age of 21, to marry the first settler's daughter, and became a leader of the community. Frontispiece

Elias Moses Duek Cohen, (Moses Simon's grandson), also, in his day, a leader of the community (1852-1927), in ministerial attire. Opposite 20

The Maghen David Synagogue, completed in 1885, to which the congregation of the first synagogue, Neveh Shalom, moved. On the right of the picture is the rebuilt Neveh Shalom. 21

A view in the Bazar - Chitpur Road 26

A view of the old "tank" 27

A wedding reception (1920), held in the garden of the Conservatoire, Park Street. 54

A close-up of the wedding cake. The bottom tier is a dummy. The cake weighed 1000 lbs. The horseshoe of crysanthemums contained doves which flew out as the cake was cut. 55

Some of the *Siphrey Torah* which the community brought from Calcutta when they left, being used in a ceremony at their synagogue in Stamford Hill, London. 116

A recent interior of the Maghen David Synagogue. 117

A funeral procession, in Lower Circular Road, Calcutta, on its way to the cemetery. The corpse in the *aron* is carried by men in turn and mourners walk or go in the line of cars behind, in which there are some women. 136

The Jewish cemetery in Calcutta at Narkuldanga. The land was a gift from the first settler. 137

A woman wearing an "Arabic" gown (for a fancy dress party) in 1897. The previous generation wore them daily. 164

A woman in a wrapper (1912). 165

CHAPTER I

Background

For to sojourn in the land are we come.

Genesis, 47: 4.

This book is concerned with the identity of a community—the Calcutta Jewish Community. Born in 1798, it has now virtually collapsed (1972), with only a handful of Jews still resident there. In England, America, Australia, Israel, are enclaves containing large numbers of this community. Our concern is with those Jews who have settled in London— have they kept their identity; what is this identity; and will they continue to keep it? Today, when there are such constant shuffles in populations and so much emphasis on assimilation, it might be interesting to trace one slim strand in the vast tapestry of the world's peoples.

Although the Jews of Calcutta are descended mainly from settlers from Iraq, the man who founded this community and was the first Jew to settle there came from Aleppo. In fact, Baghdad and Basra, no less than Aleppo, were part of the Ottoman Empire and the life of the Jews in these cities would vary in degree rather than kind. So that it is possible to trace the identity of the Calcutta Jewish community before its origin by examining the history of its first settler.

Shalom ben Aharon ben Obadiah ha-Cohen was born in Aleppo in 1762. At that time, Aleppo was the third city of the Ottoman Empire (after Constantinople and Cairo) and the Jews numbered 5,000 out of a total population of 235,000. A contemporary writer (Russell) states: "The

established banker of the Seraglio is a Jew, and the private bankers of most of the Grandees are likewise Jews, whence it probably happens, that their nation possesses such extensive influence among a haughty people..." "From the extensive connection of the Jews with the commercial world, their fasts and festivals occasion an almost universal stagnation of trade. They not only prove an impediment to the departure of the great caravans, but retard their march when actually upon the road; and even the Bashaws, and other Grandees, are sometimes obliged to postpone the dispatch of their own affairs. when it happens to interfere with the Jewish holydays."

If the Jews were so happily established in Aleppo, what made Shalom Cohen leave, one wonders? One learns from diverse sources that conditions on the Malabar coast of India were still good for enterprising traders of any race and that the merchants who ran the trade of these coastal towns were often Jews. Furthermore, "Arabic speaking Jews from Aleppo, Basra and Baghdad flocked to Surat in the last decades of the eighteenth century." (Fischel). The caravan routes across the deserts were constantly in use and, from the port of Basra, tales must have come of the 'Arabian' Jewish settlements in Surat and Bombay. This, then, was the general atmosphere prevailing at the time. But why specifically did this man, already married to Sathie, daughter of Joseph Duek, suddenly decide, at the age of 26, to leave his native city, never to return?

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Shalom Cohen left a diary in which he recorded many facts, but nothing whatever of his thoughts and feelings. His diary shows him to have been a man of strong family ties, yet there is no mention of his parents. If, as some con-

jecture, he left Aleppo because "his life was endangered by his Mohammedan co-citizens" (I. A. Isaac as quoted by Rabbi Ezekiel Musleah in his unpublished Ph.D. thesis "The History of the Jews of Calcutta"), his parents could have joined him in later years in India, as other members of his family did. Moreover, the calm opening sentence of his diary does not suggest a hurried flight. "16th June, 1789. I left Aleppo for Baghdad by mail-coach accompanied by Rabbi Aaron Beracha."

When one studies the history of Aleppo at this period, it is interesting to note that plague in Aleppo was virulent during the years 1760-62. Shalom Cohen was born in December, after the passing of this outbreak. The next visitation of plague was not until 1787, when it started in the Jewish quarter in April, rose to great violence in June and died out about the end of July. Is it not possible that among its victims were Shalom Cohen's parents and that the horror of this dreadful scourge which he had never before witnessed made him decide to leave Aleppo forever? He needed time to implement his plan and two years later he was ready.

What sort of life were the Jews of Aleppo living? We are fortunate in having as a source in English a book called 'The Natural History of Aleppo' by Dr. Alex Russell, edited by his brother, Dr. Pat Russell, both of whom served, consecutively, as Physicians to the British Factory in Aleppo during the eighteenth century.

Russell tells us that the houses of the Jews were near each other, in the north-western part of the city. It was not a ghetto, for some Turkish houses were interspersed, so it must be presumed that they wished it to be so, possibly to be within easy walking distance of their synagogue and families. They were strictly observant, "their living so much under the eye of their Khakhans render it more

difficult to conceal debauchery than it would be among a more numerous nation." The *hakams*, or rabbis, were the Cohens, to whom the people looked for both temporal and spiritual guidance, hence it was that Shalom Cohen's diary contains constant entries relating to the dates and observances of religious matters. This was a responsibility he took with him from Aleppo.

Several families lived together in the same house (compare the Indian joint-family system) and there was much intermarriage among relatives, therefore "it naturally happens that the Jews live rather more familiarly with the women, than either the Turks or Christians, and the women appear more negligent in veiling before persons of their own nation." However, they dressed like their Turkish neighbours and spoke Arabic although, when writing this language, they used the Hebrew alphabet. Their children were sent to reading school, but their knowledge of spoken Hebrew was generally limited to sabbatical salutations. The schools were kept by some of the lesser priests who, like the Turkish *Sheihs*, went to the houses to conduct the scholars to school.

Few of the Aleppo Jews took to manufactures or to manual trades. The principal persons were bankers or merchants; the others, brokers, grocers or pedlars. The poor Jews lived chiefly on bread, pulses, herbs and roots, cooked in sesamum oil (seldom used by the other inhabitants). Meat, having to be specially slaughtered by Jewish butchers, was not often available but, when it was, "it was sold to the poor at an under price, the difference being made up to the seller out of the national chest." However, both rich and poor Jews ate mainly poultry, which could easily be killed at home.

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Having spent Friday mornings preparing for the Sabbath, it was the general custom for the womenfolk to go to the *hamam* or bathhouse on Friday afternoons. The *hamam* being almost the only public female assembly place where it was permitted to talk with strangers, gossip and display one's clothes or jewels, a lively and social atmosphere prevailed. Indeed, *hamams* were hired privately for ceremonial occasions, such as after childbed, recovery from sickness or before and after a marriage feast, and used for lavish entertaining of one's female friends. The large waiting-room or *burany* was specially decorated, a *Bidoween* woman was retained as mistress of ceremonies, refreshments were previously prepared, a band of singing women engaged and ladies were dressed in their richest apparel. These assemblies would last for five or six hours, baths and massage being enjoyed repeatedly if desired. Young girls were on their best behaviour, for it was often here that the Turkish and Jewish matrons selected brides for their sons.

On Friday afternoons, the women returned from the *hamam* in time to light the Sabbath lamps. The men, too, left their businesses earlier, in order to dress and prepare themselves. Both sexes attended morning and afternoon services in the synagogue on the Sabbath and the rest of the day was spent in private devotion, feasting and particularly in visiting the sick. "It is a custom among the men, on their return from the synagogue in the forenoon, to go in parties together, from house to house, to visit the sick; and as it is sufficient for a person to be considered sick if he does not make his appearance at public worship, people though really indisposed, often make an improper exertion to go to Synagogue, in order to avoid the fatigue of ceremonious visits. The women, unless to very near relations, defer their visits to the sick till another day."

Knowing the strictures on the lighting of fires on the

Sabbath, certain *Bidoween* women would go along the Jewish streets on a Saturday with small pans of lighted charcoal crying, "Fire! Fire!" to sell.

In addition to their strict observance of the Sabbath, Shalom Cohen's co-Jews observed each feast thoroughly. For the Passover, "every corner is rummaged and washed with scrupulous care, and their kitchen utensils are new tinned." For the Feast of the Tabernacles, myrtle from Antioch and citrons and palm branches from Tripoli would arrive some days before the feast and would be distributed by the *hakam* for the synagogue ceremonies. Each family, however poor, had its own tabernacle, specially constructed for the eight-day festival in whatever open space in each house was found suitable for the purpose; either in the courtyards, the small terraces in front of the upper rooms, or on the flat roofs of the houses. They always ate there and sometimes slept there.

"The Turkish ladies at this season stroll in troops among the Jewish houses, to see the tabernacles, and are seldom refused admittance. Such as are acquainted with the family, are entertained with coffee, sweetmeats, and sherbets; the others, after satisfying their curiosity, retire without ceremony." "This festival, in the eyes of strangers, appears more splendid than any of the others kept by the Jews. They entertain hospitably at their houses, send presents of various sorts of sweetmeats to their friends, and all business is suspended."

The Sabbath, the Feasts and also the Fasts were rigidly adhered to by Calcutta Jewry's Aleppo ancestors. The Day of Atonement (10th Tishri), a total fast for a complete twenty-four hours, was the one that was kept most assiduously and even pregnant women or sick persons who might normally claim exemption, would refuse it on

this occasion. "Nothing but imminent danger of life declared by the physician, can justify the breach of this fast." Apart from five other obligatory fasts (i.e. 3rd Tishri, 10th Tebeth, 13th Adar, 17th Tamuz, 9th Ab) there were voluntary ones, such as the fast of the first-born before Passover, the anniversary of the death of parents and so on, but the one most remarkable was for six complete days, attempted by a few persons of extraordinary sanctity. During this period of total abstinence, not even a drop of water passed their lips, nor might they smoke. "On the evening of the sixth day they moisten the throat with a few spoonfuls of oil of almonds and afterwards sip chicken broth." At the time of Shalom Cohen, about twenty persons a year would attempt to keep such a fast, and few began who did not accomplish it. One man claimed to have kept it seven times. "A person who should die in the attempt would be considered not as a martyr, but as one sinfully obstinate." The Jewish love of life imposed restraints even on sanctity! Besides the annual fasts, the Jews observed occasional fasts on account of famine, plague or other public calamities, accompanied by prayers in the synagogue.

It is clear from this account that religion was part of the way of life of the Aleppo Jews. Even in the desert, it was usual for them to procure an escort from the caravan leader to make a forced march on the Friday, in order to rest on the Sabbath, rejoining the rest of the caravan (which marched each day) on the Saturday night. If a caravan were due to set out at the time of a holy day, they found means of delaying its departure until after the feast. In spite of all obstacles, they managed to maintain a strict observance of their ancient institutions.

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Generally, the Jews married at a young age, before eighteen or twenty. "The Jewish marriages are celebrated with great pomp, the nuptial feast continuing seven days. The bride is accompanied by her mother and near relations and the ceremony is performed in the presence of as many, besides those invited, as can find room in the house; so that there is always a number of Turkish and Christian women among the spectators." "Besides entertaining a number of guests for seven days, victuals are distributed to the poor."

All Jews, however poor, married at one time or another. Polygamy was rare, although legal, only being resorted to in case of childlessness or the want of a male heir, otherwise it was considered rather scandalous. "In one case, a person of low condition, on account of his wife's barrenness had taken a second wife and soon had the mortification of seeing both become pregnant. Both wives continued for several years to bring a child every fifteen months, which the pious Hebrew considered as a punishment for not trusting to God's providence."

The Jewish mothers nursed their babies for eighteen to twenty months, unless pregnant, when they employed the services of a wet-nurse. The Jews believed in the existence of evil spirits and one very common custom was to tie a little piece of rock alum to the headdress of their children to ward off the evil eye. Any hysterical illnesses, epilepsy and madness were attributed to the agency of spirits "and in such cases, it is remarkable that they do not trust solely to their own Rabbis, but call in the Mohammedan Sheihs to pray by the patient's bedside, and to exercise various means of exorcism." They were addicted, like the Turks, to judiciary astrology and were also more credulous than the others of the claims of Africans who professed magic and went about telling fortunes.

"None of the Eastern peoples are so attentive to the sick in acute diseases as the Jews. The female relations, who take upon themselves the office of nurses, are strictly scrupulous in the exercise of their duty. They are punctually obedient to directions, and are so distinct in their report of what happens in the interval of the physician's visits, that in drawing up an account of the epidemical diseases, the journals of the sick of that nation were always found of particular service. The Rabbis administer spiritual consolation to the sick." "The conclamation at death is practised by the women, but hired mourners are seldom called in to assist at the Wulwaly. The Corpse is carried to the grave in a covered bier, and is accompanied by the men only, the women remaining assembled at the house of mourning."

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This, then, was the life of Shalom Cohen's people and, with a little imagination, one can picture his mother looking with favour on the young Sathie at a party given by Joseph Duek's wife at the *hamam* and thinking, "She will do well for my son." On the other hand, the two families might have been on intimate terms already, for Shalom's sister married Simon Duek Cohen who was Shalom's great friend (they grew up in the same house together); we do not know how closely Simon was related to Joseph, Sathie's father, though their family name Duek shows they were kin. However his marriage occurred, we know that at twenty-six Shalom left his home and his wife and travelled via Baghdad, Basra and Bombay to Surat.

A remarkable point of interest lies in the many-faceted character of this Cohen, who is perhaps representative of

his culture, in that he was not only a priest (by virtue of his name) who accepted the spiritual leadership of his community without question when necessary, but he was equally a jeweller and a merchant, of whose activities in Surat we learn so much from the scholarly researches of Dr. Walter J. Fischel of the University of California. In his work, 'The Immigration of "Arabian" Jews to India in the Eighteenth Century' (1965), he tells us of the thriving Jewish merchant colony in Surat to which Shalom Cohen came late in 1790. He stayed a few months, presumably to decide whether or not to emigrate, went back to Basra and then returned to Surat in April, 1792 with his *shohet* and two servants, bought a house and settled in.

Here, he seems soon to have become the spokesman and leader of "sixty-five merchants" of the Jewish community. These Jewish merchants had vast Asian-centred commercial markets spreading between Basra, Baghdad, the Persian Gulf, Moscat, Mocca, Zanzibar and Bombay in the west to the Malay Coast, Siam and China in the east and the commodities they traded in included "cotton goods, Venetian ware, mirrors, gold leaf, copper, tin, coral, coffee, raisins, almonds, myrrh, spices, indigo, sandlewood, elephant tusks, coconuts, saltpetre, timber" and many more and Shalom Cohen appears in records of the Surat Factory Diaries to have been their representative, while he was in Surat.

Meanwhile, his wife, Sathie, was still in Aleppo with her parents. There is a legend which states that, shortly after establishing himself in Surat in April, 1792, Shalom sent for Sathie to join him. "If you were to pave the way from Aleppo to Surat with gold and precious stones," Sathie's parents are alleged to have replied, "we would still not send you our daughter." While thus married, yet single, Shalom Cohen's only recourse was to take a

second wife. In January, 1793, he married Najima, the sister of his partner, Jacob Semach of Baghdad. As his diary records: "...and I called her Simha. May it be a good omen and good luck that will grow and increase, Amen. So should be the wish of God."

Joseph Duek Cohen of Aleppo must now have realised that his son-in-law was not to be lured back. In March, 1795, Shalom Cohen left Surat for Baghdad where, in July, he was reunited with his first wife Sathie, whom he escorted via Basra to Surat. There is a touching story handed down of Najima (Simha) "a very beautiful woman of noble character" who, family chroniclers relate, met Sathie on her arrival, embraced her and handed her the keys of the house, saying, "You are my elder sister, so must keep the keys. We will live together in love and peace."

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Shalom Cohen's diary gives the birth dates of all his ten children. These bare records open up a whole vista of speculation. The long list begins: "Lunah, born December 1st, 1793. Sarah, born November 29th, 1796. Rebecca, born April 10th, 1797..." At what age did Shalom Cohen marry Sathie? From the custom of those days, it was probably before he was twenty. Thus, there were many years of marriage in Aleppo during which Sathie was barren, as well as for the seven months when husband and wife were reunited before they returned to Surat in February, 1796. Here, she finds Najima with a two year old child and, almost immediately, Najima is pregnant again. What lifted Sathie's sterility? Was it that now she was an "elder sister" and no longer her parents' little girl? Was it unknown forces of jealousy

and competitiveness? Was it a release from fear, seeing Najima took childbearing so easily? Of this, perhaps delicate, woman's feelings, when she knew she was to bear a child, there is no record for posterity. We know, only, of her daughter Rebecca's birth in 1797 and we learn, again through family legend, that she died in that same year—perhaps through childbirth?—and that Najima suckled her child and brought her up as her own. She also named her fourth daughter Sathie. It is an interesting postscript to the close bond that must have grown up between the two half-sisters, Sarah and Rebecca, separated by not even five months, that they were married on the same day (28th December, 1815) in their father's home in Chinsura and they and their husbands moved to a shared house two days after the wedding guests returned to Calcutta.

There is no mention in Shalom Cohen's diary of Sathie's death—as there is no mention of his parents—yet, is there a hint of poignancy in the fact that, in that very year, 1797, Shalom Cohen sets out from Surat with his *shohet* and his cook, via Bombay, Cochin and Madras, for his historic journey to Calcutta? Did this loss make him decide to leave this thriving trade centre, where he was prospering mightily? On the other hand, an entry in his diary dated 13th November, 1796, reads: "An order came from Calcutta abolishing the monopoly of ships going to Basra, Mocha and Jidda, so that the merchants could bring merchandise on any ship they liked." This may have presaged the dawn of Calcutta as an entrepot and the decline of Surat, which Shalom Cohen was the first to sense.

On August 1st, 1798, Shalom Cohen arrived in Calcutta. On the 8th May, 1799, his diary states: "My wife, Simha (blessed be she) and my daughters Lunah, Sarah and Rebecca arrived, accompanied by Abraham Hibba, his wife and children, and Mordi and Gabriel Shaib."

Thus began the influx and Shalom Cohen's diary rolls off familiar names as, one by one, they joined this religious and prosperous new community; his sister's son, Moses Simon Duek ha-Cohen, who married his eldest daughter, Lunah; another sister's son, Aaron Shlomo Lanyado; Joseph Ezra, "known as Behar", (Sir David Ezra's great grandfather); Ezekiel Elias Musleah, Jonah Jacob Jonah—and many others.

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This detailed study of the events in the life of the founder of the Calcutta Jewish community, leading up to his arrival in that city, gives the flavour of 'Arabian' Jewish life at that time. Shalom Cohen lived in Calcutta until September, 1812, when he moved with his family to Chinsura and thence to several other cities where, in the course of his adventurous and colourful life, he appears to have been court jeweller to the Nawab of Lucknow and, later, to the Maharajah Ranjit Singh of the Punjab. He was buried in Calcutta in 1836 in the cemetery which was his gift to the community, where an inscription marks his grave.

In 1812, when Shalom Cohen passed out of the Calcutta scene, he had already handed over the care of the community to his son-in-law (and nephew) Moses Simon Duek Cohen and also left his house for communal use as a place of worship. Moses Duek Cohen's story is also a fascinating one.

In 1806, when his eldest daughter, Lunah, was twelve years old, Shalom Cohen wrote to Simon Duek Cohen in Aleppo asking him to send one of his young sons to marry his daughter. When the letter arrived, Simon was in

Constantinople on business, where a copy of this letter was sent to him. Moses Duek's diary tells us, "When the copy reached his hands, he rejoiced greatly because of their friendship from the days of their youth, when they had grown up together in one city and in one house with great affection, until time had separated them, sending one to the East and one to the West, for almost twelve years and, after this time, when that letter arrived, he was overjoyed and wrote his answer to him: 'My brother, my friend; my dear son Moses, the light of my eyes, the crown of my head, choicest of young men, is yours and I trust, in your affection, that you will keep your eye on him and from this day onward he is your son."

So this young man of twenty-one, after an exciting journey, during which he witnessed a naval battle between an English and a French ship, arrived at midnight on the eve of Tabernacles at Shalom Cohen's house and, as he says, "we met and I did obeisance before him and kissed his hand and he also kissed me and embraced me as a father his son and likewise did all the relatives living in his house, and we sat down to talk about things relating to that time, all the half of the night that was left, and in the morning we rose early to the synagogue of my father-in-law, the crown of my head, which was in his house, and we prayed according to the custom, and I gave praise and thanksgiving for life and peace and for my having arrived at my destination. Blessed be He Who does good and deals kindly, Who has rendered all kindness unto me. Amen."

On the 20th January, 1807, not quite two months after her thirteenth birthday, Moses Duek married Lunah. His diary records: "And I stayed in quiet and peace in the house of my father-in-law and G-d, blessed be He, set me favourably in his sight and in the sight of his family, large and small, until Tuesday, the 11th of Shevat, 5567,

when in good omen and successful hour I married my bride, my dove, my perfect one, Miss Lunah—of women in the tent may she be blessed—daughter of my father-in-law, the crown of my head, and I lived with her and she found favour in my eyes and she also loved me as her own soul; and I gave thanksgiving to His great name for all the above-mentioned that I had experienced."

"And after the wedding, my father-in-law gave into my hands and possession all his affairs and all his secretaries and servants were under my control, for he saw that I was suited for this, and I put in great effort in dealing with his affairs and he was pleased with my efforts."

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Because his eldest son Simon's circumcision was ineptly performed by the practising *mohel,* Moses Duek resolved to learn the art; "...and the blood was flowing and the baby went on weeping until he was silenced by the great weakness and pain and danger, and I, out of worry for my son, undertook from that day on to learn the practice of circumcision, because I knew in myself that I had a courageous heart for this purpose, through the help of G-d."

This was the start of his service to the community in many ways; "...all my life, in all public or private duties, be it as a *hazan* (cantor and reader) or a *mohel* (circumciser) or a writer of *ketubbot* (marriage contracts), letters and bills, except divorces of women, with which I would have nothing to do;—I have never even given evidence in matters of a divorce—thus, except for matters of divorce, I have not forsaken any matter, as far as my poor ability would allow ... further, all my days, through the grace

of G-d, the Exalted, I have not received any fee or remuneration for my work."

From an incident reported in Moses Duek's diary, he seems to have had leadership thrust upon him! His father-in-law Shalom Cohen, had left in his possession all the items for synagogue use, including the Scrolls of the Law and, as befitted a small community, (about 100 Jews all told at that time, including children), they all prayed together in a hired house, without any elected officers, "each doing what was right in his own eyes."

On the 7th day of Passover, 1824, Moses Duek was unable to attend morning service at the synagogue "because I was occupied treating my dear friend, Elias Musleah, who was dangerously ill and, at the bidding of the physician, I remained sitting by him, constantly giving him medicine to drink." The congregation called on another *hazan* to take his place and the service was conducted by this man, who, hastily handling the scroll, inadvertently tore it right through from the top to the bottom, thus rendering it unfit. Greatly distressed by his carelessness, Moses Duek requested this *hazan* to have the scroll repaired at his personal expense or from the funds collected from the community—but nobody paid any attention to his words. Moses Duek therefore transferred all Shalom Cohen's possessions, including the Scrolls, to his house and, together with a group of men "known for their humility and dread of sin", conducted all future services for over a year in his own home.

"Meanwhile, during this period, the synagogue in my house was well organized and its affairs well ordered; the prayers respectable, with no one talking during the service, the *amidah* (repetition) and the reading of the Law. And all donations, as well as oil for the light, were collected with honesty and trust; and we acquired lamps, lanterns

and large candelabra of white glass, and silver vessels and all other fine articles required for a synagogue, so that finally the synagogue was as fine and beautiful as a lovely, charming bride.

"But the former synagogue was in just the opposite condition, with disputes and bickering between themselves every day, nobody to collect their donations because they had not one leader but everyone was a leader. When they realised their unsatisfactory condition as compared with our well-run affairs, they subdued their nature and condescendingly appealed to us to come to terms with them and make peace so that we should all be one community. But I, the writer, was unwilling, and did not accept their words, out of concern for the loss of what we had acquired from that which is G-d's, but they kept begging me at all times; and for about a whole week all the community of Calcutta prayed the evening service in the synagogue in my house and, after the service, they sat down to a session with the aim of making peace; they urged and pleaded with me for a long while, until finally I agreed to make peace on the basis that they would choose one official as their head; 'according to his word they would encamp and journey', that they would fulfil wholeheartedly and willingly everything he would decree, also on the understanding that we would draw up a bill stating the terms, in the name of the community, and translate it into English, and we would go to the police, that is, the Official (Royal) Court and call to witness the Judge himself and he would sign his name and seal with his stamp that document.

"Immediately on the spot I uttered an oath that I would not become that official that we were speaking about, but that they should choose anyone they wished and I would be the first to accept his authority and obey his words and decrees. The community consented to this

and all that was left was to select one knowledgeable and trustworthy and G-d-fearing man, but they were unable to find such, so they once again resorted to me, saying, 'It is for you to complete the work'. But I refused, for I had previously sworn that I would not take it on myself. A week passed by while they sought and one day all the community assembled in my house and declared: 'We will accept no other as *Paquid* over us but you, and we insist and persist that you be so and if (as you argue) you have sworn not to be the *Paquid,* we likewise have all sworn that there can be no other *Paquid* besides you. You are an individual and we the many; stand on your feet and we shall annul your oath, for we shall appoint over us no one else; and if you refuse, know and understand that it is you who are the cause of the disorder in the community—' and they continued with similar severe threats.

"I had nothing to rejoinder and under this compulsion I accepted their wish on the stipulation that I would sit in my office for no longer than six months in order to organize the affairs of the office of *Paquid,* after which another would sit for six months and afterwards another and so forth, until the office would be occupied by all the community in turn and the cycle be repeated. We all consented to this arrangement and at once I stood up and they annulled me my oath according to Rabbinic regulation, after I had expressed 'remorse' for my oath.

"Immediately we drew up a bill stating the terms and the principal and chief members signed, thirty-six in all, and we translated it into English and the following day we all went to the police in the presence of the Judge and he read out the document and adjured them all that they had undertaken it willingly and they signed their names and declared 'Yes'. After this he also signed his name and stamped it with the seal of the police. We all left satisfied

and happy at the reorganization of the community and we gave thanks and praise to G-d's great Name for all the kindness He had rendered us."

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Thus, on the 29th of August, 1825, the first document of the Calcutta Jewish Community was officially executed.

"After this, we moved with the articles from the synagogue in my house and transferred to the original synagogue; and thanks to G-d's kindness following the day that peace was made, the synagogue was arranged and organized well, as in other Jewish places."

If Moses Duek thought his obligation to the community might now cease, he was soon to be disabused of this opinion; as his diary further records: "When the fixed term of six months of my office was over, I requested and asked the congregation to choose and appoint another as they had stipulated with me; but they entreated me and persuaded me with soft words to act for a further six months and out of embarrassment I agreed and stayed in office for a second six months. When these were completed, they urged me incessantly so that I acted for a third period, and again for a fourth and again for a fifth and a sixth and so on and so on until on Monday 18th Elul the year 5597 (September, 1837), in the morning, I brought with me all the record books and put them before the congregation in the synagogue and I said to them: 'Whatever you say to me and however much you urge me, this cannot continue longer, for am I the only Jew present, who is alone required to do this, while you are all exempt? This is impossible; you must now decide and do what you think best.' They then discussed the matter, I among

them, and we agreed to draw lots on two men excluding myself, that is, we wrote the names of all the leading community members eligible for office and we drew out two slips by means of a little lad. The first that came out was the name of Ezekiel Eliahu Musleah and the second Aaron Mashiah Sabbati, blessed be they, so I was released and had rest."

However, it was not long before the responsibility was once more in his hands and so it continued till his death in 1861.

An interesting feature of the religious leaders of the Jews of Calcutta was that they were not ordained rabbis. It was as if the vigour of their personalities could not be confined to one area only. Both Shalom Cohen and Moses Duek Cohen were thriving businessmen, the former, indeed, being quite flamboyantly successful. Moses Duek's grandson, Elias Moses Duek Cohen, who carried on the family tradition by serving the community as Minister for over fifty years until his death in 1927 (having taken over from his father in 1873), was also the Honorary Secretary and Treasurer of the Jewish Girls' School and, at various times, a printer and editor of a popular weekly *Paerah,* a municipal councillor, as well as the owner of a theatre, the Grand Opera House, and, hence, impresario to a long stream of well-known artists from abroad! It might be said that these men represented a community in which they were but a sample of the many-sidedness of each individual. Others excelled in other spheres, (such as the Ezras, Meyers, Sassoons, Eliases) founding nationwide enterprises, building Jewish hospitals, synagogues and schools, but all were concerned with their fellow Jews and the religious, moral and economic life of their community.

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Elias Moses Duek Cohen, (Moses Simon's grandson), also, in his day, a leader of the community (1852-1927), in ministerial attire.



The Maghen David Synagogue, completed in 1885, to which the congregation of the first synagogue, Neveh Shalom, moved. On the right of the picture is the rebuilt Neveh Shalom.

This, then, was the background of the Jews who lived in Calcutta and formed a community which, like its originator Shalom Cohen's in Aleppo, reached a total of some 5,000 members during its apogee. For most of this period of over a century and a half, these Jews maintained the traditions of their ancestors and the society Russell describes in Aleppo is echoed over the years until, finally, its days draw to a close. It has left behind it many charitable institutions formed for the benefit of its own people and now, (because of the nature of its charitable trusts), for the benefit of those who may need them.

In 1968, the Indian headmistress of the Jewish Girls' School in Calcutta wrote to a Jewish benefactress of the school in London that she had no Jewish staff save one lady "left now to impart religious instructions, teach prayers, etc. There seems to be no problem about this, as Jewish pupils are literally one or two in each class and continue to migrate. To us, non-Jews, this migration is a great pity as they leave so much behind." And again later, "More Jewish families are migrating and even the 17 pupils in the Hostel will be decreasing in number." (The Jewish Girls' Hostel housed 68 children at one time but, in 1971, there were 4). "The few who are left (only one or two in the Senior classes) are getting the benefit of religious instructions. But in spite of the Jewish pupils being in a small minority, the school still follows all the Jewish religious injunctions as regards diet, Festivals and other observances. We are finding it difficult to find enough children for the Jewish items for the Distribution." (of prizes).

At the time of writing, there are about 300 members of the community left in Calcutta. Yet we recall that, in 1825 when the first document of the community was officially executed, the members totalled only a hundred. These were confident in their times and in their growth

and were able to look forward. No such feeling prevails today. The 'Shalom Cohens' of this century have already left Calcutta. No new immigrants are coming in, so that those who remain, if they want a full Jewish life, are forced to look for it elsewhere. It seems unlikely that anything can revive this wasting body.

The several charitable institutions founded by the Jews of Calcutta are a fitting legacy from them to the people of India, who, from the very beginning, welcomed them and showed them nothing but kindness; indeed, the Indians have never known the meaning of anti-Semitism and, in the midst of this warm and liberal nation, the special Jewish identity of this people could flourish at will.

CHAPTER II

The Family

> Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house; thy children like olive plants round about thy table.
>
> Psalms, 128: 3.

In attempting to capture the identity of a people, we look first into its heart—the family. That the family was in fact the heart, we soon learnt.

Even among the younger generation, some of whom were brought to London aged six or seven, there was not one who said his family was other than "very close" or "close", and by "family" the married ones automatically included their parental family and those grand-parents who had lived with them.

The older generation went further, embracing aunts, uncles and cousins (up to third cousins) under this title and *all* respondents knew all their first cousins, even when these were shadowy figures, living in other parts of the globe, whom they may not have met.

But let the older generation speak for itself.

"What I valued most was family life. One never felt alone, one always lived in a family, perhaps with a couple of grand-mothers, one or two maiden aunts and there was a life of security, a life of protection."

"For festivals, or other visits, my mother's sister from Northern India would come to Calcutta with her family and even if we had no room, they would be accommodated somehow—on the floor, if necessary."

"My family means the world to me."

"I do feel my family is one unit."

"I dared not do wrong, because my conscience said 'Remember who you are and what family you are from and the high standard of your family.' "

"I like to know there's a solid family."

"I always felt I was responsible for anyone of my family who was in trouble and I still feel the same. I've just written fifty airletter forms to my family—ready to be posted."

When it comes to the younger generation, there are some interesting embellishments. An honest young woman in her twenties said, "One could say I am too close to my parental family—incestuously close! This is where you have the battle with yourself all the time. There is so much environmental, that is, family, influence which you are trying to break from; in other words, my life has been very broad, and yet I am drawn back to this focal point."

And another, "My family is one of the main contacts in my life, apart from a few close friends. Sometimes I wish it wasn't so."

"I have a good relationship with my parents and sister. I feel it my duty to give them respect. Otherwise I have my own life to live." (A young man).

"I feel we should help each other out in time of need and work for each other's happiness."

"My family helps me to feel secure and gives me a feeling of love and belonging."

"My family means everything to me. It is paramount in my life."

One married man enlarged on it thus, "My family come first. They are the basis of my life. Any unhappiness to my family would worry me most. I took them for granted when I was young. Now the positions have reversed and I feel they need me more. I look upon them as my important thing in life—to keep them happy. We have a wonderful relationship. The Ashkenazim are also close, but they don't live in each other's pockets, like we do. Here, sometimes, one likes to close one's doors to everyone outside, but in India you can't."

Another man, whose parents took Indian citizenship after Indian Independence and now find it difficult to emigrate, said, "I came to live and work in this country for their sakes, so that they might in time be able to join me. I myself love India and would have been happy to remain there, but my parents see no future in it without a community. My parents were extremely loving but they also used to scrap. On a couple of occasions, we stopped my father retaliating but, the next day, they were holding hands on the sofa and going to the races together. They were sacrificial and loving to their children. Maybe I'm biased, but I've seen other families outside the community who didn't care about the children too much. My father used to insist that we had one meal a day together to talk together as a family. As my family was so sacrificial, I owe them a debt. This is one reason why we are so close."

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Among the older generation, memories of childhood were all family ones and brought forth reminiscences that were startlingly clear. None of them had friends outside the community and the majority only friends in their own family. One extreme case said, "My father was so strict that only two of his six children got married. He did not let us mix even with our own family. My mother did not have a say. Nobody was good enough for us. He wanted to have a say in whom we married. He was a very good man and highly principled. He practised what he preached. I had a quiet, secure childhood. No turmoil or upheaval. Perfect equilibrium. I didn't enjoy it, but I didn't miss anything."

Only one woman was actually unhappy and she had a very cruel stepmother. Most of them would have agreed with this view:—

"I had a very, very happy childhood; loving parents and a united family. I remember my twelve year old brother weeping after my wedding reception, because he feared I'd be lost to them."

Another woman recalled: "As far as childhood was concerned, one always remembers coming home to someone; there was no question of a baby sitter in India, because there was always some member of the family there and you knew was there. I remember feeling the joy of coming home from school and relating to someone who had all the time in the world to listen to you, things that had happened, to share with them your experiences of the day. It is very difficult to recapture that in London. There are very strong pressures here which the way of life has created and people do not have time to give to their children, to listen to these things. It gave the feeling you were sharing, which is very important to a child."



A VIEW IN THE BAZAR—CHITPUR ROAD, CALCUTTA
From a Series of Illustrations by the late Sir Charles D'Oyly, Bart. 1848



A View of the old "tank" Square with the General Post Office and Reserve Bank Buildings in the background

And yet another said: "My father would be sitting in his easy-chair and we could never come and go into or out of the home without his awareness. He was always there—something loving, dependable, responsive and unobtrusive; later that changed, but the early feeling never entirely left. I guess it is responsible for my basic feeling of trust, and ability to bounce back, however hard hit; a sort of ability to enjoy the thing of the moment."

Some of the older generation conjured up a vivid picture of their childhood days, depicting a life that was fairly typical of their era:—

"Calcutta Jewry in those days (1904) was settled chiefly in North Calcutta. We lived not far from the Jewish Girls' School in Pollock Street, in a large rambling house, with my father's people. We started school at three years old, and attended from 9.30 in the morning until 3.30 in the afternoon, when our servants came to take us home. All the married sons with their families lived with my paternal grandparents, and so did the mothers of both grandparents, who happened to be sisters.

"Our maternal grandparents had moved from their old house near us in North Calcutta to a handsome residence near the City centre. (A number of Jewish families were gradually moving further south). I remember my mother going to her parents' home for each of her confinements and we older children being taken there to see her when the younger ones were born—walking, although it was quite far.

"Eventually, my mother's longing for a home of her own was gratified and my father leased a house not far from my maternal grandparents and we moved into our own home when I was eight. (1909). My grandparents, similarly, had lived with their parents when they first

married. The story goes that my grandfather was a father when his mother had occasion to be displeased with him and gave him a beating!

"We loved our maternal grandfather and we children found him quite accessible in spite of his towering height, well-built frame and long, white beard. I can picture him now, reclining in his easy-chair in his own special corner, with my sister and me on either side of him, each busy with one half of his beard, plaiting and unplaiting it till we tired of the pastime or until he decided he'd had enough! Grannie, too, was always loving and kind to us and I would enjoy talking to her about her young days and watching her dress and do her hair—lovely hair it was, soft, silvery masses that would be brushed up and coiled on the top of her head."

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It was the custom for a newly married couple to live in the home of the husband's parents; as one older respondent remarked:—

"My father treated the girls more gently than the boys because, he said, (if the boys complained), 'The girls are temporarily in my home till such time as they marry, but the boys are in their home' " (1890s)

Girls would return to their parents' homes for their confinements. In one case, a woman made such a journey, not from one part of the city to another, but from Singapore to Calcutta. (1890s).

It was not unknown for married daughters, too, to live with their parents if, for one reason or another, they could not live with their husband's parents. Perhaps his

parents were dead, or only the mother was living, in which case she sometimes moved into her daughter-in-law's parents' house as part of their family, in particular if she were related.

These large households consisted of the principal couple, their children, some married with children of their own, unmarried sisters or brothers of the couple and any aged parent who might still be living. There were, of course, separate Indian servants for each individual family in the household. In general, the whole family sat at one table, although, as the twentieth century advanced, they might have ordered individual meals from the same cook or, in some cases, have had completely separate establishments, including their own kitchens, while living in the same house. The servants, like those in an English Victorian household, had clearly defined roles and it was not proper to call upon one to do the work of another. They came to Calcutta from distant villages and lived in *godowns* (small outhouses) on the premises. The Indian female servants, or *ayahs,* slept in the nursery on the floor, as was the custom, if there were children. Some households, particularly in former times, preferred to engage Jewish women to care for their children or to supervise their cuisine, making sure the cooks were strictly *kasher* when the mistress of the house was unable to give the matter her attention.

There was no fixed rule for these patterns, however, which could take any shape in the family kaleidoscope.

"My father was an only child. His parents were married in Singapore, where his mother's family lived, and they then came to Calcutta, to live in his father's parental home. He was three years old when his father died (1869) and he was brought up by his grandmother and his two uncles and their wives. His mother had left the child

with her husband's people and returned to her own family in Singapore when her husband died."

Why this mother did not take her son with her when she left, was not known. A woman of strong character, provided she had the money, could have done so, as there was no legal bar to it. She would have been expected to live with her late husband's people but obviously the ties to her own family were too great. In this particular case, the pressures not to take the boy away must have been very strong, as he was the only male descendant of that whole house, his two uncles having four daughters and no children, respectively. Perhaps it was all amicably arranged, as the mother of the four daughters happened to be this woman's own aunt, so she may have felt she was leaving her son in the hands of her own mother, or mother substitute.

"Many years later," the respondent added, "when her own people died, my father's mother came to Calcutta with her sister, on whose death her son's wife, my mother, brought her to live with us, although at that time there were six of us living in two bedrooms. My father never called his own mother 'Mother'. He had given the name to his aunt, in imitation of her daughters, his cousins."

This story clearly illustrates the strong sense of family responsibility, transcending even a minimum or ambivalent emotional bond, felt by not only sons, but also daughters-in-law and, indeed, in those days by all the members of this closely-knit unit.

It was interesting to see a difference in emphasis in the childhood memories of the younger generation. Whereas the older people had been more confined, perhaps reflecting Victorian mores, the younger ones all recalled joyously an "open house", with a freedom that made of their youth a taste of paradise. They, unlike their parents,

occasionally had friends outside the community whom they met at school or who were neighbours.

"My childhood was wonderful. My parents were simple, but they welcomed my friends at any time. I wish I could go back to it. It was the best."

"I had no problems. I felt secure. School holidays were one big ball; cycle rides, picnics; adults supervised. We had fun with other youngsters and my parents encouraged it. Our house was always full of children." (1930s).

"In my childhood I recall laughter, cousins, happiness, family get-togethers. I remember the great love my parents had for me. My father was a great disciplinarian. I felt secure while my father was alive."

"My childhood was happy—very much so. (1950s). I did more things than any ordinary person, mixing-wise and freedom-wise. All these experiences have helped me develop into the person I am now. All was exciting—a challenge, and I enjoyed it. My uncle was aware of certain things I was doing which would have led me astray, so he told my parents, who limited my actions."

A child's welfare was the concern of his whole extended family. A verbal reprimand, or even a physical chastisement, was not uncommon from grandparents or aunts of the older members of the community. Indeed, one woman has not forgiven an aunt who did *not* chastise her!

"I was playing with my cousin and we had a quarrel. I was to blame, but my aunt did not wait for an explanation. She beat her daughter. I felt it was most unfair!"

Perhaps the parents of today who, unhappily, allow their children unlimited freedom, might be encouraged

by this memory to use a little discipline? Even one of the younger generation confirms this feeling.

"Our grandparents lived with us and also an uncle. They all took an active part in our upbringing. I thought that was great."

And two other young men say:—

"My grandparents did a lot for me. Being a united family, grandparents feel more for their grandchildren. This is what I appreciate them for."

"Although my parents were out at work, I always remember never being left alone. We had very good neighbours (Jewish) or grandmothers were with us and we were not left entirely to the servants. I felt secure as a child."

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The joint family system was a common feature of life in the East. As we see, it had the unqualified approval of the children and there is no doubt that the extended family gave them, as well as the older people, a feeling of security. Even the adolescents might have benefited from it, grandparents perhaps being more accessible for confidences than a busier parent. It is only the young married people, starting a family of their own and wanting to spread their wings, who would have found it irksome and for some of these, the pressures were great. If they became unbearable, a couple would solve their problem by moving into a home of their own, while still maintaining their ties with the parent household. In any case, with the death of the older people, the brothers and sisters would separate, each forming the principal couple in a new household of their own, and so it went.

In London, this is no longer the custom. While a few of the community still have the odd parent living with them, it is the exception rather than the rule. Couples live with their children in isolated units, as do their English neighbours and sometimes the children, when they are old enough, "do as the Romans" and move in with friends into a flat of their own. In Calcutta, for an unmarried daughter (or even son) to live away from the protection of her parents was unthinkable. If her parents died, it was the duty of her brothers or nearest male relative to offer her a home and to look after her until she died. Unmarried and impecunious males were also the responsibility of their fathers or brothers. The main responsibilities were in the direct line, that is, parents for children and later, children for parents, but no family member including women could stand aside if any other member of the family needed help.

It mut be admitted that this feeling of belonging to a family still exists in London...even in those cases—which are extremely rare—when an unmarried girl has moved into her own home, she has maintained a daily contact with her parents and still feels herself to be part of the family. Boys, too, reflect this tendency; in fact, emancipated boys whom one might expect to find living on their own in London, are often still living with their parents. One reason for this might be the traditional toleration accorded to the sexual behaviour of Eastern men, but withheld from Eastern women.

If such a close family atmosphere bred family feuds, there was little evidence of it in this survey. It is possible that in general, a characteristic tolerance caused flares of temper or positive incompatibility to stop short of actual enmity.

"I don't believe in making enemies. Life is short-

lived," said one man and another explained:—

"Being a family member does not entitle one to support if one has done wrong. But one is not cut off, because one is still part of the family."

Perhaps this little anecdote illustrates it best.

"There were two sisters, members of our community, who lived with us and helped my mother with the children. Unfortunately, they did not get on well together and sometimes their quarrels would end in long periods when they "weren't speaking". At such times, when one found it necessary to impart some information or request to the other, it would be done by the simple procedure of prefixing 'Tell her' to the rest of the speech! This method was sometimes followed by the children and one of my younger cousins tells a tale of how she and another cousin once undertook a walk together and carried on a conversation during it, when they were not on speaking terms, honour being satisfied merely by the use of the words, 'Tell him', and 'Tell her'!"

It was seen from Dr. Russell's report that the Jews of Aleppo did not often take advantage of their law permitting them to have several wives and neither did the Jews of Calcutta, although they, too, were free to live by their own legal code. However, there were a few instances where this occurred and, as in the case of Shalom Cohen, no feuds appeared to exist between the co-wives. One respondent, going back to the mid-nineteenth century, recalled that her grandfather had married four times. He divorced his first wife, presumably because she had no children, his second wife died (also childless), his third wife gave birth to a daughter and, finally, the forty-five-year-old man took as his fourth wife a seventeen year old girl who bore him twelve children, among them the sons

he craved. The wife who had borne him a daughter was not put aside, but respected, and her daughter was given in marriage to the brother of the fourth wife, to promote harmony in the family.

This desire for sons seems to have been very strong in the past. A story is told of a man in the mid-nineteenth century who had four daughters and no sons. He prayed for one, saying, "Take all my fortune, but give me a son." In due course, his prayer was granted and a boy was born and, also in due course (and possibly because he was a gambler), he did indeed lose all his money. In later years the lad, doubtless spoilt and therefore not the source of unalloyed joy as he had been at his birth, might hear his father mutter, "For *this* I gave up my wealth!"

But perhaps this desire was less intense with the passage of time. One older man who had three sons and no daughters, recalled, "Must be sons. In those days, that Baghdadi crowd all wanted sons. I did not mind. I don't see that one is better than the other, because the spirit is the same, only the form is different."

An older woman said, "I like daughters. I feel they are more precious than sons, but I was a bit disappointed for my husband and his family that my first-born was a daughter."

And a younger man: "My parents both wanted sons. It is typical of the Baghdadis. I wanted a son, to carry on my father's name, but I'm happy as it is." (only daughters).

A young woman tells this touching story. "My father wanted his eldest child to be a son. He was disappointed when I was born. He wrote me a letter when I left India saying how I had made up for his disappointment a thousandfold."

The younger generation, when asked what sex they wanted their children to be, generally replied, "Both."

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Carrying on one's parents' names was a custom rigidly adhered to by many of the Jews of Calcutta. If a couple had a son, he was named after the husband's father, whether alive or dead. The second son was named after the wife's father. In the same way, the first daughter took the name of the husband's mother and the second daughter, the name of the wife's mother. Usually, only the one name was given and often it was possible to place a person exactly in his family tree by his name, knowing at once whether he was the first son, second son and so on, of his parents. Also, many cousins perforce bore the same name, so that families designated them as "Big David", "Little David" and so on. Later, perhaps to avoid this confusion, parents took to naming their children as custom decreed, but calling them by another name of their choice beginning with the same letter, such as Carrie for Comehra, or Matilda for Masuda. Later still, the grandparents' names may have been included as a second name (which was never used) or else the parents dispensed with the custom completely and gave their children only names of their own choice.

Children were never named after their parents, except when the parent was dead before the naming, in which case it was obligatory. One mother died on the fifth day after her daughter was born and they said, "Sulha is gone, Sulha is come," as they named the child after her.

Jewish law demands that, when a man dies childless, his brother must marry his widow "to perpetuate his seed."

One such case occurred in the community and the resulting issue of the union, an only son, was named after the dead man, his uncle.

Arabic names were very common until recently, when English names were adopted in their place. Indeed, the parents of the older generation were so used to the Arabic names that they often confused them with the Hebrew. "Simha" (Hebrew) and "Farah" (Arabic) both meant "Joy" and were both spoken of as "Your Hebrew name." "Masuda", "Zebeda", "Abdullah", "Furuj" were a few of the Arabic names solemnly handed down to children by pious Jews who were horrified when their descendents were named "Cyril", "Sheila" or "Daphne."

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On one point the reminiscences of the older and younger generations showed a marked diversion. Among the parents of the older generation, it appeared that the fathers were always the "boss", whereas many of the younger generation remembered dominant mothers. As some of the older generation said:—

"My father was an absolute monarch. He ruled my mother with a rod of iron, but he never took advantage of her."

"My father, definitely, was the boss. He laid down the law. Olden-days people were like that—one hundred per cent."

"My father had all the say. My mother gave in, in every respect. His word was law to her and she was happy about it and liked it this way. Once, my mother went to the hills with my brother who had been ill. Although

she was chaperoned, my father told her she must not speak to any man. There was another Jewish person there but my mother refused to see him and never even wished him, although she was quite lonely."

The correct attitude of a docile Eastern wife was taught to young girls but, in spite of this, many a clever and tactful woman managed to convey her point of view.

"Granny was old, very old, and she was deaf. She used to talk to herself out loud. We weren't allowed to shout when speaking to her. If there was anything that required an answer, if she couldn't hear, we had to get up and go and whisper in her ear. She'd be talking away and she'd say, 'Your husband is the crown of your head. If he says black is white, you must agree.' That was very useful to me after I was married. Fortunately, both my husband and I had a sense of humour. Naturally, sometimes, we'd have disagreements, we'd argue and then suddenly, I'd say, 'Yes, you're right!' So he'd say, 'What, Granny?' and then both of us would laugh and the argument would be ended. When I married, my mother said to me, 'God first, your husband next and then we'—and so it was.

"My mother was guided by my father, but when she really wanted it, mother got her way."

"My father was the "boss", but in a very subtle way my mother, through her invalidism, got her way. In the house, she was boss, but she wanted to do what he wanted. There was a deep bond of affection between them, but their lives developed separately."

"My mother was a very strong character and my father allowed her her way—as long as it did not interfere with his."

The younger generation tells a different story. There was the odd instance of the father being boss, some maintained their parents were "equal", but the majority said their mothers.

"My mother was the one who used the rod, not my father."

"On the whole, my mother is the stronger personality, but she gave in to my father in many ways."

A noticeable and recurrent feature of Calcutta Jewry, even in the days of the "one hundred per cent" dominant male, was the strength of many of the women it produced. Bound as she was by convention, nevertheless her character developed along permitted lines and, in her own sphere, she commanded the respect of her husband, children and community. She might study Hebrew or the mysteries of the Kabala to an advanced stage, outstripping her brothers, or else help her father or husband with his work. Previously, she was not permitted to go out to work but, in the confines of her home, her intelligence was appreciated and used even for business decisions by her menfolk. Many women, when widowed, took over and managed their husbands' estates most capably.

"After my husband's death, there were money problems, many debts and confusion. I sorted this out and paid back all we owed."

"My grandfather used to gamble and would keep the money he won in a camphorwood box in his house. At one time he had accumulated a vast sum, a fortune, but then gambled and lost it all. The shock killed him. Friends urged my grandmother not to pay his gambling debts, but she dug into the box and paid them all, leaving herself and her 5 children penniless. She worked for her family, taking in sewing and so on, over many hard years."

Always, in the community, there was this feeling of family pride. All those questioned spoke enthusiastically or appreciatively of their forbears.

"My father built up a business empire during the course of his life, starting with nothing", said one member of the older generation and others said:—

"My grandparents were illiterate, but tried to educate their children in the best possible way."

"The greatest thing my parents did was to bring us up, stinting themselves to give us education; it was more important than money."

"The main thought that comes to my mind is of love and devotion and encouragement in all our activities, in spite of not being wealthy. There was some sacrifice made to educate us but we were unaware of this and took it for granted, as it was done with such love and as a matter of course. Only in later life one realised we were very fortunate and I always look back on it as very enriching."

The younger generation goes on in the same vein:—

"My father took a great interest in our education. He introduced us to books, music, etc. He neglected his own education, but regretted this and later taught himself. He gave us a strong sense of family unity, still carried through till today. All that was soft and gentle in our house was my mother. She integrated so well into the community, she became a community stand-by."

"My parents had a tough time financially to educate their children and to give them each a profession. My mother was always available to the community and people used to come to my father for advice when they quarrelled in marriage."

"My father has taken over most of the community work in Calcutta since 1959. There are about 300 people left in the community there. They are still leaving. No one is arriving. But he is carrying on."

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This natural pride in one's family was sometimes carried to inordinate lengths. "In those days we looked only at families", said one older woman and this scrutiny was applied more particularly when it came to a choice of a marriage partner for one's son or daughter. This was all the more odd when one considers that most of the community, due to close interbreeding, were related to one another. It may be that this very closeness made it impossible to hide the slightest deviation from the strict standards of conformity demanded, so that the older generation, in their childhood, often heard the phrases, "That is a good family" or "That is a bad family"—the implication being, of course, that their own family was the best! So many of the community have grown up with this feeling of being 'special' that it is almost a commonplace.

When asked to explain their criteria for 'good' and 'bad' families, one older woman jokingly said,

"There must be seven generations of virtuous women in a 'good' family... But, really, you must look at the mother and grandmother when you wish to choose a bride. And for a bridegroom, too. I will tell you about my mother. I believe my father and another man both came in the same boat to see my mother. This other man was very good-looking, a blond. When my mother saw both of the men, her father asked her whom she would

like to marry and she said she preferred my father, because she had heard the family were very good people. She could trust herself with him."

An older man explained, "In a 'bad' family, the women folk led easy lives. If a woman goes astray, it affects the whole family as the home is hers. If a man goes astray, it is not so important as regards the family; he is separated from his family as an individual and his faults are not attached to his family."

Some further comments by the older generation:—

"The criterion was not based on wealth. If they led immoral lives, that is, if the women were not chaste, this would be passed on to the children. It was understandable if the men were immoral."

"There must be no slur on the name of a 'good' family The women must not go astray; the men must be honest and look after their families."

"A good family was one which had a good background socially and educationally, but mostly morally. Both the mother and father, but they always said, 'Look at the mother'. They were not interested in the father's sexual life but looked at his honesty, high standards and principles."

"I remember I was not allowed to go to tea to a girl I knew. My family had fairly advanced ideas, so she was allowed to visit us, but I could not go to her house as her mother was living with an Indian."

One woman, in the nineteenth century, who, after enduring much cruelty in an unhappy marriage, had the courage to break away and live independently, was ostracised by the community for her free life. "I never visited

anyone," she said. Much later, her uncle spoke to her, reminding her of her obligations to her "family name" and she was persuaded to make a second marriage which reinstated her with the community. It is a moot point whether such a reinstatement would have been possible if her family had not been a 'good' one to start with.

These moral taboos were so ingrained in the older generation that they operate automatically even now. One woman was considering suggesting a marriage partner for an unmarried friend. She discarded the notion of a spinster cousin and, when asked why she would not even propose the girl, she replied, "Her mother has remarried a non-Jew." It made no difference that the girl's own dead father had been a community Jew, the family name was sullied. "It would not do," she said firmly.

On another occasion, previously, an engagement was placed in jeopardy because the bride-to-be's sister was suddenly presented with the opportunity of becoming an actress—an unacceptable profession. The young man, however, refused to be influenced by such considerations and the marriage took place in spite of these temporary familial misgivings.

Gradually, the rigidity of such taboos lessened as we see in the younger generation's remarks:—

"We were brought up thinking and being told some families were 'bad' and now I've met them and formed my own opinion and often it is so. It is good to know someone's family background; it is very important."

"A 'good' family must have a good reputation, morally perhaps, with no big scandal against them. I form my own opinions."

"I do not quarrel with the older generation's view,

'The fruit does not fall far from the tree' i.e. look at the mothers; but I have my own criteria. In a 'good' family there is unity, values, ideals, affection, responsibility to each other, reliability. In a 'bad' family there is not enough love, no respect for parents, selfishness in the parents and children, no morals or principles, no example."

"In Calcutta there was this old-fashioned tradition—what people thought affected one's family and standing in the community. Not being a virgin was bad enough: illegitimate children was worse. They based their opinions on what other people said, they did not form independent judgments."

Finally, the views of the youngest members of the community on 'good' and 'bad' families can be summed up by this remark made by one of them:—

"I've never heard of it!"

Children brought up in a close family situation tend to consult their parents about their problems. Both parents seem to have had their children's confidence. One young man said:—

"When I was very young, I consulted my mother because she brought me up and I had more contact with her. By the time I left school, it was my father."

But the majority of people seemed to turn to their fathers for help in intellectual, financial or religious problems and to their mothers for emotional help. Except for one young woman, whose unusual reply was:—

"We turned to neither; we solved our own problems:"

However, she did get help from an uncle and also from an aunt. In the Calcutta Jewish community, children were exposed to a great many influences, not least of

which came from maiden aunts, who were often an important "second mother". One man, who spent many years, long after he had left Calcutta, in translating the monumental works of a great French dramatist into English, said his interest in both the French language and the dramatist had been kindled by just such a maiden aunt when he was fifteen and she had told him the story of one of the great man's plays. This particular woman, although she never married, was unofficial "aunt" to a great many members of the community on whom she exerted a beneficial influence in the midst of leading a full life with varied interests, including service to her community. Whereas it might be thought women in tight family circles such as prevailed previously in Calcutta would remain oppressed and unfulfilled, and sometimes this indeed did happen, we see that this was not always the case. Many women, as has already been noted, were greatly respected by the community, whether they were married or unmarried. They were judged on their own merits, irrespective of their menfolk, and, indeed, not infrequently, overshadowed them.

"I would say the strength of character of our women was far superior to that of the men."

The scope of family loyalties spanned a wide radius. An Indian doctor who was very popular with the community was the third of his line to care for them. It appears that his grandfather was the first male doctor permitted to attend the confinement of a Calcutta Jewess towards the end of the nineteenth century. Another woman, while she was in Calcutta, used to complain about her *dhobi* (washerman), maintaining that he tore the family wash and did not even get it clean. When asked why she did not replace him with another (they were plentiful), she answered, "It is not possible. His father worked for my grandmother. I cannot throw him out."

When we examine the family life of the Jews of Calcutta, in one aspect it is paradoxical. However narrow their concentration on their families, this very concentration was wide enough to include relatives not only in other parts of India, but in places as far-flung as Rangoon, Singapore, Java, Hongkong and Shanghai. There was much coming and going between them and it was not unusual for a man to be born in one of these places and to find a wife when visiting relatives in another; or to start a career in one place and then move to another and continue it there. In this way their horizons stretched far beyond the confines of their homes, for "home" to them was not a house, but anywhere the family dwelt.

CHAPTER III

Marriage

For in what stupid age or nation
Was marriage ever out of fashion?
Samuel Butler.

Hudibras.

If the family was the heart of Calcutta Jewish life, marriage is what made the family. To get their children married—sons and daughters—was the goal of every parent and most of the community married.

In the olden days, marriages were arranged, occasionally by marriage brokers, to whom fees were paid, but mostly by the families. As in the case of Shalom Cohen, who wrote to his friend Simon Duek Cohen in Aleppo to send him one of his sons for his daughter, the parents disposed of the children and the young people were not even consulted. This is what one older woman from Calcutta said:—

"My mother was about eleven and going to school. One day, she was being brought home from school when she passed the home of a relative, who called her in. A sweet was put into her mouth and she was told she was engaged. My father was fourteen then. He was seventeen when they married and my mother was thirteen and a half (1870s). They had no voice in it really.

"During the engagement, father would visit my mother at six monthly intervals, at Pesach and Rosh

Hashana, and they would be placed on a sofa. One would look one way and the other would look the other way. Grown ups would be around, highly amused at the embarrassment of the couple. When they were married, my father taught my mother all she knew because she was so young. It was a very good marriage, thank God, and lasted more than fifty years."

Sometimes, the participants were allowed a little licence. In one case, the young man had a choice between two sisters, the younger of whom was the prettier. He chose the elder, in order not to hurt her feelings. It was a long and happy union.

Sometimes, parents would try to arrange marriages or the daughters might attract offers on their own merits. If the parents were lenient, they would not force their children to marry a specific person and, in one or two instances, couples came together years after their union was originally mooted. The delay might have been due to strong parental attachments as can be seen from this older woman's story:—

"I had offers of marriage but I wanted to marry someone like my father. He was wonderful. My husband would not marry while his mother, a widow, was living, as he would not put anyone in her place. She wanted him to marry and even mentioned my name. He married two or three years after her death. We were very happy."

Not all such marriages were similarly successful. One very young girl in an arranged marriage was so ill treated that, in spite of the birth of a child, she could not endure it and, after much difficulty, she finally secured a divorce. However, in the vast majority of cases, as in Moses Duek Cohen's in 1807 the couple knew what to expect, entered

into the partnership willingly and wholeheartedly and, convinced it was for life and being reasonable human beings, generally made a good job of it.

Although there were some cases of arranged marriages among Calcutta Jews even as recently as the 1930s, the twentieth century saw a gradual lessening of this procedure and, with the slow easing of the former strict surveillance of children, the latter were enabled to make a freer choice. In other words, the freedom extended to include members of the community, or those members of the community acceptable to the couple's parents. As one of the older generation said:—

"I remember, in my time, if our community married outside even into an Ashkenazi community, it was not considered so very good, because the Ashkenazim were not considered as orthodox as we were. I think this changed ten or twenty years ago. We did not accept black Cochin Jews or Bene-Israels. White Cochin Jews were accepted as they had the same origin as us. There was the case of a boy in our community marrying a Bene-Israel girl—this was when I was much older. (1940s). The secretary of our synagogue in Calcutta objected to the marriage taking place there, because she was a Bene-Israel and was going to be married in a sari. I argued with him and said English clothes are not Jewish clothes and we accept them as Jewish; what difference if she wears a sari, so long as she is a Jewish girl—then he allowed the marriage to take place."

By the 1940s, many innovations were being presented to the elders of the community. The advent of World War II, with the fighting against the Japanese in the East, brought a large influx of soldiers to Calcutta, in even larger numbers than had been the case during World War I. There were also refugees from Nazi—occupied

Europe and from Singapore, Rangoon and other countries occupied by the Japanese during the fighting. While marriages with the Eastern refugees, who were part of the same larger community, followed normal procedure and caused no comment, there were many marriages to Western refugees and Jewish soldiers, both British and American, which, because of their numbers, had perforce to be accepted by the community. By this time, not only were arranged marriages out of the question but, often, the children did not even wish to be reminded that their parents would like them to marry, if not in the community, then at least Jews, even if Ashkenazim. Some of them married non-Jews. Formerly, those who did so, invariably converted their partners to Judaism before marriage, but this was no longer the case. Strangely enough, the attitude of the Calcutta Jews, when this occurred, was in strong contrast to that of their Ashkenazi brethren in London. The latter would cut off their erring children (even if they did not 'sit *Shiva*') and have nothing more to do with them, whereas the former, however much they may have disliked the union, generally adopted a more liberal attitude to it once it had taken place. It is possible that they could do this because they did not share the background of gentile enmity which would have made acceptance too bitter for the Ashkenazim.

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Even today, when the younger generation are finding their own mates, their intention is invariably to marry. Not one single person of those asked if they would mind if they or their children did not marry answered in the negative. All said they *would* mind. As one of them put it:—

"I wouldn't have thought of not marrying, as I have always intended to marry. If my child did not marry, I'd be very disappointed. It's one of the main reasons we are on earth—to transmit things. One isn't complete until one is married."

And others said:—

"I think marriage is a fulfilment. I would feel I hadn't been fulfilled. I knew the case of a woman who didn't marry and yet led a very full life teaching and doing social work. When her mother died, she was very lonely and she often told me she regretted not having married.

"I would not like not to have married. I think a bad marriage is better than no marriage."

"When people don't get married their nature changes. Ideas of home life don't exist. Unmarried people become cranky. It's not normal."

"I'd feel very lonely. I do feel marriage is necessary."

When asked to view the question from a more detached point of view, that is, what they thought of marriage as an institution the answers were as emphatic.

"I think it is very good. Without it, there is nothing steadfast."

"It's very important. It is a peaceful life. There is no substitute for marriage. It is a partnership." (An older man).

"I think it is a good institution and should stay. Sexual relationships do not usually lead to permanent

ones and I feel this is important. The others are pointless." (A man).

"One of the most important social institutions and I certainly advocate it. I think a man is just as satisfied and fulfilled by marriage as a woman. A secure marriage is the most important thing for children. I don't think illegitimate children are so happy and secure." (A younger man).

"It is terrific and underrated. A happiness-making institution."

"I think it is very necessary for one's entire security. If two people live together and don't marry, there's always doubt. You can't give yourself so wholly unless you are married."

While some of the younger ones, who are still unmarried, think like this:—

"At the moment, there is no alternative, because people frown at living together, but I think it is a bit outdated. I have to work it out. It's O.K. not to marry without kids. They pose the problem."

"Like religion, a great idea; but people mucked it up or tend to muck it up."

"It's important to be married, because someone needs someone at the end of it."

"It is the best thing we have as yet. People have tried communal living, it hasn't worked. It is like democracy, which has its flaws but is the best form of government we have till now."

Marriage was so integral a part of life for the Calcutta Jews that it even took precedence over their desire to

see their children married to Jews. Parents were generally snobbish about their children's suitors, no one, initially, being good enough for them. One woman commented on this attitude when she said:—

"I would be most upset if my child did not marry. I like to know they have their partner in life. They come to the stage where the parents say, marry anyone! —so why not let them marry at an earlier age, before they reach that stage?"

"Marriage is very important," insisted one man. "Of course I would want my child to marry, even a non-Jew. We can come to some agreement."

"I would prefer my daughter to marry a non-Jew rather than not at all," an older woman said thoughtfully. "If one does not marry, there is a big slice of life one misses. I'd rather my daughter had a child, not married, than never at all."

This tolerant attitude towards illegitimate children was reflected in the majority of the community. In the olden days, as one woman said:—

"There were no unmarried mothers in our community. If there happened to be, they would make the man marry her. There was one case in a poor family where a girl got a child from a Muslim. She was so upset by this, she refused to see the child and the grandmother looked after it. The girl's older sister, who was married, offered to take the child to enable its mother to be free to marry and she adopted it as her own when it was six months old. The girl subsequently married a Jewish divorcé and had seven children. Her first child (accepted as Jewish because of its mother), grew up to marry a Bene-Israel Jew."

The younger generation, while maintaining the tolerance of the older, insisted there was no need for illegitimate children.

"One definitely should *not* have children, unmarried. One should be responsible for avoiding this." And again.

"You can avoid this completely with modern birth control."

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In the olden days, there were many rituals surrounding the solemnization of a marriage which were strictly adhered to by the Calcutta Jewish community. To celebrate the engagement, the bride's parents would give a party and the bridegroom's parents would send a tray to the bride (in the name of the bridegroom) on which reposed a piece of jewellery, flowers, sweets, perfumes, the whole covered with a silk cloth. The following day (often) the bride-to-be attended school as usual! The next ceremony was the occasion of the *Khuthber* an Arabic word describing what was doubtless an Arabic-originated custom.

"On the Thursday before the wedding," explained an older woman, "the bridegroom's relations and friends visit the bride's house in a procession, with gifts for the bride. There are flowers, sweets, music and singing. The bride's nails are painted with henna and ladies shout *kilililee*", (the high-pitched ullulation still a common expression of jubilation in Arab countries).

Then followed the wedding, generally on a Sunday. This was solemnized in the bride's synagogue. No fees were paid to the synagogue or to the Minister for this service. The bridegroom, who fasted on the day of the



A wedding reception (1920), held in the garden of the Conservatoire, Park Street.



A close-up of the wedding cake. The bottom tier is a dummy. The cake weighed 1000 lbs. The horseshoe of crysanthemums contained doves which flew out as the cake was cut.

wedding, broke his fast with the sip of the wine. After the ceremony, the first act to be performed together—and—alone by the newly married couple was to step from the *khuppa* and to go to the curtained alcove at the rear of the synagogue where there reposed in solemn majesty the fifty or sixty *Siphrey Torah* lined up against the wall. These, in their gold-washed, silver or velvet covered cases were most impressive and it was the duty of the couple, while contemplating or kissing them, each in turn, to give thought to the holy law on which their marriage was based. In this way they were made aware of their traditions before entering into their new life.

The invitations to the reception were sent out by the bride's parents, in their names (or in the names of both sides' parents), although it was the bridegroom (or his parents) who paid for the reception. This generally took the shape of a garden party with innumerable guests—a large slice of the community, as well as non-community friends. The bride wore white. This was followed by a dinner with fewer people.

One man described his quite distant wedding with much pleasure: "I had over 600 guests. My cake was huge, it had five tiers. There was a cage at the top in which were six live birds. When we cut the cake, the birds flew out."

After the wedding, the next ritual was the *sheva berakoth*, or seven blessings. Prayers were said at dinner every night for seven days, in the home of the newly-weds (that is, the bridegroom's parents' house).

The same man went on to say:— "Of course we had no honeymoon. Who knew about it then? We stayed at home for one week after the wedding and there were 100

people for dinner and prayers every night for seven nights."

"I enjoyed the *sheva berakoth*," said a woman. "It was full of life, so there was no flatness after the wedding. It was lovely dressing up every night." (1930s).

Sometimes there was dissension about following these old customs, even among the older generation. One of them relates:—

"We went on our honeymoon, which my husband wanted, so did not have the seven-day prayers. My father was very upset. An old friend settled the dispute. He said, 'When she was unmarried, she was under your control but, once married, she is under her husband's."

In the Calcutta Jewish community a girl was considered a 'bride' for a year after her wedding and was made to feel honoured and special. A custom known by the Arabic name of *Fatah el Wooch* (showing the Face) took place.

"On the Saturday after the wedding, there was a big party in order to show the marriage had been consummated; this was supposed to be a women's party, given by the bride's mother, celebrating her daughter's initiation as a woman. Usually, later, relatives in turn also invited the couple and, apart from giving a wedding present, in those days very close relatives gave another present to the bride when she came over. I had all this after my wedding (1913). Also, the next morning after the wedding, trays of *baclava* and dishes of sweetmeats were sent to the bride by her parents and, each day, others—the bride's grandparents, uncles and aunts,—sent trays and these used to be distributed around the whole household. It was meant to be for the bride's breakfast."

A bridegroom is honoured by being asked to read the lesson in synagogue on the Sabbaths before and after his wedding. In the case of two members of the younger generation, both of whom had married in London and had then gone on their honeymoon abroad (one to the Continent and the other to Israel), the couples attended the service at Sephardi synagogues on the Saturday after their weddings and both bridegrooms were granted this privilege. In the case of the Continental honeymoon, the bride said:—

"In a Sephardi synagogue the custom is to offer a stranger the privilege of being called up to the Torah; hence my husband read the prayers on both the Saturday before and after our wedding."

Older generation bridegrooms were often presented with a dowry together with the bride. This could take the form of the bride's lavish trousseau, bedroom furniture for the couple, jewellery for the bride, trusts set up in the name of the children-to-be or gifts of money made directly to the groom. When such gifts were made, they were always mentioned in the *ketuba.*

"The *ketuba* was a marriage contract in which was noted down the value of whatever the bride's father gave her, plus the amount the bridegroom contracted to give her. This total sum was the first charge, after funeral expenses, on the husband's estate after his death. In the event of divorce, this sum had to be paid to the wife."

Also noted in the *ketuba* was a memento from Biblical days:— 200 *zuzeem* in addition to everything else, for a virgin and 100 *zuzeem* if the bride was a widow.

Ketubas were handed to the brides and later examined by their children with much interest and curiosity for, while they were unable to understand the Hebrew or

Arabic texts, they could enjoy the colourful illustrations. *Ketubas* in Calcutta were frequently decorated with signs of good omen and fertility.

"My father ordered my *ketuba*, which was hand-painted by a member of our community who was an artist. There was no payment made."

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Although the modern bride might conceivably feel nostalgic for the passing of some of these ancient rituals, she can view with nothing but relief the abandonment of the 'virgin blood examination' to which her grandparents had to submit. One woman, who feelingly described her mother's wedding night (1890s) said:—

"There was no such thing as marital privacy on the first night. Indeed, it was a nightmare of publicity. Old female members of the bridegroom's family waited outside the bridal chamber for evidence of the bride's virginity. Woe betide the luckless girl if there was no such evidence (as is sometimes quite naturally the case), for she would then be declared unchaste and that fact would constitute sufficient grounds for a divorce."

The thought of this test which they had to pass must have been equally gruelling for bride and groom (who, incidentally had to prove his potency); but, unless the marriage failed on other scores, the lack of virgin blood would not have caused a divorce as it was more or less known to the community who were virgins and who were not. However, this threat was often used (by her mother) to coerce a reluctant bride to do her duty. These young girls were mostly completely ignorant of what to expect.

Sometimes, they were told on their wedding day or, more often, fobbed off with the vague admonition to do whatever their husbands wanted. In some cases the brides were frightened or, as one said, "I was greatly disgusted", but, on the other hand, it might have worked out this way: "I trusted my husband and I wasn't afraid."

One woman described the general conditions that prevailed in the 1890s: "My mother had attained the age of 22 utterly innocent and ignorant of the implications of marriage and child bearing. To her, love was of the story-book variety, romantic and unreal as depicted in works of fiction in those days, and babies were just 'given by God'. Indeed, my mother had a tale about the early days of my father's courtship that is quite amusing. At a party he had evidently handed her one of those flavoured sweets with scalloped rims that were so much in vogue in those days. Each sweet bore an inscription of some kind—either an avowal or an invitation—and my father's choice had fallen on one with the words 'I'd like to kiss you' or 'Will you give me a kiss?' or something to that effect. This upset my mother a great deal and she wept bitterly afterwards and confided to her mother that my father could not love her if he could offer her such a token of disrespect! Such was her simplicity and my grandmother never thought to make her wise as to the real nature of love between the sexes, but considered that revelation on the day of the wedding would be sufficient. As a result of this ignorance and the subsequent shock of reality, my mother considered sex an unwelcome duty that fell to the lot of wives and she carried it out with reluctance and distaste. It was only after she had borne my father four children that she realised the sexual act could actually be *enjoyed*!"

In such conditions, it is not surprising to learn that the older generation were chaperoned even after the

engagement. One woman said, of the early 1930s:— "My father would not let us go for a drive; I wasn't allowed out alone, or with my fiancé—only in view."

It then became understandable that the bridegroom was expected to bring some finesse to the marriage bed. Even women in those days felt this double standard was right. The woman describing her mother's ignorance went on to add that her father, too, had been chaste. In those cases where the bridegroom was experienced, it was held there was a greater chance of the bride's initiation being successful. There was, too, a firm belief that a woman's nature was different from a man's. One woman said:—

"To my way of thinking, a desire for sex adventure is like an attack of the measles; it is bound to overtake a man at some period of his life and, if he hasn't ventured in that direction before marriage, he will be tempted to do so after."

It was therefore thought preferable for a man to enter into marriage having 'sown his wild oats'. But for a woman not to be a virgin was unthinkable.

"I am of the old school. A girl who is a virgin at marriage feels proud of it. Also, it is a risk for the girl—babies, abortion, disease, heartbreaks—and I don't think it is worth it."

And another woman, not quite of the old school, who has done considerable social work among non-Jews in England, almost echoes this:— "I don't think sexual intercourse before marriage is so good. There is guilt, abortion, forced marriages. Also, the first person in a girl's life is often idealised. But times are changing and people take it as a matter of course. I still think they lose something."

"Most men in the community would not have married

a non-virgin," affirmed another of the older generation, while an older man had an ingenious explanation for the double standard :—

"God built man differently. Woman was built for virtue. God created virginity for women, therefore there must be some meaning to it. This physical difference isn't there for a man."

However, two other men held a more egalitarian view.

"Sexual intercourse before marriage is very wrong for both men and women. I'm very stern about it." And:—

"It all depends on how orthodox one is. The Bible says if you sleep with a Jewish virgin, you are responsible and you can't divorce her. I think a man should treat a woman as he would like his sister to be treated. If a woman is good enough to sleep with, she is good enough to marry."

Orthodox or not, this was the minority view, the sexual leniency allowed Eastern men having seeped through to the Calcutta Jews. The high standards demanded of women's virtue were of long standing, and, indeed, incredible to Jewish refugees from Hitler's Europe who came to live in Calcutta in fair numbers during the 1930s. Whereas community men would never have made an improper suggestion to well brought up community spinsters and Anglo-Saxon Jews, even when doing so, would have accepted a refusal as genuine, European Jews could not realise that when a girl said "No", she meant it. They thought it was a ploy in the eternal sex game and were thoroughly confused by what they took to be incomprehensible new rules. Finally, when they thought virginity was a necessary prerequisite to marriage, they accepted it, but then, why should

married women say "No"? To European Jews, the community was peculiar in these attitudes.

However, it is interesting to see how these values, too, were being gradually eroded. One older woman declared:—

"I don't think girls should have experience even in this modern world. But they must not go to their graves virgins. They should be able to have sex if not married at 30."

This figure of 30 seemed to have some significance, as it was frequently quoted as the borderline. However, unmarried women of 30, having previously been chaste as required by community standards, found it difficult if not impossible, to rid themselves of these taboos, even when given the 'All Clear'! Their difficulties were not experienced by their mothers, who would have been required to reach their graves virgins (had they not married, of course); nor, indeed, by the youngest adult generation of the community, who expressed themselves in no uncertain terms. One young man summed up the leap made in a single generation when he said:—

"Sexual intercourse before marriage? Definitely—for both sexes. Also for the couples intending to marry, as this is a good way to get to know each other better. People should only get married if they want children. I would definitely *not* marry a virgin. I think it is essential to sleep with one's partner before marriage."

On the subject of extra-marital relations, there is not such a wide gap between the generations. Apart from one very young woman who said—"I'm not against it. Sometimes it might help to keep your marriage together and you might appreciate your partner much more. But one thing I must say—it is just as right for a woman as it is for

a man", the general opinion of the youngest respondents was best summed up by these two statements, made by a young man and a young woman:—

"If the marriage is working out, this should not happen. On the other hand, if the marriage is unsettled and they feel they want to hold the marriage together, then they can test it out with extra-marital relations and they should know if the marriage would stand or not."

"I don't really approve because there is danger in the fact that you could break up a home. You should have messed around enough before marriage and be adult enough to understand your responsibility to another human being."

While the unanimous disapproval of the rest of the community to extra-marital relations was echoed many times:—

(Men)

"I am against it, one hundred per cent, for both sexes."

"No. It is adultery."

"I don't approve of it, for men or women. Though one can make a mistake and do it and the marriage should survive it."

(A very old man) "No, I don't think it's right, but I remember a Jew long ago once told me 'Have it outside, because your wife is precious so why spoil her with too much intercourse!"

(Women)

"I'm dead against it."

"Definitely not for either. If it does happen, it must not happen with the wife."

"I don't approve, but most men seem to have extra-marital relations. It is better to let them, rather than break up the marriage. If a woman wants to keep her marriage, she should not—otherwise, she can."

"I am against it, more so for the wife. I think many men, especially in the older generation, cheated on their wives, who accepted it."

"I don't think one can have a real family life if either side has extra-marital relations—and I think this is important."

There was only one dissident voice among them, from an older woman in the community:—

"I don't think this is so bad, because maybe something is missing in the marriage and the other should accept it as he or she is not providing it—so long as the marriage does not break up."

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This desire to preserve the marriage against all the strains to which it might be subject was paramount among the Calcutta Jewish community. Among the marriages which took place, only seven per cent ended in divorce. As the Mosaic law was followed by Calcutta Jewry in its sanction of polygamy, so was it followed in its divorce by mutual consent. The divorce of the estranged couple would be the concern not only of themselves but of their families and, to some degree, of the elders of the community. In one instance of a virtuous wife, whose husband

wished to divorce her without her consent, the community refused to permit it and the husband had to accept this as there was no one to give him the divorce.

Although divorce was easy, marriage was thought to be for life, so, despite any personal heartbreak, the atmosphere was one of live and let live. Those husbands who indulged in careless extra-marital relations always made their wives feel *they* were supreme, one even going so far as to assure his wife that no one in his experience could equal her. Thus their husbands' sincere concern for them made it easy for other wives to preserve their amour propre and their marriages. In those cases where husbands made permanent liaisons with other women, the wives adjusted to this as they might have done to a second wife, not considering divorce in the belief that their husbands would return to them in the end and this usually happened. Generally, even these husbands lived at home with their wives and children with no thought of divorce.

There were also instances where married women had liaisons with men in the community, usually bachelors, and these liaisons lasted for life with the husbands turning a blind eye to their menages à trois. When these husbands gave their tacit support to their wives in such situations, the community followed suit and the women were not ostracized. It was only if the married woman were to leave her husband's protection, or to have a succession of extra-marital partners, that she would earn the opprobium of the community and this never happened. There were some old-fashioned families however which held the view that they would not permit their children to marry into families where the wives had transgressed, even with their husbands' consent.

It can be seen, therefore, that there was no such thing as casual sex between members of the Calcutta community.

If casual, it had to be with non-community members; but, when it involved community members, the responsibility of a full relationship was the standard the men set themselves.

Given this strong desire to preserve the marriage, divorces occurred mainly for bed rock reasons, such as the non-consummation of the marriage (a husband who would refuse a divorce on this score would soon be made to acquiesce by the community) or lack of any children after seven years or more of marriage (similarly, a wife would concede the validity of this cause, whatever her personal feelings). In one case where a divorce took place because of non-consummation, both partners were able to make successful second marriages with two other members of the community.

When divorce did occur, the general attitude of tolerance in the community was extended to divorced people, who were accepted without reservations. That this was possible in a society whose general attitude to sexual morals followed the Victorian code was due to the basis of the divorce; that is, it was given by mutual consent with no blame attached to either side, unlike its Victorian counterpart.

Some of these views were expressed by the community.

"I was brought up to feel marriage was for all time but, if there is real incompatibility, I would not rule out divorce. There must be give and take in marriage, though the husband should be boss. I have no feeling against divorced people."

"It's a very sad thing, but sometimes perhaps it is best. It is not good for children to see their parents bickering. If there are no children, then it doesn't matter but, otherwise you've got to consider them."

"I think marriage is something that can take hard knocks. It's an institution—a way of providing a secure basis for bringing up a family. Too often people in England tend to separate at the first knock, without realising the secure base. I am against easy divorce because it prevents one working at making one's marriage a success. No one today accepts the responsibility of a contract."

"Our community do not like divorce. They do their best to prevent a marriage from breaking up."

"The Torah says you must do everything to prevent divorce. If there are children, you should definitely stay together. If it happens, I would not attach any stain to it."

"I would do everything in my power to avoid divorce in my life and would advise against it. I feel very sorry for divorced people."

"It is O.K. if absolutely necessary, but people don't try hard enough." (A young woman).

And a young man: "In certain cases, divorce is necessary. It's neutral, like water or money. You can use it or abuse it. Marriage is always a risk. Even if you lived with someone a short time, or even six years, it's no guarantee. People change—it's not a lifetime."

It is possible that a strong emotional investment in marriage and motherhood was the reason why women in the Calcutta Jewish community, when widowed, seldom married again. This condition has often incurred the shocked disbelief of strangers, such as one American official, who could not reconcile the attractiveness of a Calcutta Jewess who happened to cross his path with her state of long widowhood, as declared on the forms she had been required to complete! It was a total commitment.

Generally, the oldest generation could say, with this woman: "I was brought up to believe a husband's desires were the only ones that mattered."

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But in spite of this background, there was much thought given to the responses as to how important the physical side of marriage was among the Calcutta Jews. Even here, the trend was to preserve the marriage.

"I consider it important; but if, for some reason, there is no sex, the marrage need not break down and the companionship should offer compensations."

"I think it is very important, because if the physical side is not good, it can be loathsome. So the physical side and the nature of the couple are both important. Some common interest is also very important to cement the marriage. That is what is good in young marriages, because, although they are inexperienced, they can grow together."

"Theoretically, it is very important—fifty per cent. It means that the make-up of the individual who can't give it is lacking. That is, they can't give themselves to the marriage."

"It is very important but not of primary importance. There are many other things more important; love, taking care of her and understanding. A good marriage is possible without a great sexual relationship."

"It is extremely important when young, but not the all-important factor. Compatibility and honesty are."

"It is important because it helps you to love your

partner more. Sex is part of love, which is much larger."

Among the older generation, marriages were based on mutual respect; a respect that in an arranged marriage, would fall on the considered choice of one's family or, in a non-arranged marriage, that went with the approval of one's family for one's own choice. Surprisingly enough there were also many instances where in addition to respect the marriage was entered into with love. The partners would have met at community gatherings or, if related, in their homes and their interest would have been fixed. In spite of this, by far the majority of the community felt it was not important to be 'in love' on marriage. As one woman expressed it:—

"I don't think it is important. What is important is to know what each party wants and to know they want the same."

"Knowing what each party wants" is reflected in the fact that the overwhelming majority of those questioned wanted to marry Jews. Except for one young bachelor who said, "I've never been out with a Jewish girl" and, in this, seemed to be reflecting the views of a group of his young friends who had not clarified what they wanted, beyond knowing that they were not yet ready for marriage. When queestioned further, the young man said he would like best to marry a non-Jew and added:—

"No, I would not be married in a church. I respect my religion. I don't have to practise my religion to be Jewish. I would marry in a civil ceremony, although, I hope my wife would convert." In which last hope he shared the dream of romantics everywhere that the loved one should make some sacrifice for them. But others expressed the majority view forcefully:—

"There are more chances of happiness if people of

the same religion marry."

"I don't think the world is ready yet for mixed marriages of Jew and non-Jew, unless the families are very broad. It leads to unhappiness. If my daughter were to be married in a church I would attend the wedding but I would be crying for her future."

One older woman said she would not attend the wedding if a child of hers were to marry a non-Jew. "They could visit me, but I would not visit them. I refused three offers of marriage from Christians before my second marriage, to a Jew."

Others said:—

"I don't think differences of religion are good in a marriage. One goes to church, the other to synagogue. One celebrates Christmas, the other Rosh Hashana and Kippur—and the children don't know where they are. Marriage is hard enough without adding this."

"I have nothing against marrying a non-Jew, but it would be very difficult for me, her and the children. If my child were to do so, in a church, of course I would attend. Would I disown him? He has got to find his own level."

"I don't want my child to marry a non-Jew. It is a great privilege to be Jewish."

"I am facing problems regarding Jewish traditions with my Jewish husband which would be much worse if he were not Jewish. However, each individual case is on its own. I feel it is a weakening of the race. If a girl is unmarried at a late age, I would agree."

"I am always sorry if a Jew marries a non-Jew. It is hard to be accepted as a Jew of a mixed marriage, there-

fore the children become non-Jews. They make conversion so difficult in England that some people don't bother to convert, whereas in India people were more tolerant. Conversion was easy. Converts knew little on converting but often made genuine Jews, bringing up their children as Jewish."

"I was going out with a couple of non-Jewish girls and I felt guilty. Whenever my festivals came, I went to synagogue, so I did not like it and felt guilty at those times."

"I woud have to consider it carefully, because my parents would be upset—therefore, he would probably have to be converted. However, I mix mainly with Jews."

"I wouldn't go out with a non-Jew with a view to marriage, as I wish to form a Jewish home. In India we had many non-Jewish and Jewish friends, but we weren't allowed to form very close associations with the non-Jewish ones. We had so much of our own life, we did not need to look further."

It was easier in India to have non-Jewish friends because the other communities also did not encourage intermarriage, so each knew where he stood in his friendships. Among those Calcutta Jews who were brought to England at a young age, the problem seems to have been more acute, so that, while most of the older members of the community did not marry non-Jews, many cases of intermarriage have occurred among the younger generation, mainly by the boys choosing partners of another faith, whom they have not sought to convert, despite the strength of community feeling. It is possible that the difficulties of conversion in London, already referred to by one respondent, is the cause, or the general permissiveness or apathy in attitude towards the youth of today in the West, or perhaps more complex and deeper reasons

which make these young men, alienated from their community by an early uprooting, choose to make the break final. It is strange that most of the girls brought to England at a young age have married Jews, unlike their brothers. The reasons for this difference have not been fathomed.

When asked to consider what races they or their children would marry, if it were not possible for them to marry Jews, many of the community refused to consider it and replied "None" or that all races were equal. Of those who did consider it, the majority placed Europeans first and Asians second, so perhaps this general feeling can give some clue to the increase in intermarriage since emigrating. For a choice of marriage partner, the majority of the community still voted in favour of a community member; other Sephardi Jews came second and Ashkenazi Jews third, while family members once so popular with their ancestors, was fourth. In the olden days, there were many marriages among cousins or near relatives. The Bible permitted women to marry their maternal uncles and some women did so. It is forbidden to marry one's paternal uncle, because of the law of *Halitza*. This decrees that a woman whose husband dies and leaves her without a child must be married to the brother of her husband, who must then give her a child for the sake of his brother. It is obvious, if this happens, a childless widow cannot then be married again to her own father, hence the prohibition on marriage to a paternal uncle.

Within the last twenty years, many members of the community in London have married Ashkenazi Jews. The tendency is for the latter to be drawn into the community partner's family, rather than vice versa.

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The typical view of the older generation was that men should marry in their mid-twenties and women when they were nineteen or twenty. Not many of them shared this extreme view, expressed by one older woman:—

"In olden days Jewish men were encouraged to marry as soon as they were adolescent. I agree—or a little older. Women, a little after puberty—sixteen upwards."

The general opinion was summed up by this woman: "The marriage age was quite young, and, if you were in your twenties and not married, you were almost considered on the shelf. Everything possible was done to get a girl married, even to paying dowries, which until recently was the custom."

An unusual view was expressed by a woman: "If people marry fairly young, that is, women at twenty, men at twenty-five, they will grow together. However, often there should be two marriages. When one develops a certain way, what one finds in youth, unless there is mental companionship, is not what one wants later. It might impede full development. But, if one waits long enough, one accepts each other's differences."

The ideal age for marriage was raised by five years, for both men and women, by the younger generation. One young bachelor said:—

"I'd want to be about thirty, because I'd never know what I wanted at twenty-five. I've had a lot of girl friends and it's good for a man to have experience."

Almost half the people questioned had had serious relationships with the opposite sex before marriage, some included sex and others did not. Two of the older men described premarital sexual relationships:—

"I had several relationships with non-Jewish girls. Once you get a girl and sleep with her, you can't get rid of her."

"No serious relationships, only casual affairs. But not with Jewish girls. It would be taking advantage."

This attitude was universal among the older generation of the Calcutta Jewish community. There was never any question of cohabiting with a Jewish girl because the unmarried ones were virgins and, according to Jewish law or custom, a man who slept with a virgin was assumed to have married her (he was required to give her a divorce if they wished to separate); sleeping with the married ones was adultery and, again, rarely indulged in lightly, generally resulting, when it was, in a menage à trois. Even sleeping with a widow involved some degree of responisbility and she was then unofficially regarded as a second wife. Thus, as already stated, there could be no casual sexual relationships among community members. Those older women who had serious relationships with the opposite sex had only platonic ones.

This state of affairs gradually changed and, with the coming to England, the very young members of the community grew up to accept the morality current among their contemporaries and threw off the constraints imposed by their parents; thus, with the boys not expecting nor wishing their brides to be virgins, the girls did not see the necessity of remaining chaste and the double standard no longer prevailed. Some young girls in the community, because of parental discipline or their own desires, remain true to the ancient tradition but there are others who echo the young bachelor and say: "It is good for a woman to have experience" and they do.

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In spite of their determination to live their own lives, the younger generation supports the older overwhelmingly in their verdict that, for a woman, a happy marriage is more important than a successful career. Even for a man, the majority opinion is in favour of a happy marriage above a successful career, which indicates the great value still placed on marriage by the community as a whole.

An older woman explains: "The prime object of women was marriage. Even if later generations considered a career, they assumed marriage would end it. Very few women went on with their careers after marriage."

And a young woman, successfully pursuing her career, states: "When a man is younger, a successful career is important for him. When he is older, a successful marriage, which makes for a successful career. For a woman of today, first a successful career and later a happy marriage."

An older man, whose very successful career began in his school-days, insisted, "A happy marriage is more important. A career is nothing."

An intelligent and ambitious older woman said: "I wanted a career for myself but, if I had to choose again, I'd still choose marriage."

Another older woman, who chose a happy marriage for a woman, added: "Both are equally important for a man; A career in great part provides the basis to ensure a happy marriage."

Also in complete agreement, young, old, men or women, the community felt the social life of a couple should be shared and not pursued separately.

"My husband and I were never parted," said one

older woman, "not even for a day, throughout our thirty years of married life."

While another older woman said: "Social life should be shared; but don't tie down your husband completely. There must be trust."

However, an older man was more uncompromising: "It must be shared. Never be separate or it can lead one astray and encourage love affairs."

In view of the tradition of arranged marriages in the community, there was a divergence of opinion, cutting across age and sex, on marriage bureaux. Women of the oldest generation felt as did this one:—

"I would not use a marriage bureau. Arranged marriages were different, as all the background was known."

And a young woman said, "I think they introduce misfits to misfits."

An old man said, "For people who are shy and find it difficult to make friends, it helps. I would not mind my sons joining one."

A young man: "I think they are a very good thing if used intelligently."

A woman in her sixties: "I might have used one, if I were getting on in age."

A young bachelor: "I think it's a good thing for the unfortunate—people who are shy, awkward, backward or disabled. I would never use one. It shows a lack of character and confidence. I wouldn't look for a wife. If it happens, it happens."

And a very young girl: "Rubbish! I don't believe in those sort or things. I might do computer dating for a laugh."

The Calcutta Jewish community has come a long way from the days, a hundred years ago, when two shy children were placed at opposite ends of a sofa, to the modern dating by computer. Members of the youngest generation, although they may have heard their parents speak of old marriage customs such as *kuthber, fatah-el-wooch* or *sheva-berakoth,* have no experience or knowledge of the actuality and there is no doubt that the ringing peals of the joyful ullulation, or *kilililee* will never be heard at their weddings. What they do not know, they will not miss; rather, it is now to them an alien culture. But, although the external trappings may differ, the basic continuity remains. The young people of the community today, like their great grandparents, still feel the most fulfilling and worthwhile human relationship is that between a man and a woman in the bonds of matrimony.

CHAPTER IV

The Community

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am for myself only, what am I?
If not now – when?

Talmudic Saying.
Mishnah, Abot.

It is often difficult for communities to exist as such in urban areas unless, as perhaps in Roman Catholic parishes, they are confined to a single district. In India, however, under the British Raj, all minorities flourished and the Calcutta Jews, like the Armenians, Parsees and many others, were able to develop along their own lines. From their inception, in North Calcutta, they spread to all areas of the city, but this did not dissipate their cohesion. It was as if the community was an enlarged family; indeed, due to constant intermarriage among its members, many of them were related in some way to one another and this tended to enhance the feeling of belonging together. Nothing had to be proved; all was known, all was accepted. As one older woman said:—

"There was a feeling of great closeness towards the community. One could not imagine life without it. The community life of Calcutta Jewry was such that everybody knew the life history of practically everybody else. In spite of their shortcomings, in spite of the fact that some of them did not lead an exemplary life, it made no

difference to one's relationship with them. There was that feeling of a family where you have the black sheep and members of outstanding quality and, whatever they were, they were all acceptable and all part of your life.

"One's community consisted of the other Jews in Calcutta but one was also interested in the Jews of other towns and, if one visited them, such as Bombay, Cochin, Rangoon, Singapore and so on, the first desire one had was to know if there were any Jews there and to make contact with them, which gave one a family feeling in a broader sense.

"Living in Calcutta, I felt very much the community was 'Us'. They shared the same background, the same way of life. There was a very warm and close feeling for Jews in other parts of India and the Far East and, as we travelled, we sought them out and we found we were accepted immediately with great graciousness; great hospitality was extended to us even if we were friends of friends or even if we didn't know them and they heard that Jews from Calcutta had come to visit their city. I would say we regarded them as 'Semi-Us'. There was a warm feeling that they belonged to the same community, but not the immediate community in your own city. Then I would say there was another category and this I would call 'Non-Us' and this was perhaps friends one had outside the community; even though one felt very close to them, they were not quite 'Us'. This was a term one applied only to members of one's immediate community."

This feeling about their community was shared by the majority of the older generation of Calcutta Jews, who expressed themselves similarly on the subject:—

"I identify myself with the community."

"The community plays the most important part in my life. I go to our synagogue here (in London) every evening to make the minyan. 'One of Us' is the Calcutta Jewish community."

"All Jewish people from Calcutta are 'One of Us' because we are brought up together, we visit each other, we have a personal touch from young. The Bombay community, like Baghdad, Calcutta, Rangoon, Singapore, have the same customs. I like the Reform Services (in London), but the people who attend there don't mean anything to me whereas, in our Golders Green synagogue, the community means a lot to me."

"It means quite a lot to me. I like to see the welfare of the whole community and know that they are getting on O.K. I am happy to hear good news about them and sorry to hear bad news."

Some of the younger generation also feel the same.

"To me it is very, very important that the community should be able to carry on in London. It's important to maintain our individuality. Western Jews organise better and share in costs. Now, we charge a bit in Golders Green. It's hard, because they aren't used to contributing and are used to having it *there,* given by benefactors. The community to me is really 'home', because though I mix with other (Jewish) communities I still feel most at home in my own community and come there for Yomtovs, etcetera."

"As it stands now, the community is only the synagogue centre; but also all Jews of Arabian origin who went to India and the Far East. I identify myself with it."

"I feel reassured in the community."

"It makes me feel alive."

"I felt and feel great with my community. I like them to be around us. I would not live in Richmond, or Brighton, although I'd like to, because of my community. I made some Scotch and Irish friends (non-Jewish) when I first came to London, but they did not mean anything to me. We did not have our community synagogue here in Stamford Hill at that time. I could not follow the Ashkenazi way, it is quite different. I felt rotten. I never went to synagogue. I was out of my religion in a sense until my family came. All Asiatic Jews—Jews from India, Burma, Aden, Baghdad are all 'One of Us'."

Whereas the whole community shared in common the very strong bonds of family closeness, in the main, ties to the community were not strong among the younger generation. One woman said:—

"I consider family and close friends as my community. My wider family among Calcutta Jewry is closest 'Us'; 'Semi-Us' are members of the community who are friends and also close childhood friends (non-Jewish) of other Calcutta communities. 'Not One of Us' is the rest."

A young man said: "The community doesn't mean much to me. It means very much to my parents."

And a young woman: "I don't feel that I am one of the community because I don't go to the synagogue or mix with the people, though my parents do. I have mainly Ashkenazi friends."

Another young woman, who lives away from home and moves in a circle entirely outside the community, said: "It (the community) is something quite pleasant really.

I enjoy the company at times. We have a good laugh as long as it doesn't get too deep. I do feel part of the community, which is the basis for my emotional conflict."

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This strong legacy of community-mindedness was handed down to their descendants by the founders of Calcutta Jewry, whose setting up of the first synagogue, Neveh Shalom, in 1825, was followed through the years by the establishment of many projects for the benefit of the community. Wealthy members of the community founded various trust funds with large amounts tied up for the Jewish poor. An example of this is the Ezra Hospital, which provided for free treatment for poor Jews, including money for nursing and *kasher* food. Now the Ezra Hospital has become a General Hospital and the Government allows these hospital trust funds to be used for Jewish patients in any other hospital, as beds may not always be available when needed in the Ezra.

The Jewish Girls' School was established in 1881, to counteract the conversion of Jewish children by the mission schools they had been attending previously. This school accepted boys as well, until the Talmud Torah School was founded for the latter.

The charitable institutions of the Calcutta Jews are too numerous to mention. Perhaps the Jewish Women's League was the most widely known, because the wealthier members of the community contributed money and services to its functioning, while the poorer members benefited from its monthly payments, which were generally made personally; in this way, all stratas of the community were in constant touch. The tradition of

service inherited from their ancestors was manifest in large numbers of the community, both men and women. The men bore their honorary offices in the religious life of their people, while the women concentrated on the social side. As one woman said:—

"I would help my community in all ways. We were brought up to a life of service."

A novel experience was presented by another woman: "I was too young to do social work when I was in India. In England, I tried to do Jewish Welfare work when I was living in a provincial town but they were very snobbish and the emphasis was on meeting socially in each other's houses. In London, I was taken to a non-Jewish place and I did social work for them and they appreciated me."

Many Jewish women in Calcutta served also on Indian committees and did charitable work among the Indians. Gifts (such as beds for cancer patients) were also made for the general good.

There were a numbers of beggars in the Calcutta Jewish community, but, as one man put it, "They were not true beggars, they just did not want to work. Most were physically fit." He was comparing them with the "true beggars" in India, diseased, or maimed at birth, to excite pity and justify their begging. The Jewish beggars of Calcutta did not need justification. Those of them who choose to beg did so with confidence and one such woman, when she left for England and was asked, by the suspicious officials of the Reserve Bank, there to control the outflow of Indian money, where she had amassed the large sum she claimed was her own replied proudly, "I am a professional beggar. I came by it all honestly!" (This was corroborated by an elder of the community and the

woman was allowed to take her money out of the country).

There were also those who begged out of temporary need, but these did not remain long at the bottom of the ladder and the sons of today's poor immigrant from Baghdad might become the millionaries of tomorrow. There was a great deal of social mobility. One very old man said:—

"I knew several beggars. Their children are today good, prosperous people. How can I talk about their parents? One fellow used to send his young son to my uncle every Friday to collect one or two rupees for him. He was only one among many. That very boy married someone from a good family. This impressed me."

As another older woman said: "There was one hundred per cent education in our community." So it would seem that this boy made the most of it. The woman went on: "There were a number of beggars. The majority of Jews in Calcutta were not so well off. Poor children were all given an education, paid for wholly or in part by the community. Girls were sent to the Jewish Girls' School and boys to the Talmud Torah. Beggars used to walk the streets in slippers and wrappers (a long flowing robe) (1930s) some—a very few who came from Baghdad or Basra—wore an enveloping garment called a *chuddar* (sheet). Many older married women covered their heads with handkerchiefs called *yasmas*. They would beg only from the community, not from Indians or the British. Many were given monthly payments from Jewish charitable institutions. Many of them sold things rather than just beg. They sold clothes or food from house to house among the Jews."

Another older woman recalled: "Beggars used to

come to beg in our homes generally on Friday mornings. They were mostly orthodox and attended the synagogue. They lived in one room godowns and their children were in the free school. They did not remain beggars. The Jewish Women's League helped. Some beggars saved money and gave it on loan, with interest, to one of the elders of our community, who never revealed the names of those who did this. Beggars would come to Jewish houses during the festivals, mourning periods, or weddings and other celebrations. They would collect food, dropping it quietly into their bags. Everyone knew they did this and in addition, parcels of leftover food would be made up for them to take home."

"There were many begggars. Some used to go in a *gharry* (horse drawn carriage) to my aunt, who paid the *gharry* man, gave them money and sent them back."

"Several beggars came round to the house on Fridays, in their wrappers. They used to go around to all the houses of Jews to collect money for the Sabbath, ten or twelve of them. My father always gave them something."

"I remember one incident," said an older woman. "A beggar came to my aunt, who told her she could have anything she asked for. She asked for the ribbon off my little cousin's hair and my aunt gave it to her. They never had extravagant wants."

There was one woman with such a striking personality that she was mentioned by almost all the community. One called her "exciting and interesting" and another one said:—"Not only did she come round to the houses to beg, or to sell bread, but she attended celebrations and entertained the guests by dancing with a glass of water perched on her head. She was very proud of her family and shared news of their successes with us;

she was a cheerful and likeable person, although very persistent."

Eventually, many of the community found it inconvenient to have beggars visiting them in their homes and gave donations for them to the Jewish Women's League. They would give a list of their nominees and the amounts due them to the League and, every month, the office bearers of the League would assemble at the Jewish Girls' School and make the payments. In spite of this arrangement, some of the more determined beggars would still visit the wealthier homes to importune their owners for further assistance or, in the case of officers of the League, they would demand by right an increase in their allowance from the League (which made additional payments when justified, from the common treasury).

"There was one man," an older woman remembered, "who was one of the constant stream of beggars who visited the Treasurer of the League to plead their cause. One day, he grew so incensed because of what he considered to be her indifference, that he barged right after her into her bedroom and threatened to be her pall bearer at her funeral. She replied sweetly that that was very kind of him, but the mourners would be hard put to it to find men to match his height, as he was so tall. I think he felt slightly ashamed!"

"The Jewish Women's League emphasized learning for the young. It paid for professional training, so that they did become independent. It also paid medical fees and expenses and the Baby Clinic and Dispensary helped mothers and babies. Over here, the National Health is a great boon."

One member of the younger generation shed some light on community beggars in London. He said:—

"I don't know any personally, but I've seen a handful here (Stamford Hill) begging from anyone in shops. They are the older generation. I think they did it in Calcutta and it is their way of life. I think it's diminishing since they have been here."

In Calcutta, too, individual house to house begging decreased because, the majority of the community having left, there were fewer people to beg from as well as fewer beggars; moreover, the large numbers of charitable funds which had been set up to deal with a thriving community, still existed and could therefore be used more extensively to help the few who needed it. As one young man explained:—

"Most of them were not professional beggars. They just lived on the community's national assistance." And an older woman told the following story:—

"One day, I went with some other officers of the League to pay out their monthly allowance to the poor. At the end of the morning's session, when we did our accounts, we found we were five rupees short. We decided to check the accounts some other time as it was getting late and we were just on the point of departure when one of the women we had seen that morning came running in holding out the five rupee note to us. Apparently, it had stuck to another note when we paid her and she had discovered it at home and come all the way back to return it. Five rupees was a lot of money in those days (1930s) and it says much for her honesty that she did not even think of keeping it and was surprised when we gave her something for returning it."

Another young man identified himself with the beggars, as he said:

"It made me aware that there was no scope in India

and I would rot, because I could become like them. I didn't have to work. My parents had a little money. I had no go or ambition. Many people were not working, just drifting." In London, this young man has acquired a great deal of ambition and is working hard in his chosen profession.

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Not only the beggars among the Calcutta Jews were individualists, but so were the numbers of eccentrics among the community. It was interesting to see that there was very little mention by the respondents of mentally ill people in the community, although these did exist, and possibly this was due to the wide acceptance given to eccentricity, so that the line between this and madness was blurred. Old and young alike were equally tolerant. One young man burst out laughing at the question and said:—

"We are all eccentric!"

While another young man mused, with relish, "Eccentrics? You might say we cultivated them..."

And others, old and young, commented similarly:—

"Many people had their quirks. It may have been due to inter-marriage in the community. The community accepted them all."

"Oh yes, many were eccentric in their own way. The people tolerate this over there."

"I should think so! Half my family are eccentric or individualists. How dull it would be if we weren't! One

of my uncles came home very excited one day, saying he had bought the underground rights to a part of the river. We said, 'But uncle, what on earth do you want with land under the river?' 'Ah ha!' was his reply, 'don't you know the Hooghly is due to change its course just there and then think how rich I will be as the owner of the exposed land!' Another uncle came home with boxes and boxes of collars, which, when he wore them, we noticed were much too large for his neck. 'Those collars don't fit you,' we said. 'I know!' he replied triumphantly (he stammered), 'but I got them ch-ch-ch-cheap!' Our attitude was more than mere acceptance. We were taught to be individuals. When we came here, there was so much sameness (1920s). No one liked to be different from his neighbours."

"There was one old woman in our community who bathed once a week only, on Fridays. (1920s) But her bath lasted all day and all her household was involved in the process—the male servants making vast quantities of hot water, while the female servants scrubbed her at least seven times all over—or so rumour had it!"

Perhaps this old woman was not so eccentric, but just stubbornly clinging to the *'hamam'* days of her Baghdadi or Aleppeen ancestors and ignoring the local custom of a daily bath!

"Our community accepted all eccentric people; everyone was tolerant of them. There was one follow who wouldn't touch anything anyone else had touched; he lived with his wife and had children, but afterwards he wouldn't have anything to do with her. I used to do this man's accounts and try to balance his books, because otherwise he couldn't sleep and would be furious with everyone. I played games with him to humour him. In India we had the time. Another man I knew was so

orthodox he used to say his prayers twice and wear two *tephelins.* One mad fellow used to sell cloth. He became a rich man."

"I know plenty of people who were eccentric. I just thought they were characters. We accepted them."

This gentle attitude towards the dissimilarities between fellow human beings was part of the philosophy of the East which respected the right of each one to develop as he wished. Already, among the youngest generation in the community, brought up in London from their earliest years, conformity is the norm and this tolerance no longer prevails. These youngsters stand aside and view their community with Western eyes. As one young girl put it:—

"All of them are eccentric as far as I'm concerned... some of them are really a bit weird though; superstitious, and their ideas are completely divorced from mine. Many are terribly oldfashioned in their ideas. Some of them seem to be like morons, with dull, expressionless faces..."

And another young girl said: "Well, they are certainly all mad about going to the loo and fanatical on cleanliness."

To this youngest generation, to whom their families are still "we", the community is "they".

When talking of the mad people in the community, one woman expressed it like this:—

"We did not think of them as being 'mental'—they were colourful eccentrics. Our definitions were different. A large proportion of any mental illness in Calcutta might have been depression."

The older generation were unanimous in saying

there were not many mentally ill people in the community. One woman answered:—

"There were, but only a few. Some were sent to a mental hospital at Ranchi, in Bihar and, if they could afford it, their family paid for them. Otherwise, the community paid through the Jewish Women's League or other charities."

"There were not as many as might be expected in a small community with so much intermarriage. It was a closed community. Anyone introducing alien blood was really doing the community a service."

"There weren't so many mentally ill people in our community. Some were put in hospitals, others stayed with their families. In this country I have not come across any of our community who is mentally ill."

Not only was it customary among the Calcutta Jews to keep their mentally ill relatives at home as long as they could, but physical illnesses too were mainly treated at home. Sometimes, even minor operations were performed at home, the surgeon setting up his theatre in the patient's bedroom, helped by relatives as well as his anaesthetist and nurse. The doctor was not only the family doctor but generally served many members of the community as well, so that he (and very likely his father before him) knew the community thoroughly and never hesitated to recommend that his patient should call in a consultant if he thought it necessary. His own position was so assured that he could act like a friend, without professional jealousy. Babies were born at home and geriatrics died at home. It was a culture kind to the young and to the old and to the unfit.

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The prevalence of crime in the community was rare. As an old lady said:–

"There was no violence; very little theft, very rare fraud. On the whole we were quiet people and subdued. We never thought of interfering with others; we always kept together."

And others confirmed this general opinion.

"There was very little crime in our Calcutta Jewish community. Maybe, perhaps, occasionally, a little fraud off and on: hardly heard of. No violence; no theft."

"I don't think crime was very prevalent—even the poor people were not criminals. There was no violence.

—Theft? Maybe... Fraud? Yes, in business, but that happens everywhere, not only in our community."

"There were a few cases of fraud, but violence and theft were practically non-existent."

"I heard of one murder of a Jewess by her husband. Violence is not absent, but it is certainly very rare. I never knew of a Jewish burglar. Jews are expert at fraud, but we call it diversion—against outside people."

A vivid account of a violent crime which occurred in 1844 is related by Moses Simon Duek Cohen in his diary:

"On Sunday, 15th Siwan, 5604, the poor fine young lad Abraham, son of Nissim, son of my uncle Abraham Duek ha-Cohen, met his end, murdered by the wicked murderer, Nissim ben Ezra ben Moses; for that wicked man was bad-tempered by nature and he was acting as assistant to the school teacher, Rev. Elazar Araki ha-Cohen, and this wicked Nissim, when he became angry, used to beat the children cruelly. Three days earlier, this poor

boy had probably done something that angered that wicked assistant, who arose in his fury, gripped the lad's neck with both his hands and nipped him like a bird. All these three days the lad ate nothing for he could not, and they gave him animal's milk to drink, but to no avail, and on that day he passed on to his Next World. His age was 7 years, 1 month, 24 days. And the lad had been weak and very frail from birth and was an easy victim in the hands of that wicked murderer—may G-d take vengeance for him, Amen. And in fact if we had made a complaint and summoned him to the secular courts, he would certainly have been put to death, for there are two gentile women as witnesses to the murder and, according to the English law, their testimony is valid and penalty is exacted on their word. But it is not right that we hand him over to be put to death, but he is subject to the death penalty by Divine Hands."

As can be seen, when it came to murder, manslaughter (or suicides) the community stood staunchly together but, in cases of fraud, even among themselves, they might resort to litigation. Moses Duek, brought up in the tradition of Oriental law courts in Aleppo, gives an interesting sidelight in his diary on how the English legal process appeared to him.

"...in accordance with the custom of the English courts, whose authority (1811) extended over all the cities of India, its capital, Calcutta... Such is the practice in the English courts: great expense, frustration and time-wasting. As I have heard from reliable people from a town in England, that there was a dispute between two people...and it dragged on for three or four years until the decision was reached and each side incurred costs from his own pocket. The presiding magistrate has nothing of these costs, because he receives a salary from the king's treasury, but these costs go all to the clerks, officials,

counsels and scribes, etc. Because neither of the two litigents has the right to speak on his own behalf in the presence of the judges, not even a single word, only the counsels of each side 'they are to speak before Pharaoh', and none of the general public has permission to speak before the judge, only the witnesses when asked by the counsel. Therefore the court expenses of the English courts are great and no other nation or tongue in the world has such usage or custom; only the English!"

In one area (outside of business) where fraud may have been practised, it was not considered by the perpetrator to be a crime. This was when it remained within the family. Men who needed money (generally to pay gambling debts) and who had access to family funds not, strictly speaking, their own, might help themselves to this money without a qualm, feeling, in some obscure fashion perhaps, that they had a right to it. This might also occur occasionally between community members who 'borrowed' money from friends never to repay it. This gave rise to unhappiness and sometimes to bitterness, but almost never was it known to lead to litigation, family members and community members preferring not to expose their non-business quarrels to the public gaze.

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Gambling was highly prevalent among the Calcutta Jewish community. There were several categories. Those men and women who gambled to pass the time might be called the social gamblers. The majority of the community could be included among these. They met at each others' houses to play bridge, *mah jong*, poker, rummy or whatever game was popular, for modest stakes, and

occasionally bet on the races. The next category were the regular gamblers, who played the game of their choice daily, for high stakes, and who enjoyed no other form of recreation. And, lastly, there were the compulsive gamblers, who gambled on games, on the stock market, on the races and even on which of two crows would fly off a wall first. Children began gambling at Purim, when they were given mint-new coins and played with each other for them at simple card games like *nautha hushtha* (a variation of *chemin-de-fer*) and *vingt-et-un* (Black Jack) while their parents played *loo*. Members of the community expressed themselves freely when questioned about gambling.

"There was plenty of gambling. Most of the men of our community are gamblers—in everything. They are masters of the trade. There are also women gamblers, but 99% of the men gamble, whereas 5% of the women (not social gambling, bridge, *mah jong* etc.). My husband gambled away a vast fortune. I did not know until he died that we had not a pice left."

"Both men and women were very fond of gambling. There was a lot of speculation in shares, etc. Those who got broke went to richer members, who helped them, and matters were hushed up."

"My cousin was a big gambler; whenever he lost a lot, he'd go to bed completely covered with a blanket and sleep for a couple of days. When I was very young (1890s), the rich Jews played *towli* (backgammon) for money. There was a poor man from Baghdad who lit the tobacco in their *hookahs* (hubble bubbles). The winners used to give him some money for doing this job. My mother told me he bought a ticket for ten rupees in the Derby (Calcutta Sweep) and won seven lakhs of rupees, which was the start of his fortune."

"They were all gamblers. At heart, I'm a big gambler, but I won't let myself start. I once spent all mine and a friend's money at a machine here many years ago (1930s) and we had no bus fare home. Three times I've been cleaned right out, but now I won't start."

"Three-quarters of our community were gamblers—compulsive gamblers; cards, races, stock market—men mostly, not women, but there were some women too. Two men I knew gambled their fortunes away."

"My uncle was a compulsive gambler; so much so that one day, he went to the races and was taken ill there. Members of the community and other friends gathered round him and it appeared as if his last hour had come. In a weak voice he asked for Ben, a young solicitor in the community and everyone assumed he wished to give him instructions about his Will. Ben was hastily summoned and bent over the prcstrate form of my uncle, who whispered to his trusted friend:—"I have two hundred rupees in my pocket—please take it and put it on Little Corporal in the next race to win!' Ben did so. My uncle recovered, but the horse lost!"

"Gambling with the men in Calcutta was prevalent. Women only played cards—never on a big scale. In Baghdad there were no races, or stock market gambling—only on a minor level, *towli* or cards. This was acquired in India. Our community gambles less here in London than in Calcutta."

"Gambling was prevalent in our community, but our generation now is not interested in gambling. We only play at Purim. If we had stayed on in Calcutta we may have gambled. Here, interests are wider and also, we have less spare time because of household activities."

"There was nothing else to do in Calcutta. Also,

many of the men were living by their wits."

"Yes, of course I knew gamblers. In my grandmother's house they played poker every evening. My father gambles within reason. My brother gambles heavily."

And the very young bachelors of the community when asked if they knew any gamblers, burst out laughing and said, "Yes, all our friends! We can't get away from them!" While another young man echoed them,

"Oh my God! Plenty... I am a professional gambler, but I am not addicted. A lot of the boys in the community are potential gamblers."

This was about London, so it seems as if, notwithstanding some optimistic views, this is one trait the youngest generation still shares with its Calcutta ancestors.

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It was generally agreed that there were not many drunkards in the community.

"A neighbour of ours was a great drunkard," said an old man. "Our community had not many drunkards—many more gamblers. Our Jewish community lived a very sober life, not like the Europeans in Calcutta, who liked to drink."

"There were hardly any drunkards—never women."

A few men might have drunk heavily, but they were not alcoholics. They held jobs and worked well. Some of these might have been gamblers also but, unlike gambling, habitual drinking was not a feature of Calcutta Jewish life.

The attitude of the community to drug taking was as tolerant as it was to everything else. And as it has been said, it is not the drugs themselves which are inimical, only the society in which they are taken. It is hedonistic drug taking which is condemned in the Western culture of today. In this society, some of the older generation took opium, but not to the extent that it became a vice.

"My mother took it on medical grounds to prevent diahorrea," said a very old man.

"I knew a couple of men who took opium, but there were not many."

"A friend of my family took it, but we took it all for granted. The *ayahs* used to give the babies opium sometimes to keep them quiet, but we did not approve of this."

"My partner took a little every morning for health purposes. The habit never grew."

"My father took it, also my mother's father. Anyone could buy opium legally, there was no licence needed. Many people made fortunes buying opium in India and shipping it to China. The British Government used to sell opium to the different firms once a month at a public auction. This was stopped I think in 1912 or '14 and opium was not any more sent to China. Many years later my parents wanted to go abroad, to England (1920s). My father was told he would not be able to get opium there so, before he left, he gradually gave up taking it and did not start again when he came back."

"A friend's father took opium. He used to get stomach pains and, when these grew more severe, he would take a double dose to obliterate the pain. Unfortunately, this suppressed the trouble and suddenly it

flared up and he had to have an operation. A second operation killed him."

"It was commonplace among the older generation." (That is, before the First World War).

"One man I knew took opium. I wouldn't have known if he hadn't told me. It was a regular habit, but controlled."

Apart from opium, the only other drug cited as being popular among the older generation of Calcutta Jews was tobacco, which was smoked in *hookahs* or hubble-bubbles. The tobacco for this was very carefully prepared and many other ingredients added (including *jaggery* or molasses) to make an enjoyable smoke. The same hookah could be shared among friends and was passed around companionably, each smoker taking care to grasp the stem with his fist and draw the smoke through this, so as not to contaminate the mouthpiece with his saliva.

About Indian Hemp, or *hashish,* one old man told the following story:—

"I knew some Bengali friends and one Sunday evening, they asked us over and they gave us what is known as *bhang*. It is made of milk, almonds, sugar—a most delicious drink. You drink it, one glass, another glass...and I used to smoke a cigar and I put the lighted end into my mouth, it didn't hurt me and I started laughing, after the *bhang*. I enjoyed it and that is the only time I had it. I believe it is a drug. I don't know what it is."

The younger generation have this to say about drugs:—

"Some of the older generation used to take snuff;

they would come round synagogue with it, in Calcutta. I don't think any of the community today are indulging in drugs."

"No. Drugs are not a problem amongst our young."

"None of us do. It never occurred to us really."

A young man said:— "I and some friends took *hashish* once or twice." (in London).

Whilst a very young girl summed it up.

"No drugs—not in the community. If they did, I should imagine it would be very mild stuff. I don't think they would, because they are too sensible."

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The Calcutta Jews were unanimous in having no interest in Indian politics while in India. In this respect they unknowingly followed Mahatma Gandhi's advice to the Bombay Jews, which was quoted by P. S. Gourgey in a letter to the Jewish Chronicle of London (1972). "It was Mahatma Gandhi himself who. . .advised the small Jewish community to stand aside 'lest it be crushed between the giant conflicting forces of British Imperialism, Congress nationalism and Muslim League separatism' ". One or two served as Municipal Commissioners to which position they were elected, one or two were appointed Justice of the Peace and one became Sheriff of Calcutta during the 1920s. Most were indifferent to Indian Independence, while some preferred the British rule; others, as one woman put it, were "happy for India, but not content to remain there."

"I was too much British orientated," said a man.

"If we had not been, none of us would have left India and our community would have been virile and leaders of industry there now."

In London, a few of the community take an active interest in politics, mainly among the older generation and almost wholly for the Conservatives.

What were the reasons why, over a period of more than a hundred years, the Jewish community in Calcutta did not assimilate? Many explanations were offered. Some of the older generation said:—

"Because we had the background from Mesopotamia. Jews were strict, they kept to themselves."

"As a general rule we were brought up to consider that our religion did not permit us to intermarry with others, unless the conversion was sincere. We were a small community and lived among ourselves. There were a few exceptions. There was a tendency in India for all communities, large (Hindu, Muslim) or small (British, Parsees, Armenians, Jews) to live among themselves, although they mixed in certain areas."

"We wanted to copy the English, so looked down on the Indians and would not assimilate with them. The British looked down on us, so we could not assimilate with them. We therefore remained ourselves."

"We tried to keep ourselves separate. We were basically orthodox."

"I do believe there was no assimilation due to the fact, mainly, that India was a colony and a conquered country, therefore most of the people there wanted to follow the British way of life and perhaps, I would say quite wrongly, did not participate fully and assimilate with

the Indian way of life. There were several communities in India and there was much tolerance. Communities tended to live within themselves, understanding the others, being integrated into the life and yet not assimilated."

"I think the parents had a powerful hold on the children and influenced their marriage partners; latterly, when there were few left in the community in Calcutta, they started to marry outside more."

And these were the views of the younger generation:—

"I think because our parents were very strict in keeping customs and with regard to intermarriage. It wasn't made exciting or attractive for you to go outside. Some didn't mix with Indians. There were Anglo-Indians and English, but we were a small community and everyone knew what you were doing, so one was more careful. The young people were dominated by the older, in India, but here the education trains them to think, question, enquire and move around more, so they marry out."

"I think the reason was probably fear. There was strength in their togetherness. They were not Indians, not Europeans, so feared neither would accept them. They felt superior to Indians and inferior to Europeans. They were not well educated (i.e. the majority not beyond secondary level) so stayed in family businesses or joined a large Jewish concern, which was just a paternal organization without any policy. They did not try anywhere else even when dissatisfied."

"I think because it was a religious minority and religious minorities are respected in India. I worked for the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, an English institution, yet it was understood that all members of staff, whether Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Muslim or whatever, had their religious holidays and others worked harder to help out

during these times. The Hindus are very tolerant of religious beliefs."

"The Jewish community were only concerned with what other people thought and were very conservative. They were afraid to do what they wanted. They would have been black listed from the community."

"The whole world is made up of communities. Integrate maybe, but not assimilate; I don't believe in assimilation. In India there were clearly defined sects— no one goes into the other's camp. It's like the Chinese in London, some of whom don't even talk English."

While the question of assimilation, throughout the period of their sojourn in India, was summed up by this young man from the community:—

"We can see that in a few generations under the British Raj, families who spoke Arabic and upheld many Middle Eastern customs, began to educate their children in English schools, adopted English as their first language and tended to regard Hindi and Bengali as inferior languages. This process went a bit further when some of the richer people decided to settle in England or made repeated visits here and were generally looked up to.

"Our grandparents found a fertile soil in India for their spiritualism and mysticism. Emotional modes of communication which included hand gestures and vociferous and heated argument were a part of oriental social life and were used by our parents. When, however, we came to England, we began to find this embarrassing, as it conflicted with our newly adopted English standards. We now find outselves suppressing our tendency to emotionality, though it needs to find an outlet. Oriental hospitality and large-scale entertainment at home, which

servants made possible in India, will begin to die out too in my generation.

"I feel that the Jew's chameleon-like ability to merge into new environments by picking out the essential elements in the prevalent culture, will mean that the old patterns of social behaviour will disappear in a generation or two over here. The emotionality will persist, however, in our children and if they learn to channel the energies that result from it, they could develop some successful forms of originality."

Hence we see the tendency to identify with the British way of life was already beginning to appear desirable to some of the community while still in India and, although the majority of the Calcutta Jews in London would greatly regret the ending of the community's tightly-knit cohesion, there is not one who feels it can continue. Old and young alike mourn its inevitable passing.

"I hope it can continue—it's a little world in itself, but I doubt it." (A young girl).

"The Calcutta community will be wiped out in about fifty years. How can you expect otherwise. They (the young people) will not marry within our community."

"Here, I think we will lose our identity, but our children will stay together in our synagogue and become anglicised Sephardim, because we don't have our own schools. The community will not lose its Jewishness, but its distinctive personality."

Two of the younger generation who are closely concerned with the welfare of the community in London explained the position in realistic terms.

"In another generation or two we'll be more integrated with other communities and in London we'll lose our individuality; whereas in Israel, if we go, we may maintain our identity because it's more Sephardically orientated there. Also Sephardi education here has petered out. Our Hebrew school in Golders Green has closed after about 6 years and the children are now going to Ashkenazi schools. Now, I think 'As long as they are Jewish', though it hurts me to hear a *barmitzva* boy in our Golders Green synagogue read the prayers with an Ashkenazi tune."

And, more fully:—

"Our community has two main sections; the larger section of the community is in Stamford Hill and the smaller section round Golders Green. We have two main synagogue centres; in Stamford Hill, Gan Eden Synagogue and the Lincoln Institute in Golders Green Road. The Golders Green community consists of approximately 150 families, mostly young people. My husband and I would like our children to be brought up in the same traditions as our parents were brought up in India, perhaps with more knowledge of what we did. But we find it extremely difficult in the present circumstances. When my daughter was about five, she used to attend Hebrew classes in Golders Green. They had them four times a week, evenings, as well as Sunday mornings, up to fifteen years. She did not learn very much, but was very happy to go there because she liked the children she met there; although the classes were a bit disorganized, she got on quite well. After she had been attending for a few months, the synagogue committee decided to close them, as they found them very expensive to run; at the same time they did not think the children got what they should out of the classes. At that time, they made arrangements with a neighbouring Hebrew school to pay something

towards the school there and have all the children transferred to it. This neighbouring school was a fully Ashkenazi school but, when our synagogue decided to contribute to the classes there, they said that these classes would gradually go over to Sephardi. I was very happy that my daughter started classes over there because I thought it was a more organized and larger school and she would benefit more from the school there, but she has been attending the Hebrew classes now for the past 3 years and I find that the result is rather confused. She comes home with in-between Ashkenazi and various other tunes and, at the Jewish school she is attending, she learns more Israeli-type tunes so with the result, I think, she is a mixture of all kinds.

"As our community stands now, I can see no future, as there is no continuity—I don't even give it two generations. Most people accept the fact of merging with the Spanish and Portuguese or Ashkenazim and losing the community identity."

Meanwhile, the community exists. No longer in Calcutta, from where letters come from non-community friends, regretting its passing. An Armenian, whose parents were intimates of the community and whose own memories of friendship span more than half a century, writes to one of the older generation in London:—

"I often think of the good old days when we used to go to the Grand Opera House; all these thoughts give me great comfort and joy although I can't help having tears in my eyes as I write to you..."

The splintered bits of the community still exist in far-flung corners of the globe; in Israel, London, New York, Los Angeles, Sydney; and the interest of its members in each other is still lively, as lively as it was nearly

fifty years ago, to a point where the misbehaviour of a neighbour's child was the direct concern of anyone who witnessed it.

"I was quite a young child at the time (1920s) and had run out of the house to play with a friend, clad only in my vest and panties, hastily grabbing a coat to cover them up, as I couldn't wait to dress properly. As we played in my friend's garden, an old lady came by and stopped to talk to me, as of course she knew us. Her pleasant exchanges turned to shock as she noticed my outfit underneath the coat and said to me, 'You are shaming your parents!' She reported me to my father, who gave me a sound thrashing, and I have never forgotten the incident."

Today, this closeness remains and people who may never have time to meet in the pressure of life in London have only to take up the telephone with an enquiry for a recipe, a contact, a reference, a favour, to be met with a warm response. When a respected member of the older generation died, within twenty-four hours the news had spread, so that 120 men and women attended her funeral in spite of its being a working day. At this same funeral was a woman from Los Angeles, passing through London for two days en route to visit her daughter in Israel, who said simply: "I knew I'd meet everybody here. Some, I haven't seen for years."

Funerals are a good place to make contact. When a community member dies, it is not felt that here is a corpse to be disposed of. Strangely, it is felt that the person is still there and that one must assemble to do him honour. Therefore, it does not seem mal a propos that, at a large funeral assembly, the community takes the opportunity of meeting one another and renewing contact. For, already the ties are loosening. The old

gentleman who said: "In this country, I have not come across any of our community who is mentally ill," expressed himself accurately. In Calcutta, all would have been known. In London, he cannot know. It is too diffuse. For weddings, one must wait for an invitation and often it is not possible in the West to display the same lavish hospitality of the East so that all are not invited. For funerals, all may come and many do, knowing that here is one place that this truncated community can warm its heart at the ancient fires of its own people, lit a hundred and more years ago.

CHAPTER V

Religious Observances

Show me thy ways, O Lord; teach me thy paths.

Psalms, 25: 4.

When Shalom Cohen first came to Calcutta, he took it upon himself as a Cohen to lead the newly arrived Jewish community in the full observances of orthodox Judaism and only relinquished his role to concentrate on his spectacular business activities all over India, when his son-in-law Moses Duek Cohen, showed himself fully capable of carrying on these voluntary duties in his place.

As we learnt in the first chapter, a synagogue was soon established and, over the period the Jews were a thriving community there, as many as five synagogues flourished in Calcutta. The Calcutta Jews professed orthodoxy, but, as with other orthodox communities, their degree of observance varied with the individual. Apart from some families who succeeded in passing on to their children their own strict adherence to all aspects of orthodoxy, it might be said that, in general, the older members of the community were more observant than the younger. Here is how one member of the older generation describes the Sabbath, which was similar for most people at that time.

"When I was young (early 1900s), every Friday night we had *kuddoos* (*Kiddush*). We wore our best clothes, silk wrappers, jewels and so on, and sat down to a special meal.

This consisted of *aloomakala* (sometimes made with duck), *pilaw,* chicken *khutta, hulba,* boiled vegetables and fruit. Before we ate, that is, after the *kuddoos* and *hamosee* (sanctified wine and bread) were passed round, we young children used to go to our parents and elders at the table and kiss their hands and they would bless us. On Saturday at six in the morning, the men went to synagogue. It was not usual for the women and children to accompany them. They came home at about 9.30 for the Sabbath breakfast which was *kuddoos* again and then *hameen* (chicken cooked with additions on a low fire from the previous evening), hard boiled eggs, fried aubergines, chicken *mahmoosa, sayed-ka-roti* (an Arabian 'flat bread'). All this food had been cooked the day before. No fire was allowed in our kitchen on the Sabbath. The servants were not allowed to use our kitchen to cook their food on Saturdays, but they could cook in their own quarters. In the afternoon, we children went to our great uncle, who taught us Sabbath prayers. Later, at 3 or 4 p.m. we had a Sabbath meal at home called *Seyuda Sayleesha* which means the third meal (the first being on the Friday night). This might be fish, or chicken *chutunny,* or perhaps a milk meal consisting of cheese, jam or mango. (This third meal at 3 or 4 p.m. is had now on Saturdays at Stamford Hill synagogue). When Sabbath was over, we had *kuddoos* for the third time, *habdallah,* hymns and prayers. The men walked to synagogue, but later, when the community moved too far away, they went by car. We were not allowed to play the piano, nor write, nor even pluck a flower.

"Now, I don't keep the Sabbath 100%. I light my Sabbath lights—that's all; because my children are married and have their own homes. To a certain extent, the restrictions of my childhood did make the Sabbath cheerless. I used to resent not being able to play the piano,

but my great uncle used to get the four of us together and used to tell us Biblical stories as well as teach us different Hebrew chants. That, we used to enjoy very much."

Other members of the older generation recalled:—

"In India we did not light candles in those days, but oil lamps. There were seven wicks in one bowl of oil, called *tirya* and this was hung up from the ceiling in a corner. In my father's house we were very strict, but we did carry things. Now, in London, I say *kuddoos* on Friday nights. I love to read *aishethai.* My wife lights the candles. I do not write or work, but I do ride."

"On the Sabbath, when I was young, we used *palkies* and rickshaws but not *gharries,* because it was argued that men had a choice and could refuse to work, but the horse had no choice. (They were not house servants, but public pliers). Also. we bought a tram season ticket in advance. because a tram does not run for individuals. We did no work, no writing. My father gave Sabbath readings after breakfast on Saturday. Grandfather came over and they all read in Hebrew. If there were any delicacies, they were kept for the Sabbath. If we had new clothes, we wore them for the first time on the Sabbath and made *shayhiyanu.* My mother lit candles on Friday night even when travelling, and so did I. Once when I was on a train in France, I lit two small candles and held them for half an hour or so until they burnt out, so that they wouldn't fall over and start a fire. You can light the *tirya* at any time before the Sabbath starts, but once done, you have accepted the Sabbath.

When I was about sixteen years old and had finished studying at the Jewish Girls' School (about 1904), my father wanted me to continue my studies and sent me to

the Convent in Calcutta. The Principal of the Jewish Girls' School took me to the Convent herself and gave me a very high recommendation. I wouldn't go to school on Saturday and naturally that was a handicap, so the nuns changed their holiday and had school on Thursdays instead of on Saturdays. Of course, some girls resented it. but eventually they had Thursday school for the whole convent, instead of Saturday. When I left, they changed it back to what it was before."

"When I was young (1920s), the Sabbath was observed in degrees. There were prayers and family life, bible discussion and visiting. Often people kept the letter of the law rather than the spirit. They went to the races and got others to bet for them, or some rode in public transport, getting their servants to pay for them. Some of us (like myself) went to the cinema, but wouldn't do school work. I was doing my B.A. at the Calcutta University; two of my exams fell on a Saturday and I absolutely refused to do them and I had to be locked in until sunset and then I did the papers after sunset on the Sabbath. Most of us looked forward tremendously to the Sabbath as a day of rest; the whole week it was a day to which we looked forward with great joy and delight, which proves the efficacy of having this one day of rest, which we do not and cannot observe in this country."

By this time (1920s), the majority of the community accepted the Sabbath as a day of rest and pleasure, but not of work. This led to some curious situations, as will be seen from this anecdote, related by an older woman.

"My cousin and I were doing our Senior Cambridge and one of the exams fell on a Saturday. We had to spend the day with the Sister Superior (we were going to a Protestant school) and, after sunset, my father came in a carriage to take us to the hall where the examination had

been held, so that we (and other Jewish children from other schools in Calcutta) could now take the exam. The Sister Superior accompanied us in the carriage. My father had been to the races that afternoon. Imagine our embarrassment when he turned to Sister and said chattily, 'Do you know what won the King-Emperor's Cup today?' 'I do not,' she replied. 'It was Orange William, a rank outsider! And do you know how much he paid? 'No' was the brief response. 'Guess' coaxed my father, 'just guess!' 'I have no idea,' said Sister coldly, but, no whit abashed. my father brought out in awe, 'A hundred to one! Can you imagine—a hundred to one!' My father was unaware of any incongruity in the situation."

Another woman said:—

"We went to school five days a week and on Sundays we did our homework, so we really looked forward to Saturdays, when we could play or read. On Saturday afternoons, my father would take a nap and was of the opnion that we should be doing the same, but we were too intent on play and, if we were lucky, or not too noisy, we usually got away with it. A great treat for us in those days (early 1910s) was the travelling skating rink that pitched its tent every winter on the *maidan* (public garden). This was a good distance from where we lived, but we cheerfully walked there and back every Saturday during the winter months for the pleasure of skating."

And a man:—

"I used to be very particular about the Sabbath and even closed my business when I first began. Gradually, I changed. In Calcutta we had Friday night *kuddoos* and everything; we even had it here when we first came; our children would come for Fridays, Saturdays and festivals, about 20 people, but now we can't any longer, our health

won't permit it. My children do Friday nights in their own homes. I no longer do Saturday *kuddoos* or *havdallah*."

I used to love Friday nights as a child, when I lived with my grandparents. Granny was dressed up and the uncles were all there, waiting in turn to kiss the elders' hands. I did Friday night candles and *kuddoos* when my child was small and she does it now for her children. I don't keep the Sabbath; when I was young, I had to and felt it was all restrictions and don'ts."

While most of the community feel it is important to keep the Sabbath traditions for the sake of passing them on to their children when the latter are young, they have gradually grown less observant with the years. Yet there are some who, on coming to London, have been enthused by the example of fundamentalist co-religionists (both Ashkenazi and Sephardi) and have embraced all the local rituals.

"I was always religious, but since coming to London I have learnt even more and I keep the Sabbath assiduously. I have a time clock for my lights and heating and I will not carry anything. Of course I will not ride, not even on public transport. I walk to synagogue and back. I will not watch television or listen to the radio."

A young married man, whose wife is Ashkenazi, says:—

"In India, other people did not mind switching lights on and off on the Sabbath (our servants did this), but the Ashkenazim do mind. I keep the Sabbath 100%. We make a special effort for Friday nights. We have an Eastern dinner, although during the week we have Ashkenazi food. We kissed our parents' hands and I am training my children to do it and I bless them. I like

it—it brings the family closer together. People are against sentiment in this country."

Another young woman conforms more to Calcutta standards.

"I just do no work and no cooking and no sewing and we do Friday night and Saturday *kuddoos* and *havdallah*. Otherwise I drive in a car, put on lights, go to the cinema. We have our special Jewish food on Friday nights. We used to kiss hands, now we don't; we kiss cheeks."

Other younger members of the community are less observant than they used to be:—

"In India we did everything. We used to kiss our parents', grandparents' and uncles' hands. I loved doing it. Here, we light candles and do *kuddoos* on Friday nights, but otherwise we do not have a special dinner or dress up or keep the Sabbath."

"No, I do not keep the Sabbath. In Calcutta, I did not write or sew so I feel guilty if I do it here unnecessarily. We do nothing for Friday nights."

"No, I do not keep the Sabbath. My mother lights candles and my father makes *kuddoos*. My mother makes a special dinner and my grandmother comes on alternate weeks. I would not go out on Friday as a rule, unless it is a special do."

"We did *kuddoos* in India, but now Friday nights are not special. I go out on a Friday night and so do all my community friends. In India we had a special dinner. I don't miss it because it's a change of life completely. I won't have Friday nights when I get married."

This young man echoes the many young people of

the community who do not keep the Sabbath and for whom Friday nights are no different from any other night.

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What about the fasts and festivals? What did these mean to the community? An older woman describes the general position.

"We were what I would call orthodox Jews, but I don't think there were any divisions like you have in this country. We had our own Board in Calcutta laying down the rules and getting its direction from Baghdad and Jerusalem. There were different degrees of orthodoxy in various families depending on what they wished to do but, in general, most of us kept *kasher,* the milk and meat laws, Passover and the other festivals, *Kippur* and *Tishabaab.*"

While not many women and children went regularly to synagogue on the Sabbath, on the High Holy Days it was a different story. The main synagogues presented a glittering appearance, their chandeliers sparkling, their *ekhals* (enclosures formed by benches and chairs) overflowing with the whole community, including the children, who began attending at an early age, all dressed in their best apparel, the women resplendent in their finery and jewels, the clothes frequently newly made or bought, to honour the day.

"In 1936, on my first visit to this country, when I attended a New Year service in the synagogue in London, it struck me very forcibly when I saw how soberly the women were dressed for the occasion; all wearing dark suits instead of something which to us was really festive."



Some of the *Siphrey Torah* which the community brought from Calcutta when they left, being used in a ceremony at their synagogue in Stamford Hill, London.



A recent view of the interior of the Maghen David Synagogue.

"I started going to synagogue from the age of five or six. I went on feast days and ran about at the back of the ladies' gallery."

"If children attend at synagogue, ,it is a living community."

The synagogues were built in the Eastern style, with the main *taybah* (dais) in the centre of the huge hall downstairs, flanked on two sides by the *ekhals* for the men, with similar ones in the gallery above, for the women. At the far end of the hall, facing the entrance, a few steps on either side led to an elevation from which the Cohanim blessed the congregation and, behind the elevation was a semi-circular alcove, curtained by rich velvet hangings or *parokheth,* in which the *Siphrey Torah* were kept. The largest synagogue had about 50 or 60 of these scrolls, encased in hand-wrought silver, gilt or velvet and these would be used in turn for the readings. When there was a lull in the service, the congregation (including women and children) went up to the alcove passing through the men's section and, in a long line, filed past the *Siphrey Torah,* either kissing them in actuality or through the medium of their fingers, praying while they did so. This was called 'making *zoor*' (from an Arabic word, meaning 'to go around'). During lulls in the service, also, *komas* were sold. We learn about these from the diary of Moses Simon Duek Cohen, who writes:—

"At that time (1825) I instituted (according to my poor intellect) a rule, approved by the community, to sell by auction... all the *miswoth* and call-ups occurring in the following month or on that festival, except for the call-ups of the Sabbath morning service, which were at the will of the Lighter of the respective Sabbath, and those of the Sabbath afternoon service and of Monday and Thursday, which would be reserved for the destitute."

The *komas* were these auctions (held in Arabic) and the money obtained from the highest bidders went towards the synagogue funds, for there was no levy on congregation members. Seats were free and went from generation to generation, usually from the husband's side. It was the custom for a wedding ceremony to be held in the bride's synagogue, if the couple were from different synagogues, but, thereafter, the bride transferred her attendance to her husband's synagogue. If the couple were members of the same synagogue, the bride moved to the husband's family's *ekhal* (as, similarly, she moved into his parental home). With these flexible arrangements, it was not uncommon for quarrels to break out among the women when, for instance, a new daughter-in-law might be seated more favourably than an elderly cousin. Indeed, one formidable lady was heard to warn the occupants of her *ekhal* on *Yom Kippur*:— "Don't provoke me today. I am fasting!" As who was not?

On *Kippur* some people slept in the synagogue by arrangement, rather than ride home.

When a man was called to the *Sepher Torah* to read, his sons, younger brothers or grandsons stood up. If a younger man was reading, he would come back to his *ekhal* and kiss his elders' hands.

Sometimes, after childbirth, a woman did not leave her house for a month or so, until she was free of bleeding. Then, her first outing would be with her child to synagogue, to give thanks for the birth and to 'make *zoor*'.

As Festival and Sabbath services lasted many hours, there were frequent lulls in them, during which time the congregation 'made *zoor*', participated in the *komas*, or walked around the synagogue, visiting each other, ex-

changing news and good wishes and making of the synagogue that 'meeting place' it was originally intended to be. Little girls sometimes went 'downstairs' to visit their brothers and fathers. For children, from their earliest years, the synagogue was a friendly place, as well as a place of awe.

"When I was in India, before I was six, I was taken to synagogue occasionally. I felt it a great treat."

"In Calcutta, when I was very young," said a young man, "I used to go to synagogue very often, on Saturday mornings. Later, when we moved near another synagogue, I used to be hauled in to make the *minyan*. I used to enjoy the buying and selling. I was fascinated that they did it in Arabic, but my father used to explain it to me. I never go to synagogue in London, only for weddings. I was disgusted with the Liberal service I attended."

A young man, who was brought to London as a child and is now a member of a Reform Synagogue, said:—

"I seldom went to the Calcutta synagogue except for a few special occasions. I remember various figures in shawls muttering away, and others chatting, children playing, fretting, and getting impatient. Proceedings seemed interminable, and quite meaningless; while the growing reality of religion in my mind was of family observance on Fridays, and festivals such as *Purim* and Passover. So the synagogue simply had no meaning for me in Calcutta as a house of religion.

"In England at the Reform synagogue I was not impressed either. Here, all is sacrificed for an aseptic decorum; the people still attend over-dressed and under-involved, seeming to expect the rabbi and choir to

entertain them with music and drama. In orthodox synagogues there is the terrible abuse of business chatter and gossip—though one forgives this, as some of the participants are busy in their own speed at their prayers; and occasionally the group comes alight and acts as a congregation. As a social scientist I see the separation of women as an unacceptable Calcutta and Western orthodox practice of retaining an ancient eastern custom: our Fourth Commandment, in addressing itself to 'you' must imply inclusion of wife with husband (or total denial of wives' existence); in this I totally agree with 'reform' (actually, true) practice. So, elements of my Calcutta beginnings of synagogue experience, though slender, have affected my response to reform practice in England. I have responded to echoes of Calcutta in synagogues in Venice, Athens, Djerba (Tunisia) and Nairobi. But in the reform synagogue here, the music, to me always an important vehicle of religion, has been best. If only the rabbi could strip the audience of some of its silent decency, and get us all to really belong to the events we so far merely attend!"

When the community began coming to London in large numbers, they looked for places to worship in their own way.

"When I was in Stamford Hill," said a young woman, "about 1955, the community met at a school before they had a synagogue. Apart from the High Holy Days, when we had the school hall, during the year when we didn't use the hall, we went to the Persian synagogue. In Golders Green, before the community had a synagogue, we also met in a hall."

The synagogue at Stamford Hill suffered a great disaster when it was burnt in April 1968. A funeral was

held for the eight *Siphrey Torah* which were destroyed. They were carried in two hearses from Stamford Hill to Golders Green and buried in the Hoop Lane cemetery. About 1,000 people attended. Some were so upset that they cried and fasted.

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Passover was celebrated in the home, but, nevertheless, the synagogue played its part. An older woman describes it.

"For Passover, the *Matza* Board organised the making of *matzas* in the synagogue compound. The poor people in the community were employed to do this, thereby giving them a certain source of income. Everybody wanted thin *matzas,* but the workers were paid piece rates and couldn't spend time on each *matza.* (These were large circular discs, over a foot in diameter). Members of the community used to go and bribe them to make it specially thin for their order; then, during Passover, one would hear moans of how *matzas* were not thin enough or boasts that their *matzas* were the best in the community. It was quite a communal and almost social affair when people used to go to the synagogue to collect their *matzas* wrapped up in a cloth, in huge baskets which were then taken home and suspended from their ceilings so as to remain free of *hamese* (leaven). Certain poor Jewish families would also make *hullake* (date juice) for sale to the community, to be eaten sprinkled with crushed walnuts and almonds, with the *matzas* moistened in water."

At home, in addition to the universal spring cleaning, many families who did not own separate pots and pans would *agala* those they had (immersion in water).

It is interesting to note a side benefit from the local supplying of *matzoth*. Because of a dislike of being numbered, inherited from Biblical days, no census was ever taken of the Calcutta Jews; yet it was possible to calculate the population figures at various time from the orders of *matzoth*.

During the *seder* service, the recitation of the ten plagues by the master of the house was a very solemn moment. Before he began, all the wine glasses and edibles were covered over, so that they might not be contaminated by the fearful words; an Indian servant then approached, bearing a mud pot and the master repeated each plague, slowly and with awe, with each of the ten words, pouring some of his wine into the proffered container, until the tenth gesture emptied his glass. The servant then took the mud pot outside and smashed it, for even they knew that nobody must drink that cursed wine.

On the eighth day of Passover, the community would return to normal eating, generally, by buying various savoury and sweet delicacies from Indian sweetmeat shops. The table would be laid with these and with green stems and leaves and each person would take a piece of greenery and would tap the others with it, saying *"Santil Khadra"* (Arabic) thus indicating the hope that the coming year would be a fresh and green one for the person concerned.

A sidelight was thrown by a respondent on the different stresses placed by different orthodox communities on what was acceptable or not.

"When my brother returned from England to Calcutta for *Pesach* and brought cheese, butter and cake, my grandmother said 'these are not *kasher* for *Pesach*', as we were used to living on *hullake* and *matza*. He said, 'But

they have the Beth Din stamp', but my grandmother said 'Nonsense' and refused to accept it."

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As in Russell's description of the Aleppo of Shalom Cohen's day the *sikkas* (booths) built by the Calcutta Jews were a memorable feature of the High Holy Days. Some of the houses had a permanent structure specially built for this purpose, which was then decorated each year with the appropriate fruits and green boughs. All the meals of the household during that week were taken in the *sikka* and often religious Jews slept in it as well. On the opening night of the festival, the long table would be stretched to its fullest and children and grandchildren would be assembled to join in celebrating the occasion.

"Festivals meant a lot to us," said an older woman. "We enjoyed them. Families came over during festivals. Even those who did not share a meal with each other, paid visits to each other twice a year during Passover and the High Holy Days, so that children would grow up knowing who even their most distant relatives were. During World War I we arranged accommodation for Jewish soldiers in various homes for the Festivals—the Jewish War Services Committee was formed. From the age of ten or eleven, we fasted all day for *Yom Kippur* and *Tishabaab*. Others kept the *Purim* fast as well."

"On the night before the Eve of *Kippur*, fowls were slaughtered (*Kappara*) and given to the poor for *Kippur*. Money was also distributed to the poor on *Yom Kippur* and in *Purim*."

"I used to love the feast days at my grandparents' "

said another woman. "This is why I make a great effort to make Passover and the New Year a family celebration here although, in general, I am not observant."

"I kept all the Holy Days, including staying up all night for *Hatima.* At one period of my life, I fasted every Monday and Thursday," said an old woman.

"We kept all the feasts in Calcutta," said a young man. "I enjoyed *Simcha Torah* as a boy. We had water sprays—it was good fun. In London, I keep New Year and *Kippur* and I don't eat bread in Passover."

In London, the number of private sikkas is already infinitesimal and one girl remarked:—

"My parents make a *sikka,* but I think it's more trouble than it's worth," thus reflecting the opinion of the majority in this country.

Shaveoth was celebrated by eating *suthoo* (a sweet made of whole wheat flour) *kahee, doldole* and other delicacies, which families sent to each other on trays. Trays containing six or eight small plates of sweetmeats were also sent to each other by families on *Purim* and it was customary to give the Indian servants who brought these trays a tip. *Purim* was a very happy occasion and stressed, as *Hanukah* is in the West. In *Hanukah,* lights were lit, but there was no exchange of presents, whereas in *Purim,* there was. As *Hanukah* coincides with Christmas, *Purim* coincides with the Hindu festival of *Holi* (meaning 'joyous') and there was a general air of rejoicing all round. One of the older generation says:—

"We gave presents to relatives. We sent trays covered with silk hankies, with sweetmeats on them. Here the Ashkenazim have *Hamen Taschen.* The plates had to be an even number (odd numbers were only for mourning).

My father gambled. He brought new money in packets from the bank. I give my grandchildren *Purim* presents now."

The new money that was brought from the bank was shining copper or nickel-silver. It was a pleasure to gamble with this money and even the very young children did so. A game which was never played at any other time of the year, but which was almost obligatory at *Purim*, was *loo*, a card game of ancient French origin, part of the inheritance of Calcutta Jewry, a tradition whose origins were untraceable. As this game required some nine or ten players, families would get together every *Purim* to play it and would allow almost nothing to prevent them. As one woman recalled:—

"I remember one *Purim* my friend and I had four or five month old babies and were playing loo at a third friend's house all afternoon. Promptly to time, our *ayahs* arrived, each carrying a baby and we retired temporarily from the game (while someone else played our hands) and nursed our babies, after which we returned to the game and the *ayahs* took them home."

The observance of the *kashrut* laws also varied according to the families or individuals. Most families in the Calcutta community had their fowls slaughtered ritually and, like Shalom Cohen, would take their *shohets* with them when they travelled, as, for instance, for months to the hills. One woman recalls:

"In my early childhood (1920s) I remember a *shohet* would come to our house and to all the Jewish houses to slaughter the fowls and, in later years, our Indian cooks used to take the chickens to the *shohet* to be slaughtered. He would be in the New Market for this purpose every

morning (not Sabbath). We almost never had meat but, at one period, there was also in the New Market a shop selling *kasher* meat and an amusing verse was written about it by one of the community:— 'If you want to eat number one *kasher* meat you must go to the booth of one Zumbartooth'. But this did not last long. The Moslems, too, had ritual slaughter rules. It was interesting that they could eat Jewish slaughtered food, but Jews could not eat theirs."

Most families kept separate sets of plates for milk and meat and for Passover but, latterly, the time limits between meat and milk meals might have grown more elastic. However, even when, gradually, some people began eating in restaurants, the majority held strictly to the taboo on pig, which they felt was *asoor* (forbidden). Even in London, among the less observant, this restriction seems still in force.

Many of the community in London, however, are very particular and have taken steps here to safeguard their observance. A young man explained it:—

"I am one hundred per cent *kasher*. In India we keep three hours for chicken and six hours for beef. The Ashkenazim do six hours or three hours for either. I keep to the Indian custom. In India we always had chicken. Occasionally, someone slaughtered an animal and the whole community shared it. Here, we formed our own Sephardi *Kashrut* Authority (Spanish and Portuguese, under the *Hakam*). It was formed officially in 1968, but ran unofficially three or four years previously. Our difference from the Beth Din is we do catering, but not manufacture. Also, we have a *shomer* at functions right from the beginning, with taking out utensils, to putting them back at the end. The Ashkenazim do spot checks. We are small, so can be more careful. We also supervise

wines, but the Ashkenazim don't. Spirits are O.K. We are going into manufacture of *kasher* food."

Another young man recalled a custom that was prevalent among certain Calcutta Jewish families:—

"There was a belief that if you ate milk with fish, you would become a leper—so my grandmother said." Many people would not eat milk with fish and fish was kept on a par with meat and fowl.

* * * *

In general, children of the community, both boys and girls, were taught to read Hebrew, though not to write, speak or understand it. An older woman describes what it was like in her youth (1910s).

"Private teachers were engaged to teach Hebrew to girls and boys in their own homes. Most of our community—in my generation at least—started our career in the Jewish Girls' School. Some of us moved on from there to other schools, Protestant or Roman Catholic, but the home influence in the Jewish community was so strong that it remained with us all our lives and the Christian religion did not affect us as it might have done if we did not have the home influence."

A decade or two later, some families were sending their children to boarding school in the hills, where they stayed for nine months of the year, and this tended to weaken the home influence.

However, the majority of the Calcutta Jews received a basic Jewish education, even those who did not have a very religious background.

An older woman said:– "We were taught to read and write Hebrew. We learnt the traditions through continuous observation and practice", while another confessed to what was, regrettably, a not unusual practice:–

"*Ustad* (teacher) came regularly, but I ran away."

Boys would apply themselves a little more assiduously before their *barmitzva*. Girls did not have a *batmitzva* but were given equal opportunities for learning.

"One of us had always to stand and see the chickens salted" (by the Indian cook, after the *shohet* had slaughtered them).

'We were taught Hebrew reading," said a young man, "but not *Gemarrah* and *Talmud*. We could conduct services but not understand them. At 16 or 17 I learnt meanings. Previously I learnt Bible stories and Jewish history."

Most boys said their prayers and wore *tephellim* daily until about 16 or so, then, gradually, they stopped.

All houses of the community in Calcutta had a *mezuza* on every door (except the bathrooms). "Some of us kissed our fingers, having touched the *mezuza*, on going out of the house and coming in, said an older woman. In London, while all the community have *mezuzoth* on their front doors, not all have them on every door. One woman remarked:–

"I have mezuzoth on all doors now, because I bought my flat from an Orthodox Jew. You have to leave *mezuzoth* on doors if you sell your home to a Jewish person, otherwise no."

The use of a *mikva* (ritual bath) was not common among the Jewish women in Calcutta. "Sephardi men

have never done it," said one man. The majority of the women used a *mikva* for the first and only time as brides, before their weddings; a few might have continued to use one while they intended to have children and others, while not using the *mikva*, might nevertheless have observed the Mosaic law regarding sexual intercourse. But even if they did, they did not sleep on separate beds or observe a strict 'separation' during this period.

Male children were circumcised on the eighth day, as the Bible commanded (the sign of the Covenant with the God of Israel). This was a great occasion and the festivities began when the eighth day started, which was the previous evening. This was known as the *agdilyas* night. A young man described the whole proceedure:—

"The night before the *mela* (circumcision) we have a large party at home at which Hebrew and Arabic songs are sung and a dinner is served. We have a tray with one *Elyahu Nabi* (the prophet Elijah) large candle and several other candles and the guests donate money for charity. The *Elyahu Nabi* chair with a Bible and *yas* (Arabic for myrtle) is in a place of honour. I had about a hundred people for my son (in London). My wife (an Ashkenazi) came home from hospital specially in time for this. She said she would not miss it for the world. The next morning, there is another large celebration, which, unlike Ashkenazi circumcisions, both men and women attend. Two special songs and tunes are sung before the baby is brought in and again after the *mela*. The godmother (*takdomahee*) brings the baby in on a pillow and hands it to the *mohale*, who puts it on the lap of the *sandek* (always a man, generally the father of the child—the Askenazi custom is for the grandfather or a respected elder to sit *sandek*—not the father). (The *Elyahu Nabi* chair stands near the baby and *sandek*; the *mohale* kisses the Book

before performing the operation). After the *mela*, the *mohale* makes *kiddush* and puts a drop of the wine on his finger into the baby's mouth. He then names the child and the *kaddish* is said, after which the godmother takes the child away. One of the biggest *mitzvoth* is to have a sit-down meal (lunch) after the *mela*, at which the *mohale* is generally present. This is in addition to the sweetmeats etc. which are served directly after the *mela*."

An older woman said:—

"The *agdilyas* and *mela* were a very great occasion in Calcutta. Big parties were held, with friends and relatives; women were also present and children too. My sons were circumcised in the synagogue, after which guests came to the house. Once, there was a circumcision in synagogue on *Yom Kippur* and the whole community was present."

In London, most of the community follow the Ashkenazi custom.

"Here, they don't have parties or think women should be there."

"It is not necessary to have ten men—only the *mohale*, *sandek* and two male Jewish witnesses."

Circumcision seems to be the last rite to be omitted, even by Jews who are observant of nothing else. A young man said:—

"I will have my children circumcised. It is very hygenic; medical science has proved it so."

And, perhaps more surprisingly, members of the community (male and female) who have married Christians, also have their sons circumcised.

Even before the circumcision on the eighth day, that is, on the sixth day, a ceremony known as *shasha* was performed. On the evening of the fifth day after the birth of the child (that is, the beginning of the sixth day), was the *sithee* or naming of a girl child. After the *sithee* was the *shasha*, for both boys and girls. This has been described by respondents:—

"On the sixth day after the birth of the child, I bought sweets, chocolates, peanuts, sunflower seeds, dried dates, popcorn and roasted chickpeas (seven things) and mixed them all together in a big sheet. The children of the family came and shouted *shasha* as they shook the sheet. We then put the sweets, etc. into little bags and distributed them to all the children of the family and friends."

"Sometimes you gave little presents, or a little cup."

"*Shasha* means to distribute. It's for the spirits. The louder the children call *'Shasha'*, the more they get of the sweets, toys, gram, etc."

"For *shasha*, a *panja* (hand) in saffron is put on the wall, to ward off the evil eye."

"Some of my old-fashioned friends came and gave my children *shasha*, I am rather sorry I did not do it for my children."

"We did not do *shasha*, but my mother sent us *shasha* for all our children."

And the final word, which seems to sum up the majority view, comes from an older man:—

"It's a Baghdadi custom, but it has died out." Which, from the point of view of the children, who thoroughly

enjoyed the shaking and the shouting, might be considered rather a pity.

One of the Biblical precepts almost universally followed, even by the non-observant Jews of the community and even in London, is the ceremony of redemption, or *pidyone*, for they feel, "the child is not yours without it."

"The *pidyone* is the redemption of the first born. All the first born belong to the Almighty—animal or vegetable. The Cohens, as the priestly tribe, being representatives of the Almighty, are entitled to all first fruits, including the children, so these have to be redeemed. Why only boys? Because of the Exodus, when all Egyptian first born males were killed."

"On the thirty-first day after the birth of a woman's first-born child, if he is a son, a ceremony called *pidyone nayfaysh* is performed. The parents of the child have to pay some money to Cohens at this ceremony to buy the child back. If either parent is a Cohen or a Levy (who were servants of the temple), there is no *pidyone*. Even if it is a man's third or fourth wife, a *pidyone* is necessary if the woman's first born is a son; but not if it is a Caesarian, or her first pregnancy has miscarried."

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The most important day in the life of a Jewish boy is his *barmitzva*, when he officially becomes a man, but among the Calcutta Jewish community, this was preceded by another very important day, known as his *maftir*. The community described both *maftir* and *barmitzva* in detail.

"A boy can read *maftir* at any age, eight, nine or ten; as soon as he is able to read from the *Torah*, he is called up

in synagogue and the first occasion is known as his *maftir*. This is a very great day and is usually celebrated with a party at home. In those days, people did not give presents for *maftir* or *barmitzva* (1920s). The parents would give the child a new suit or *siseeth(tallis)*."

"The reading of the *maftir* is *not* a requirement for the *barmitzva*. The *maftir* is the first time a boy is called up to read the *Torah*, which can be at any age. *Barmitzva* means accepting the responsibility of doing your own *mitzvoth* and prayers, wearing the phylacteries and prayer-shawls for the first time. This is done a day after the boy's thirteenth birthday (the Hebrew date) at home, or at a party. The boy usually reads *maftir* during a festival, generally *Simha Torah*, which is a children's festival. Sweets, etc. are passed round to children in the synagogue and it is followed by a big *maftir* party. For the *barmitzva*, one can have a party, but many families keep it as a private family occasion. The boy is shown how to wear his phylacteries and says the required prayers, (that is, the morning prayers) at home. The Ashkenazim do not believe a boy should be honoured by being called up to the *Torah* until he is a man (that is, *barmitzva*). They call this ceremony a *barmitzva*, but are really celebrating the *maftir*. I thing this is wrong—it is not in the spirit that was meant to be. The *maftir* is stressed, the *barmitzva* is ignored."

"I had my *maftir* in Calcutta when I was ten. I was called up to the *Torah* for the first time. I read the *maftir* portion and the *haphtarah*. It is a big celebration. People throw little sweets, cloves, etc. on the boy as he goes up and as he comes down. We had a big tea party at home on the Sunday following. My *barmitzva* took place when I was thirteen and a day. This was a much bigger celebration with a religious significance. About 10 a.m. my father and the Rabbi helped me to put on my *tephellin*

for the first time. I read the portion and *Shema* and I gave a sermon in English (prepared by my father) to about 300 guests, assembled in the garden, at home. The Rabbi and my father also spoke. There were refreshments served. About 50 people stayed to lunch. All my friends stayed to tea. There was music all day and the party ended about 7 p.m."

"On the morning of my *barmitzva,* I was not allowed to eat. My master and my father made me wear my *tephellin.* My grandfather was present. I read my prayers and took off the *tephellin* and then was allowed to eat."

"Our *barmitzvas* were family occasions but, for my grandson's *maftir* my husband spent a large sum and had 1,000 guests. He said 'Let me do it, as I won't see his wedding'—and he didn't."

"My *barmitzva* was private, but my *maftir* was a most important occasion and I was coached for it intensively. Before the great day (1890s), the pastry makers were sent for and worked for days in the house, making wonderful foods. We had a big gathering in the house—many large tables laid, full of food and drink."

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In Calcutta, when one of the Jewish community died, there were strict rules to be observed and which of these was religion and which tradition was obscure. Death usually occurred at home and, if it was expected, either the sick person or a relative said the *Shema* immediately before. If this were not possible, then a relative said it immediately after. The dead body was then placed on the floor of the room in which he had died. The jaw was tied up and the eyes closed and the corpse was covered with a sheet. Candles were placed at his head and feet and he was not left alone for a moment. (This

was because it was believed that, if someone whispered a wish in the ear of the corpse, the spirit must not rest until it carried out this commission). If the person died in a hospital, he was generally brought home for preparation, unless it was a bad case of a contagious disease, in which case the body was taken directly to the cemetery, where there was a room in which one could wash the dead.

"Loved ones of the same sex can wash their own dead, but not the sons, who are not supposed to see the nakedness of their father. Over here, I believe the daughters are not supposed to see the nakedness of their mother but, in India, the daughters do."

Although there were people employed by the Burial Board to wash the dead, some people did this voluntarily as a *mitzva* or sometimes members of the family wished to wash their own dead. Funerals would be arranged as soon after death as possible (because of decomposition in a hot country and to delay this, ice was placed on the corpse) and the body was prepared immediately before the funeral took place.

"The dead body is washed all over with *kasher* soap by members of the same sex. Mud pots are then filled with water and each time they utter a certain prayer, they throw the water on the corpse and then break the mud pot. I think they have more pots for the men than for the women."

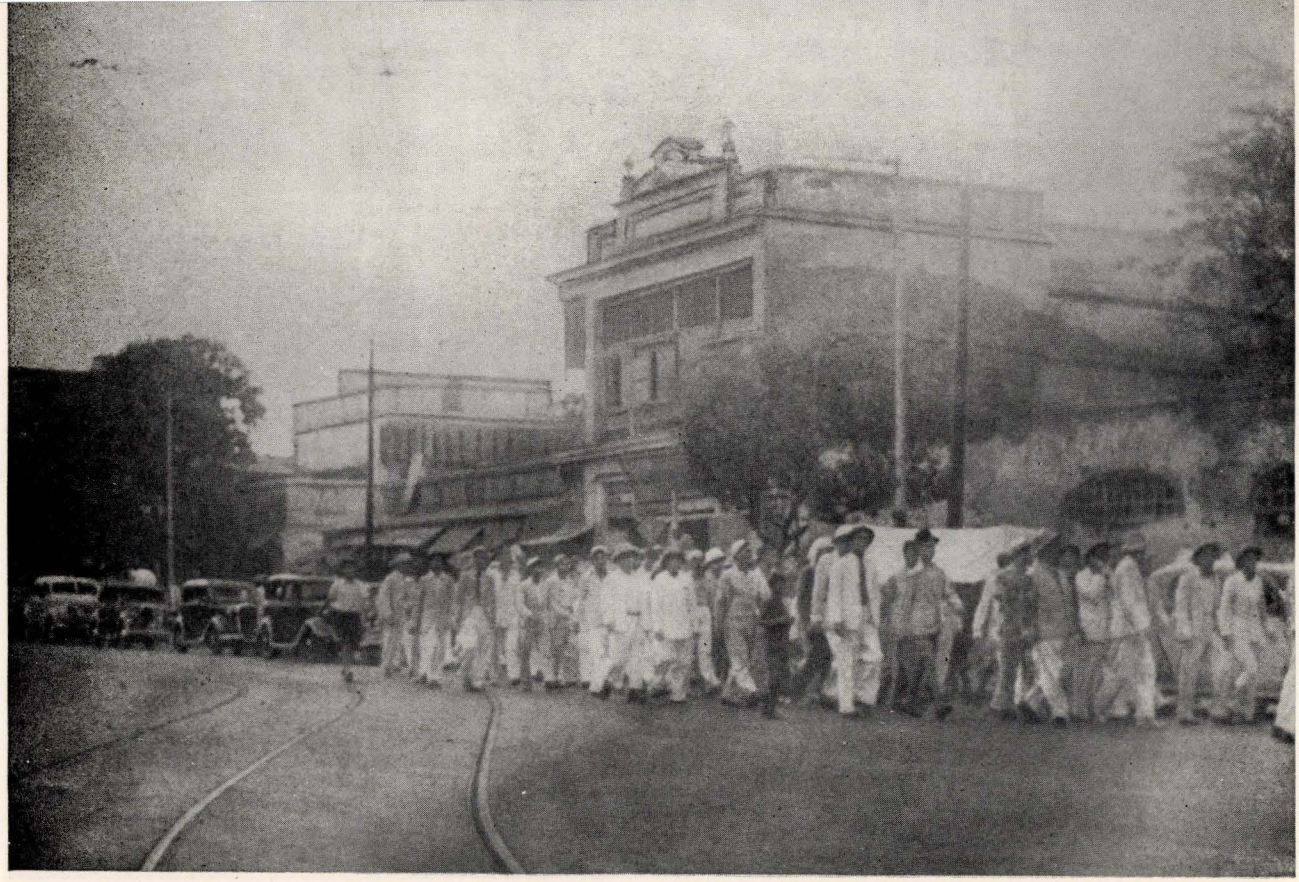
After the bath, the body of a man was dressed in shirt and trousers, with a small *siseeth* (*tallis*) and that of a woman in a nightgown. These were made of white cotton or linen and were roughly sewn. People often sent for the material for their shrouds from Baghdad and kept it in readiness for their deaths. When the body had been washed and clothed, relatives sprinkled a whole

bottle of rose water over it. The body was then placed in an *aron,* or lidless cane-sided box covered over with a cloth and put into the hearse. The Calcutta Jews believed in simplicity in death—an unadorned coffin and a simple shroud. Before the advent of a motor hearse, bodies were carried in the *aron* to the cemetery. An old man recalled:—

"As a youngster (early 1900s) I used to attend all the funerals I could. We carried the body in a litter, with men bearing the poles at each side. Men took it in turn to carry the bier; the cemetery was six or seven miles from the centre of town. When people tired, they would get into *tikka gharries* (horses drawn carriages) which accompanied the procession. Men would read the prayers and psalms all the time; if the corpse was a woman, they would sing *ashethai.* (Proverbs Ch. 31. vs. 10-31). They would throw money across the litter—the Indians would pick it up. This was because Abraham gave the Philistines presents to separate them from his son, Isaac."

"Originally (up to the 1940s), women did not go to the cemetery but, nowadays, they do go, here and in Calcutta. In India, the women used to go as far as the grave, but here, in the Sephardi community, women don't go as far as the grave, but I know in the Ashkenazi community they do, because I have been present there," said an older woman.

The question of whether women should or should not be permitted to accompany their loved one to the grave is a very emotive one, subject to much argument. Those against it maintain that a woman who has her period is 'unclean', therefore all women should be barred; those in favour retort that the corpse itself is 'unclean' since Cohens are not allowed to defile themselves by going to the grave. Generally, the women conform to whatever



A funeral procession, in Lower Circular Road, Calcutta, on its way to the cemetery. The corpse in the *aron* is carried by men in turn and mourners walk or go in the line of cars behind, in which there are some women.



The Jewish cemetery in Calcutta at Narkuldanga. The land was a gift from the first settler.

custom is prevalent when their relative is buried.

In Calcutta when the funeral cortege reached the cemetery (the same one given by Shalom Cohen to the community and in which he was buried), the bier was carried to the grave and the shrouded body lowered into the grave. There was no coffin (in London, the civil law requires it). The eldest son, or nearest male mourner, had to descend into the grave to open the eyes of the corpse and put dust into them. The dust was brought by visiting rabbis from Jerusalem. The direct contact of the body with the earth and the dust in the eyes, followed the Biblical injunction, "Dust thou art, to dust returneth." Bricks were then erected in a triangular form over the body, instead of earth being shovelled over it, to prevent jackals digging up the grave, and for this same reason, tombstones were laid within a month.

Before leaving the cemetery, those attending the funeral (but not the mourners) washed their hands and did not dry them. Before returning home from a funeral, people used to step over another threshold or into a public garden first, so as not to bring the unhappiness back with them. After the burial, the male mourners would have the shirt they were wearing, torn (Bible:— 'rend your garments'); for a father's or mother's death, one side was torn, for brothers, sisters, wife, husband, children, the other side. Male mourners also wore a handkershief tied round their necks for the mourning period, as a sign of mourning.

On returning from the funeral, mourners would all collect in one house, generally that of the dead person. They would be given hard boiled eggs to eat, with no salt, but sprinkled with ash. The egg symbolised that there was life and hope even in the midst of death.

"Mattresses were spread on the floor of the largest room and those who were mourning for a father, mother, sister, brother, wife, husband or children would all sleep there and live there together, men and women, for the whole *shiva* or seven days. Their food would be brought to them there and served to them, for mourners had to be fended for—they were not allowed to do anything. They were not allowed to open letters, answer the telephone, offer hospitality, or wish visitors. They were not allowed to take baths or shave and the clothes they wore during *shiva* had to the burnt."

"When visiting a house of mourning during the seven days, you do not speak a word to the mourners as you go in and sit down beside them. If *they* start talking, you know they want to talk and you respond. If they remain silent, so do you. They do not feel like talking. After a while, you get up and leave, similarly without wishing goodbye."

"A light had to be lit for the soul of the dead person, with a second one ready to replace it before it went out. It had to be watched carefully, as the light was very important. My father said all he wanted was a light for a full year. People also put a glass of water for the one week of *shiva*, as they say the soul is thirsty and might want a drink. The water evaporates and they think this proves it."

"Male mourners went to the cemetery to read *kaddish* on the third and seventh day after the burial. This is why Jesus's friends visited his grave on the third day, when they found it empty."

"During the seven days, men were engaged to say prayers round the clock in the house of mourning. Morning and evening services were held, at which rela-

tives and friends would attend—there were always enough for a *minyan*. At the end of the seven days, when the mourners rose from their mourning, a 'table' ceremony took place. On the table were spread all the things (sweetmeats and fruit) the dead person had enjoyed eating during his lifetime—the best available—and his relatives and friends would attend and say the evening prayers and *kaddish* and make all the *berakoth* (blessings) on the titbits and say a special prayer (the Ishcabar) for the repose of his soul. Some people also made a 'table' for the Jewish schoolchildren, or the Jewish poor. It was customary to have such 'tables' and prayers, not only on the seventh day, but also on the 21st and 30th days, and on the 11th and 12th month. The mourning period was considered to be at an end after the year's 'table'. At a 'table', all the goodies placed on plates had to be uneven in number for funerals (as opposed to even for happy occasions)."

"During the year's mourning, women wore no jewellery, nor had any new clothes made, but they did not wear black. No flowers were taken to the cemetery, but some people left a stone on the grave when they visited it, to show they were coming back. There was no ceremony for the tombstone erection—it was put up as soon as possible, within one month, but prayers were held at the cemetery on the third day after burial and also on all the 'table' occasions—apart from the general days for visiting all the dead (such as before *Yom Kippur*, etc.). Also, for a close relative, some people light a light on the Hebrew anniversary of their death and male relatives go to the cemetery to read *Kaddish* for them on on that date."

"Other mourning customs are that, during the *shiva*, mirrors had to be covered up. Thirty days after the funeral, the shoes of the dead person had to be cut in

strips and thrown into the river (running water). This follows the *Shulchan Aruch*. In the olden days, rabbis did not even want graves marked, to prevent them becoming a shrine. Some graves in Tiberias are looked after (Maimonides, etc.), others are in ruins. This is wrong. Death is a leveller."

"When an old person dies (a good one), they take a piece of a shroud that is left over and use it to make garments for a new born child so it should live a good, long life."

"Men long for sons to read *kaddish* for them when they die. In London, when one of our community was being buried, relatives asked the Rabbi who was officiating at the cemetery service; 'Can his son read the *kaddish* in English?' The Rabbi said, 'No... If a man does not teach his son Hebrew, he does not expect him to read *kaddish* for him'."

The universal Jewish custom of sitting *shiva,* when practised as wholly and without reservation as by the Jews in Calcutta, cut the close mourners off from their daily life and forced them into a proximity with others who could share their grief. In the case of children mourning a parent, it was often a reminder of their long-ago youth when they last lived under the same roof; it brought forth shared memories and tears that helped to ease the parting. It gave the mourners a special status, recognising their right and duty to mourn; not only were there always people to give help and support, but the formalised ritual meant that there was no need for any decisions during this grief-wracked period. The constant surge of visitors forced life on them. If to some it was an intrusion on their privacy, these had a lifetime of private mourning ahead; to the majority it was of real help. This is part of a letter (from a Gentile friend)

received by one respondent while she was sitting *shiva* in London recently:—

"I can feel that you are embraced by family and tradition and that is as it should be. Maybe the Jewish religion in its wisdom knows how to mourn so that the wound can heal cleanly and naturally."

Although orthodox practice varied among the Calcutta Jewish community, the overwhelming majority believed in God. Even the few waverers were agnostic, never atheist. There were many individual interpretations of what the 'Jewish religion' taught.

"From childhood I always thought there must be a Power or Creator because of the precision in Nature. I can't give Him any name. As a child, He was a personal God, but certainly not now. I have said general prayers daily for the past twenty-three years. I feel absolutly Jewish according to the *Kabbala* and *Advaita* (a Hindu philosophy; the word means 'not dual'). This teaches that God exists in the whole world and everything else is a dream; the body is nothing, consciousness pervades everything. This life is a lie which is a school for the real knowledge to begin—preparation for the soul. To a great extent Jewish mysticism (the *Kabbala*) agrees with this."

"I believe in reincarnation because there are deformed people in the world. Must be from their other life, otherwise God wouldn't allow it."

"I believe in God and the Jewish faith and Jewish burial. The soul comes back. Our religion is reincarnation. We call it *gulgul,* I was told, which means 'trouble' ".

"I believe in strict orthodoxy. Some years ago, I

started wearing my black skull cap all the time (having come to England and being taught the reason—in Calcutta it was not our custom to do this). I wore it when I went back to India, even for business. Some people used to laugh, but I found it brought in more business, as the *marwaries* felt 'This man is not going to cheat us'."

"When I was young, I wore my *tephellin* every morning and I said prayers three times a day. But this is not very religious. I never studied the *Talmud, Gemarrah, Mishna, Zohar,* etcetera. Generally, none of us did."

"I have become more religious since I have come to England. I understand and take more interest in religion here. I am aware of observance and have accepted more laws which we did not know in India—e.g. not carrying books on the Sabbath. I am tolerant of others. I don't hold it against those who are less orthodox or more so. I see their point of view. If you are happy in your religion, that is the main thing. I do not like religious hypocrisy."

"I think orthodoxy needs a lot of updating. It is important to keep lots of things, but Rabbis should meet as they used to do and consider why they are putting so many fences round the law. Compromises should be made, yet they are becoming more and more dogmatic. In making so many fences, they have lost the whole essence of Judaism."

This respondent is referring to conditions in England. In Calcutta, the general climate of toleration extended to religious observances. No one allowed that a Rabbi was a better qualified guide than his own conscience. This may possibly have been because, from the time of Shalom Cohen, there was no formal Rabbi, but many respected

men, all learned in the *Torah,* each of whom expressed his views with as much force as the community's appointed ministers and each of whose adherents equally laid down the law with conviction and authority. It was only after World War II that one of the boys from the Calcutta community went to America to be ordained and returned in about 1952 to lead, for a few years, his rapidly dwindling flock.

"Many Jewish customs are well thought out," remarked another woman, "—the seven days' mourning and the seven days' feasting after weddings—it helps acclimatisation. I feel more Jewish by tradition now. Religion is very important and supportive when one is in trouble, if one can believe it. I believe in an after life and that one can contact spirits, but I'm suspicious of many mediums who are fooling themselves and probably contacting their unconscious. I would say I am not really religious, although I now see more value in religion than I did—it doesn't matter what religion."

The youngest generation varies just as much as its elders in its religious beliefs.

"I don't really have any religious beliefs," said a young girl. "I do whatever I do out of parental respect. I believe something, but I'm not quite sure what. One doesn't have to demonstrate it. I'm proud to be Jewish and I'd tell my children about it. What I observed would depend on my husband."

"I have no traditions," said another, "but I very sincerely believe in something we call God because I think it's a beautiful idea. I don't believe in a personal God. The only thing preordained is birth and death—the rest is up to one."

"I feel Jewish because the Jews were persecuted."

"I do believe what the Jews believe in, but I don't practise it."

Opinions on converting people to Judaism covered a wide range, from the orthodox views:—

"In theory there is nothing against it, if the person wants to do it because he wants to embrace Judaism, not just to get married", to the opposite:—

"I don't believe in converting. All religions are good and have the basic truths, but for marriage convenience it is good."

"I don't like it. What for? It's too much to expect to make a man leave his own faith and come to ours. It's all right if he wants to get married, because it can help a marriage."

"I'm not in favour. However, it is better to convert people to Judaism than have people of the faith converting out. On marriage, it is better for the outsider to convert, it is the lesser of two evils; yet, it is better for an older girl (over 30) to marry a non-Jew than not at all, because in any case the woman is Jewish and her children will be Jewish."

"If they are sincere, I do not mind it. I would not seek converts. My father used to tell them, "You have just as much share of heaven as I have. Be good in your own religion!"

"I'm not against it, but I don't think it should be made a farce. If marriage is a spur to learning about the religion, then it is O·K., not otherwise."

"I am all for it if there is a religious conviction, but not for form's sake. Even if the person converts in order

to marry a Jew or Jewess, it is O.K., provided they do a thorough job."

"I don't care what others do. I personally would never ask it of anyone else and I would never convert outside of what I am." (A young girl).

"I'd convert my wife if she wanted to be converted because of my parents and children." (A young man).

And a young man sums up:— "I respect those who are converted, because often they turn out to be better Jews."

When the community first started and for many decades after, it was both deeply religious and observant. The faith of its members who believed "faith can move mountains" is illustrated by a story a woman tells about her mother (born in 1875).

"My mother was living with her in-laws at that time and suffered from a rash which my father's formidable old aunt (who disliked her) declared to be leprosy. My mother was terrified and prayed to God to send her a sign that this was not so and that she would never contract this dread disease. This was during the High Holy Days' services and my unhappy mother, like Hannah of old, asked God to let the sign be the birth of a son within the year. Immediately after, my mother had to leave Calcutta to go and look after a sick married sister and was away for three months. She did not refuse to go—her sister needed her and her faith in God was complete. When she returned, she did conceive, but I cannot imagine how she got through the next months, for my brother was born on the *very last day*! Suppose it was a day or two later! Or suppose it was a girl! I should have been a jibbering bag of nerves..."

The majority of that generation had a deep faith in a personal God, but there are fewer today who have the courage to commit themselves so wholeheartedly to an outside force. It may be that the Calcutta Jewish community was following the lead of the rest of the world, where man-made machines seemed to be more powerful than God's creation, man; and this new faith swept away all the old faiths, destroying the strength and comfort provided by true belief and putting nothing else in its place. Today many are looking to their culture and their traditions to provide this lost support.

CHAPTER VI

Habits and Customs

> The 'right' way is the way which the ancestors used and which has been handed down.
>
> William Graham Sumner
> Folkways.

It is difficult to say what makes one people differ from another and retain its own peculiar personality, but if habits and customs are partially responsible for this distinction, it might be said that the Calcutta Jewish community accumulated a wealth of these, which each generation handed down to the next.

Chief among these was food. 'Jewish' cooks were much in demand. These men were not Jews, but Muslims, who had worked in Jewish households for many years and been taught to cook the traditional dishes. Usually, they stayed in the same family but, if for any reason they left, they always went to another Jewish household who needed a cook, where they knew they would be employed sooner than a cook who had had no experience of Jewish cooking. In the previous century, some families might have had a Cochini cook—that is, a 'black' Jew from Cochin; they were much prized because of their culinary skill in producing these same dishes. So great was the community's attachment to these foods that, when they left Calcutta and were without their Indian cooks, almost all of them, including many women who had never before in their lives even boiled a kettle of water to make a pot

of tea, learnt painstakingly to produce the dishes themselves. So, for that generation at least, its food habits were retained, but possibly not for the next, brought up in the West. Some of the younger generation, who enjoy the ancestral dishes, cook them for the week-ends, while doing English cooking during the week, because it is easier. In the meantime, community members visiting friends not only in London but in America, Australia or Israel, are soon made to feel at home with a familiar meal.

What are these foods? It is possible to name some of them and to try to explain what they are. Like their ancestors in Aleppo and Baghdad, the Calcutta Jews lived mainly on chicken. This might occasionally be supplemented by fish. They had four meals a day—breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner. For both lunch and dinner there was chicken generally in a wet dish with rice at lunch and dry, with vegetables, at dinner.

Because of this basic sameness of ingredients, much ingenuity was used to vary the taste of the dishes and a wide selection was built up. Most of the recipes were of Arabian origin, but the menus of the community also included Indian dishes, such as curries, *bhajis* (mixed vegetables fried in oil), lentils and so on. One dish in particular, namely *aloo makala,* was to be eaten only at the tables of Calcutta Jews, not being known even to other 'Arabian' Jews of a similar background in Bombay, Rangoon, Singapore or other Far Eastern cities. It was therefore assumed that this was invented by some culinary genius at some time in the community's history. *Aloo* is the Hindustani word for 'potato' and *makala* means 'fried' in Arabic. In English, the dish was known as 'Jumping potatoes', because the whole potato, after being peeled, would be fried slowly until golden brown outside and soft, white and fluffy inside and when served,

the crust would be so crisp that it tended to jump off the plate if not carefully pierced. These potatoes were invariably on the menu for special occasions and were served with chicken (or duck) cut into portions and lightly fried before cooking.

Another very popular dish among the community was *murug* (a chicken soup—from the Hebrew word meaning 'soup'). One of the older generation comments:—

"Our food is mostly Baghdadi in origin. The best food is *murug* of course, because you can eat it when you are well or not well."

Another Hebrew word given to a dish was *hameen* (meaning 'hot'). Hameen was chicken, cooked with either barley or rice, carrots or other alternatives, on a slow fire all night, to be eaten for lunch on the Sabbath.

Other dishes much favoured by the community were *khutta* with *koobas* (sweet-sour chicken in tomato, beet-root or other vegetables and the koobas, rice-flour balls stuffed with meat); *mahashas* (common in the Middle East —stuffed onions, tomatoes, cabbage leaves, etc.); *meeta* Hindustani word for 'sweet'—chicken generally cooked with carrots or green peas); *chutunny* (chicken with vinegar and sugar); *anjuli* (shredded chicken or fried fish, floating in coconut milk and lemon); *pilay matabak* (pilaw—common to Arabs and Indians—cooked with fish and *lembo basra*— lemons dried and ground with special spices); *hulba* (fenugreek); the list could go on indefinitely.

Because of the orthodox custom of not eating milk foods after meat, milk puddings were almost unknown among the Calcutta Jews, who had fruit after both lunch and dinner, and sometimes fruit for breakfast as well. Thus for a big household, a large quantity of fruit was

needed. It was customary for the men to go to the New Market to shop for fruit. An old man said:—

"I did the fruit shopping; it's like this in Baghdad—the men go out to shop because the women are in purdah and the Arabs are rude."

Incidentally, this was not the only custom that the Jews of Calcutta inherited from their Middle Eastern ancestors. Like those in Aleppo described by Russell, they too chose to live in areas near each other, they ate mainly poultry, they built tabernacles in similar style in the appropriate parts of their houses, they rarely practised polygamy and their knowledge of spoken Hebrew was also limited to general salutations. Thus, not only in their major life-style but in these and similar minor ways were they easily comparable with the society from which they originated.

The men went shopping about once or twice a week and, during the week, fruit vendors called at the house.

"I remember the altercations that used to take place between my father and the fruitmen," said an older woman. "The men traded regularly with our house and occasionally came with a basket of 100 or more oranges, for instance. My father would say they were too small, or that the last lot was too sour, or whatever, but the man merely handed the entire contents of his basket over to the servants and took whatever my father gave him, after much haggling, of course. When he wanted a better quality, my father would go and choose them himself from the New Market."

The rest of the food shopping was done by the Indian cook, who went to the New Market every morning, to buy the chickens and get the *shohet* to slaughter them and also bought anything else that was needed for the

meals for that day. The women never shopped for food, although some of them kept an eye on the quality of the merchandise by examining the cook's basket of purchases when he brought them home. Some of the older women who cared to indulge in a little domesticity used to peel vegetables of a morning or pick the impurities from a mound of uncooked rice, while sitting and chatting with each other.

For teas there were a variety of delicacies such as *sumboosaks* (pastry, filled with either cheese or almonds); *babas* (pastry filled with mashed dates); *cacas* (pastry roll rolled into rings); *nankatais* (semolina cakes); *koleechas* (cocoanut cakes); *lozenas* (diamond shapes of either pistachio nuts, cocoanuts, guavas, pumpkins etc.); *doledole* (molasses and cocoanut milk); *agar-agar* (seaweed cooked in water or in milk); and so on, as well as many Indian sweets of which the Calcutta Jews were very fond.

Some rather interesting additions to their food were those that were imported from Baghdad or made by one or two members of the community and sold to all the others. In this category was *baba khadrasee*, a sweet containing pistachio nuts, which came from Baghdad and was of two types—very hard, or soft and tacky. The Calcutta Jews maintained that *baba khadrasee* was the manna mentioned by the Bible as having fed the Children of Israel in the wilderness. No sooner did a consignment of this arrive to an enterprising Jewish vendor in Calcutta, than it was sold out. There were two kinds of cheeses made by these vendors, a plain cheese (like white stilton) and a plaited cheese (tasting something like *mozzarella*, both extremely popular and in every Jewish larder; and there was also another item called *tikya* (the juice of sour plums mixed with salt, sugar, etc. and dried in the sun) which few community members took the trouble to make and which was never enough to supply the demand from

one plum season to the next. One of the older women said:—

"Whenever I was sent any *tikya* from Calcutta, my husband (an Ashkenazi) and children used to eat it all up. I told them it was most unfair—nobody who was not born in India should be allowed to eat *tikya*! But they did not listen..."

While the community in Calcutta had a connoisseur's delight in food, alcohol was almost totally absent from their tables. Apart from the wine for *kiddush* and spirits kept for the odd occasion, most of them drank water with their main meals; tea with breakfast and at tea time, and coffee (Turkish), possibly after lunch daily or when formally entertaining. Thus, many might have echoed the words of this old lady:—

"I never drank in my life; a sip of *kuddoos* only. If I drank a glass, I'd go to sleep."

★ ★ ★ ★

As with the Indians, so with the Jews in Calcutta, when it came to baths. An older woman says:—

"The daily bath was very much a part of one's life there—the weather was such that one needed it—sometimes more than one bath, certainly more than one change of clothes; also one changed one's linen far oftener than one does in this country."

In London, the community has adjusted to the climate and not all maintain the habit of a daily bath.

One habit it has not been so easy to shed—at least

for the older generation—is the widely prevalent one, described by this woman:—

"We differ in many ways from the people here. Take, for example, the lavatory habits. Our people wash on the W.C. after a bowel evacuation and some after emptying the bladder too. This does not pertain here and what is interesting is the West looks down on the East for this, whereas the East feels the West is not clean enough. It's an attitude of mind."

There is also the feeling of importance attached to bowel evacuations. An older woman describes what was the standard practice in many homes when she was young (1910s):—

"My father believed in the beneficial results of regular doses of castor oil and every alternate Sunday we'd be lined up for our fortnightly dose. Great, big doses they were too, made all the more unpalatable by a mixture of hot water, but we did not dare make a fuss, for the cane was near at hand! One of my mother's friends was complaining about the difficulty she had in dosing her children with castor oil. To my parents, this seemed incomprehensible after their own fortnightly ritual, so the good lady was invited to bring her offspring along for the necessary dose. The unfortunate children believed, or were deluded into believing, that they were being taken to a party and have not yet forgiven us for the outrage perpetrated on them, although, if I remember rightly, we were made to take it too, to set a good example!"

A daily bowel evacuation was considered essential to preserve a state of health and if one day was missed, it brought about a feeling of discomfort and unease. An old woman said:—

"I must have a daily bowel motion. I am constipated,

so I use laxatives and suppositories. If I don't go, I have a headache and feel terribly upset." And a man:—

"It worries me if I don't evacuate my bowels daily. I take castor oil immediately."

"I read in the lavatory. Others I know wrote letters there. My mother smoked only four cigarettes a day and these were lit before four ritual visits to the lavatory. She felt they aided evacuation."

"I used to read on the toilet because I had no other time to read."

It is possible, also, that people read in the lavatory because this relaxed them. In general, older members of the community spent an inordinately long time in the lavatory, reading. This may have been because this was the only place they could be alone; however, this could not always be guaranteed, as this respondent shows:—

"It was the only place where one had privacy, although this was invaded as a matter of course when a conversation would be continued by one person following another (of the same sex) into the lavatory."

It may be said that none of these lavatory habits is prevalent among the younger generation as a whole.

A habit that is practised by the majority of the community, including the younger generation, is that labelled *jhuta*. It is not certain where this word originates, although there is a similar–sounding word in Hindustani, meaning 'liar'. However, in this connection, the word signifies 'contamination'. *Jhuta* means food that has been rendered unfit because someone else has either put it into his mouth, bitten it, or placed the spoon or fork from his mouth into the utensil in which the food is being

served. Cooks cannot taste a broth and put the same spoon back into it to stir it; they would make the whole dish *jhuta.* In the Indian caste system, if the shadow of a lower caste person falls on the food of a high caste man, it becomes impure and the latter cannot eat it. This habit among the Calcutta Jews may have had its origin in the custom of their neighbours. At any rate, it is interesting to note the emphasis placed by the community on cleanliness at both ends of the alimentary canal. Whatever the origin of *jhuta,* it is widespread, as a few quotations show:—

"We don't eat *jhuta.* I don't even eat from my wife's plate, if I can help it. I don't think this custom is from Baghdad. It's from India; but I don't think Bombay Jews observe it so much."

"I believe in *jhuta.* I'm dead against it. I scold my daughter for giving her baby *jhuta.*"

"I don't eat *jhuta*—not even my husband's or children's. It's a good habit."

"In Calcutta I observed *jhuta,* but here I take my husband's and children's, close family relatives' and others' I know, but not strangers."

While one young girl makes a complete change.

"Of course I've heard of *jhuta*! Spit. Somebody else's germs. I don't care. I even use a friend's toothbrush."

When the Jews from Aleppo, Baghdad and Basra first came to Calcutta, their mother tongue was, naturally, Arabic. This continued to be the case for many generations after, although the local languages (Hindustani and English) also came to be employed. One of the older generation said:—

"My grandmother would read and write Arabic (the older people all spoke Arabic) and she could speak a little English and a lot of Hindustani. I would say she was literate in Arabic. My generation (born early 1900s) were literate in English and could speak Hindustani, which was the language we spoke to our servants." And another woman said:—

"My parents' main tongue was Arabic and we children understood it. We spoke mainly Hindustani at home. In Singapore, we spoke Malay at home. In school, we spoke English. I can read Hebrew."

For more than a hundred years in their new country, the Calcutta Jews held tenaciously to the Arabic language as their means of communication; it was only at the turn of the century that English began gradually to take its place, although there are even some members of the younger generation who are familiar with it through being spoken to by their grandparents in that tongue. Among the whole community, there still exist many words and phrases which have been handed down through the generations and which are in continual usage without a thought being given to their Arabian origin. It is impossible to list them all, but a few that come to mind are:—

Ah-wah-fee (May you digest the food you have eaten.) The whole phrase is not known to the majority of the community who use the word continually; an old respondent explained it came from *Awafi haleeb imuk* which means "May you digest it like your mother's milk." Similarly, *Bileefee* (may you wear it in health—for a new piece of clothing); she explained the origin of this was the phrase *Ith kutheeya bil eefi* that is, "May it tear to shreds in health." Other expressions are:—

Showf il ama (riff raff—rubbish) means literally "See blind" or "I am blinded by what I see."

Keenoth (constantly complaining).

Humdallah (God be praised.) This was a response given to the question "How are you?" It covered both good and bad health.

Ubu coolu (an interfering person—literally, "A spoon in every dish".

Way soodah! (Oh dear!)—literally, "Oh, black!"

One woman said: "Whenever I said *Way soodah*! my mother would say, not *soodah, beedah* (white). She was very superstitious."

Superstition was prevalent among the whole community. There were so many superstitious beliefs, that it would be tedious to review them all. The main preoccupation was with 'evil eye'. An older woman said:—

"In *Elohai neshama* we pray to be saved from it."

There were numerous devices to ward off the evil eye. One, called a *tabeez,* was a collection of articles in a bunch, such as an *afza* (a nut from Baghdad), a blue bead (turquoise), a piece of alum, garlic, a *shadai* (generally in the shape of a hand, with the five fingers outstretched, with the Holy Name on it); this talisman was pinned on to the bed or dress of new-born babies, placed under the pillow of sick people or worn by the hale and hearty who felt in need of it. A younger woman said:—

"When I went back on a visit to India a few years ago, many people in London asked me to bring back some blue stones for them for use against evil eye. Some people put it on their cars. Or they put black bangles

on their children. I am not supertitious. When my daughter was two and a half, she always woke at night and cried. My mother-in-law sent to my mother in India for a five-finger *shadai*. When it came, she explained to my daughter that now she would be protected, wearing God's name, and my daughter believed this. She settled down after this and still (six years later) sleeps with the *shadai*."

A man said:— "I used to wear things against the evil eye, but I stopped it, as I felt it was against God—putting my trust in something other than Him."

An older woman said:— "When I was in India, I went to the *barmitzva* party held by some friends for their son. As we entered their drawing room, I saw a huge piece of alum suspended from the ceiling near the doorway. I remonstrated with my hostess and said to her:— 'What do you think you are doing? That might easily fall on someone's head!' To which she replied, no whit abashed, 'Good! It will mean they deserved it for giving us the evil eye!' I know the case of another couple who placed a piece of alum as a decoration on a lace mat on their piano. I don't know how effective it was against the evil eye—it certainly ate a hole in the lace and scarred the wood of the piano!"

It was felt that even parents could give their children the evil eye through loving them too much. Therefore, it was customary to say *thoo, thoo, thoo* (as if spitting) and shake one's clothes, or even to apply a token amount of saliva or dust from one's shoes on a dear one who had been paid a compliment, meaning that he was now marred and so not worthy of the evil eye.

"People tend to play down their advantages for fear of the evil eye," said a young woman and an old woman recalled:—

"On the *sithee* (sixth) night after the birth of a child, a *panja* mark was placed on the wall of the room—it is made by a hand, dipped in saffron water and placed on the wall. This is to ward off the evil eye. *Panja* is called 'The hand of Fatima'—this is probably an Arabic custom. When one wishes to curse another, one opens the hand wide and pushes it, palm side towards the cursed person, saying '*Tuffi* on you'. In this way, the *panja* does *tuffi* on the evil spirits, I suppose."

Some more exotic methods of dealing with the evil eye were described by two women:—

"You get a lump of lead and melt it down in an iron spoon over a flame. You put the lead and spoon into a mug of cold water. It sizzles and steam comes up. The lead sets and you take it out; then you have to know how to interpret it. The person doing it does it three times with the same lead and water, and says prayers and it breaks the spell. The lead is wrapped up in paper and the person for whom it is being done places this underfoot and stamps on it and says '*Aachsitain ra-a*' (which is Arabic for 'May the wicked eye be poked'). Then the packet is thrown out on the crossroads."

"My mother used to get the eye of a fish and stamp on it and say '*Fachsiltayna ra-a*' which means 'Squeeze the evil eye'.

Other superstitions, apart from evil eye, mentioned by respondents were:—

"When people were going on a journey, a mug of water was thrown on the ground after the car set off, so that they would return safely. The object was to prevent any evil spirits attendant on them at the time from going with them."

"I remember, each time we went for a holiday or moved to a new home, the first thing my mother used to give us was onion, bread and salt, in order that we might keep well in that place."

"We never cut our nails at night, or on Mondays and Thursdays, when the *Sepher Torah* came out in synagogue. (Of couse not on the Sabbath!) Nails and pieces of hair were never left around, but were carefully disposed of (in later years, flushed down the W.C.). They were part of one's body, so if they fell into an enemy's hands, they could be used to have magic done against one."

"If someone is going out, don't call him back. If you do call him back, let him sit for a minute, then kiss the *mezuza* and go out again."

"During circumcisions in India, you had to watch the piece that was cut off, because women grabbed it and swallowed it to get a child. This was considered bad luck for the child it was taken from."

"After a fright, you were given a pinch of salt with water."

"My father's family objected to his marrying my mother, because she was a Cohen. They felt that if the Cohen wife has a heavy heart against her husband, he will not prosper in life. Another superstition is that the children come from the luck of the husband and prosperity comes from the luck of the wife."

"If my father saw us walking barefooted, he would be very angry and would apply the cane to our legs; he thought this—as well as a constantly crying child—unlucky."

"My parents wanted children. They did not have

any—there were miscarriages. My elder brother was born fifteen years after their marriage. Legend has it my mother sent for oil from Cochin, massaged herself with it, drank it—then my brother was born. My cousin also had this treatment—successfully."

"My mother always told me never to go round an object. She did not explain the connection with *Kappara* or that I would become the sacrifical object—I only learnt this later. To undo the spell, I would be made to go round in the opposite direction. Once, when I was very young and my mother wasn't there, I went round a chair ten times and waited for something to happen, but nothing did! I am not superstitious."

Kappara was meant to be an atonement—a life for a life—when a fowl was sacrificed for a person.

"Everyone does *Kappara* for *Yom Kippur*. It is the law. Now, we use money, not a chicken."

"Just before the eve of *Yom Kippur*, the *shohet* used to go round to each house and turn the fowls—they must all be white—round the head of each person; a cock for a male and a hen for a female. A pregnant woman had three, two hens and one cock. The *shohet* was given a little gift, at each house. These fowls were kept and the following morning the Jewish poor used to go from house to house to collect some charity and some of them were given these fowls to be used for *Yom Kippur*. If a person was ill, also, they used to do the same thing and sometimes they used to change the name of the person, to confuse the Angel of Death who was told to collect somebody by his name and would find no one of that name there."

An older woman relates her own story of this custom in a vivid and humorous way:—

"Death suddenly discovered my name on his list when I was five years old (1906) and sought to claim me through the medium of double pneumonia. My mother fought him tooth and nail and tried to outwit him by every means at her disposal, both fair and foul. The most obvious and, to her, effective, fair means was by prayer but, in order to leave no stone unturned, she resorted also to guile and subterfuge. Death was obviously stalking me by name, the daughter of my mother—in that case I should no longer bear my name, nor be owned by my mother. Consequently, with due ceremonial (*Kappara*), I was renamed 'Rahma Mathana' (Merciful Gift of God) and sold to my uncle for the nominal sum of five pice (five being considered an auspicious number). The next time Death called round for me, he scratched his head, frowned, looked at his list again, then retired, confused and discomfited, persuaded in spite of himself that he had made a mistake."

"I changed the name of a building I owned because my business suddenly began to do badly," said an older man.

People also did *Kappara* after a bad dream.

One of the customs that was very popular among the older generation in the community was the holding of seances and a belief and practice in spiritualism. An older woman gave a detailed description of the cult.

"The rambling old house we lived in at that time (early 1900s) was said to be haunted. Whether it was or not, it seemed to lend itself singularly well to the spiritualistic experiments attempted by my mother and paternal aunts. Starting out with the usual 'table rapping', it was not long before my mother discovered that she was a medium of no mean calibre and could write

what the 'spirit' wished to say. These experiments became a daily occurence and many true things were revealed by the 'spirits'—for instance, whom a cousin of my mother's was going to marry, or the name of a winning horse in a race. The name of my cousin's future husband was entirely unknown to any of the company present, so it couldn't have been thought transference, while the names of racehorses may have been familiar to the male members of the household but certainly meant nothing to the female element. On this occasion, the 'spirit' very reluctantly gave the name, after making the women promise that they would not bet more than Rs. 10 on the race, or reveal the reason for their choice to anyone else. They faithfully adhered to their part of the bargain and the men were furious afterwards that they had not been given the opportunity to bet heavily on the race!

"This daily indulgence in spiritualistic seances, however, eventually affected my mother's health, making her nervous and hysterical and it was the 'spirits' themselves who advised her to abandon the practice."

This interest in the occult was a trait shared by the Indians and can also be traced to the Aleppo Jews, whom Russell described as "calling in the Mohammendan Sheihs...to exercise various means of exorcism."

Clothes have involved considerable changes since the Jews first came to Calcutta. Originally, they wore Arabian garments and this lasted for decades in their new country; then, they seem to have taken to loose clothing, a propos a hot climate, such as *kurthi pyjama* for the men (white cotton pyjamas with a loose white cotton overshirt) and wrappers for the women (a loose ankle-length dress with loose sleeves); and finally, they adopted European clothing. It is only the older generation who were able to recall the changes and some of them described them:—

"When I first married (1913), my mother gave me long, nightgown-like things called wrappers, but apart from wrappers, I also had big pyjamas called Arabic pyjamas and long *kurthas*—that I used to wear at home. When I went out, I used to put on a dress. Previously we used to go to parties in good wrappers, but this stopped when Lady Ezra came to Calcutta in 1912. Over the wrapper, when we were out in the street, we used to put on a cape. But the old people, if they went to synagogue, wore Arabic gowns and they had a white sheet over it, but we never went to synagogue in a wrapper, we always dressed up (in European clothes) and went to synagogue. Wrappers were trimmed with lace, ribbons, beads—they were made quite attractive. It was not like a Victorian dress, but loose, like a nightgown, usually with frills, edged with lace—yes, perhaps like a tea gown. I would say that our national dress is not really English clothes—they are the Arabic gowns that our ancestors used to wear—and the men used to wear *dugla, djubbah* and such things."

"We wore English clothes, but my grandmother still had Arabic clothes which she didn't wear—I don't know if she had it handed to her from some ancestor—it was very beautiful and we used to wear it as fancy dress. She herself did not wear English clothes, but wore a wrapper, with a cloak over it when she went out, but our generation wore English clothes and knew no other (born 1910). We did not wear sari; this, I think, was because India was a conquered country and the conquered people were not those to emulate."

"My sisters wished to wear saris for a photograph. My father was very annoyed and would not allow it. 'You are a separate nation; *ain kadosh*'. No assimilation".

"We wore Western dress when we went out, but *kurthi pyjama* as a child at home." (Born 1885).



A woman wearing an "Arabic" gown (for a fancy dress party) in 1897. The previous generation wore them daily.



A woman in a wrapper (1912).

The question of fashion was important among Calcutta Jews though a few of the respondents pointed out that, while they had felt it was important to dress well in Calcutta, they did not go to the same trouble here.

"In Calcutta I liked to be fashionable. Here, not so much. The situation does not call for it and we don't mix in those circles."

The methods of transport employed by the community also varied over the years and some indication of what was usual at the time was given by one woman:—

"Sometimes, in my childhood, (early 1900s), we rode in a *palky*. This was virtually a box with sliding doors and a pole at each end, in which one sat or reclined on cushions—there were no seats—and was conveyed by two or more men to one's destination. It was much the same as a palanquin and I suppose the word *palky* is derived from that. *Palkies* must have gone out of fashion when rickshaws came in. Then there was the carriage that my father and other businessmen used for their work. This was known as an *office john* and was another box-like affair with an opening in the middle on either side and seats facing each other. It was a horse-drawn vehicle as was a dog-cart or *tum-tum* which was also in vogue in those days. When motor cars came into use this form of vehicle died out. But before this, while the *office john* was used by the men, women had phaetons or horse-drawn carriages to convey them and their children from one place to another. Even when cars became fashionable, phaetons never died out, but became *ghora gharris*, a popular form of hired transport which competed with taxis and rickshaws up to modern times."

Another woman, born in 1888, surprisingly said:— "My mother and my elder sister rode bicycles. My

younger sister drove my mother's car after we were both married (1920). I was too nervous to drive." This response was unusual, as most of the women at that time were not able or willing to exercise so much freedom.

When motor cars came in most families had one and these were mainly chauffeur driven. In addition, there were trams and buses but, as these were always very crowded, they were not very popular. In London, those of the community who own cars drive themselves; otherwise, like the rest of the population, their main form of transport is tubes and buses.

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It was customary for babies to be born at home and for as many of the female members of the household who wished to be present, to attend the confinement. The mother-to-be was never left alone once labour had started and was given advice and help by experienced relatives before the doctor arrived and sometimes, even while he was there, for the family doctors were looked upon as part of the family. It was considered a good start for the new baby if the chemise of a long-lived worthy relative could be used to receive it as it was born.

Babies were breast fed as a matter of course and up to as late as twenty months in some cases. Where the mother could not, for some reason, nurse her own baby, Indian wet-nurses were provided. These wet-nurses were brought to Calcutta from Agra; they were examined and tested—there was probably a centre there for supplying Indian mothers as well. Most women enjoyed breast feeding their babies and one older woman remembered her mother telling her:—

"I used to love nursing my babies. Sometimes, as they grew older, they used to bite with their new little teeth quite sharply; then I would make a stern face and admonish them, saying 'Hmmm!' and they would let go the nipple and look up at me so seriously with their big, rouned eyes, I would just have to hug them! Sometimes, in the middle of a feed, they would look at me and smile. They were so sweet!"

However, another member of the older generation said:– "I did breast-feed my children because I felt it was good for them, but I did not enjoy it. Feeding my child was a pleasure, but not from the breast."

Other comments were:–

"Of course I was breast-fed. Unless the parent was ill, all children were breast-fed."

"My mother had many children. I was the eldest and the only one who was breast-fed. She stopped breast-feeding because she felt she was given the evil eye as she had so much nourishment."

"I enjoyed breast-feeding for the first two or three months but, after that, not, because it was confining." (A younger mother who worked).

"I cried when I stopped breast-feeding my baby– I had to go into hospital for some tests." (Another young mother).

"I must have been breast-fed. We were never looked after as babies, we were given to the nannies, but we were always breast-fed. It is proof of love." (A young unmarried girl).

In the majority of cases, the parents enjoyed feeding their babies; including some fathers, with the bottle.

Among the older generation, there was a medieval form of punishment used to keep them in order (as late as the 1920s). This was a form of the stocks, called a *fallach*. An older man described it:—

"The *fallach* was a wooden instrument with four holes in it, a hinge at one end and a lock at the other. My father must have imported it from Baghdad, I suppose. Two of us were put into it at one time—we were made to sit on the floor and the *fallach* was locked around our ankles—we had to face each other, so that neither child could stand up. We were six boys in the family and I remember we used to drive my mother mad, walking on the ledge around the first floor of the house; we could have died if we fell off. I think now, if my children were to do that! We were kept in it for half an hour or an hour at a time."

One woman's memories of the *fallach* that was used on her were not so tolerant; indeed, they were so upsetting, she preferred not to talk about them.

It was not customary among the Jews of Calcutta to allow their children to be independent. They were taught to respect their elders and to rely on them emotionally to a great extent. As they had many servants, they were kept physically dependent for a long time by having their servants fetch and carry for them. An older woman said:—

"Emotionally, we were very dependent on our parents. I remember my father walking up and down our street if my brother (who was a young man) was not home by 10 p.m. Physically, we depended on our servants to do things for us. I think I encouraged my own children to be more independent by sending them to boarding schools in England." And another:—

"I was physically dependent on my *ayahs* and servants and mentally on my parents. I tried to make my children independent—to make their own decisions and be responsible."

Two men of the older generation said:—

"My brother and I had very little to do with my father; he was aloof. My mother did not encourage independence."

"I was encouraged to dress myself after the age of six, I think. I remember being fed by my servants. I think we were mollycoddled to a great extent. At ten or twelve, we were not allowed to go on the roads alone. Girls always had an escort. But our homework we had to do by ourselves."

Among the younger generation, the pattern was the same. Some of them said:—

"I was bathed and dressed by the servants up to seven or eight. I was also chaperoned by my servants. It made me lazy and not practical. I was not encouraged to think independently. Now, I believe two heads are better than one. I try to encourage my children to be independent."

"I was not encouraged to be independent regarding making decisions or going out on my own. My father did not want me to spread my wings; he thought a girl's place was in her parents' home till she married. I was not encouraged to learn to cook, etc. I am trying to teach my son now to dress and feed himself, for my own peace of mind."

"We *were* encouraged to be independent physically, to wash and iron our clothes, fetch our own glasses of

water instead of asking our servants to do so and so on. But our parents never allowed us to be emotionally independent. They would have liked to keep us dependent all our lives. I would like to teach my children to be independent. My young daughter chooses her own clothes—both buying and wearing—and we also allowed her to have her wish to visit relatives in Israel on her own during her holidays, although she was only eight."

"We weren't encouraged to make decisions and things weren't discussed. They just presented us with answers. I only became independent when I came to England at nineteen or possibly a year or two before when I was at university. *We* discusss things in front of our daughter, but one must decide for children to begin with until they are secure and not give them too much freedom when they don't know."

"I was totally interdependent with my parents, until I went to boarding school at seven. My dad took me to work every morning and I played in his office. I remember the closeness and the security. My mother dressed me like herself and at five, on a visit to London, I accompanied her to the Opera and Ballet at nights. I think boarding school taught me that, if I didn't fight for myself and the few principles I had imbibed through my parents, I would be pushed into a corner and remain there."

"I was not encouraged to be independent at all," said a young man. "I had an *ayah* who used to fetch me from school. My friends made fun of me. At eight, I told my parents I had to stay back for football—to send the *ayah* at 5.30. I then took some money from my older brother and went home by myself in the tram. I told my parents, if I could do it once, I could do it always—

so they let me. I had to fight for my independence all the way."

Subsequently, these once-dependent children in their turn became parents on whom their children depended and so, in spite of the universally expressed desire to change the pattern, in the majority of cases, the cycle was continued—at least, among the older generation. As one member of the community remarked of inter-dependence within the family: "The ego strength it generates is terrific" and this was true for the whole; yet, for each individual, the problem of standing alone was all the harder and sometimes, impossible. Perhaps the younger generation will find it easier, in the non-familial atmosphere of London, to give their children the independence they never knew themselves.

CHAPTER VII

Social Life

You are always
Welcome
Whether you—
Come in the evening
Or come in the morning,
Come when you're looked for
Or come without warning.

Robert Louis Stevenson.

Perhaps the greatest change in the lives of the Calcutta Jews who have immigrated to London lies in their social habits. Forced by the reality of the conditions in the Western world, they have gradually and unhappily adapted to a greater formality in their social intercourse. One older woman tried to give the flavour of what life in Calcutta was like and how it differed from life here.

"The break up of family life is something one misses very much in this country; the fact that couples live alone with their children—and the *place,* really, of older people in the family, with the respect and the love due to them—this I miss very much. I am glad I made the decision to come here. One finds this life, in many ways, perhaps, richer and not quite as stagnant, though not quite as lyrical, in a sense, as life in India. It was a life of love; it was a life, almost, perhaps, divorced from this world you might say, because we led very sheltered lives and very much within the family. One's interests were in

common; everybody took a share in them, or if they didn't, at least you could talk about it to them and they were interested and they encouraged you and you didn't feel the aloneness that you feel in this country. Friends were family friends, very rarely belonging just to the children or to the older people, as they do in this country. One of the things that struck me very forcibly here was that the children have their own friends and if the parents came into it, it was considered almost an intrusion, and if the parents had their friends, the children were not necessarily expected to be there. It is a completely different way of life, because each one makes his own life here and that cosy family feeling is not so apparent. Indeed, if one's grown up children continue to live at home when they are unmarried—as was normal in India—they would be considered immature by their contemporaries. Thus, many of our old values are being destroyed.

"Another thing we valued in India was the leisure time we had and the time for communication. Here, we are so busy with our daily life and the pressures it imposes on us that there is no time at all to sit together, like we used to do, as part of routine life and discuss and talk and *listen;* one has no time for this in this country and that, I think, is something very precious that has been lost.

"I really valued three things: (1) acceptance of all people in the community no matter what they were. Even members of our community who for civil offences were sent to prison, were accepted and visited both in prison and when they came out. (2) Close ties in family life. I was explaining to an English friend in India the relationship to me of two people whose wedding we were attending. I said: 'The bridegroom is my grandmother's first cousin's son, who is marrying my father's first cousin's granddaughter' and she laughed and could barely work it out, whereas to me it was a very close relation-

ship. (3) When anyone was sick in the community there was no thought of calling in an outside nurse to nurse them, even for small pox or typhoid or other infectious diseases which people looked upon with horror in those days (1920s); relatives and friends from within the community went and stayed in the house of the sick, even if it was for a month or more. to look after them and nurse them back to health.

"To a large extent we have brought our life and background with us to England and we are still living mainly within the community and we try to keep up the old traditions whenever possible. With regard to entertaining, the leisured life we led in India and the fact that we had servants, meant there was always open house, people dropped in in large numbers, in families, and nobody felt any hardship. It was just taken for granted and there was always enough food, the cook was able to cope at a minute's notice. There is one amusing story where, on a Saturday night, a family saw a large number of people arriving and turned to the cook and said: *'Murug may pani dhalow'* (add water to the chicken soup). This has now become a legendary saying to indicate that guests are always welcome! It was a real joy to meet in these circumstances which it is quite impossible to carry on here in London. However, in spite of this, people in our community do tend to entertain still on a fairly large scale, doing the cooking and washing-up with the help of their friends and family who have come over."

When asked to assess what they regretted in the life they had left behind and what they enjoyed in the life here, other respondents said:—

"Life here is totally different. It breaks my heart that our community and what was built up is breaking

up now in India. I miss the life there and doing social work. I can't do it here without a car and chauffeur, but I suppose I must be satisfied. I attend lectures, study, read—that is my compensation."

"I had my servants. I spent freely on charity and entertaining. There, I was busy with social work with Jews and non-Jews. Here, I am busy doing servants' work, which leaves me no time for anything. There, I went to synagogue regularly. Here, I live too far from my type of synagogue. Life is similar only in that I have my family here. I miss my large house and many servants. I enjoy television and reading."

"I liked India, but I enjoy it better here—the countryside and the environment. I don't know what I would have done in India after my retirement. I keep myself occupied here."

"I had my own home in Calcutta, but I do not regret anything. I say this was fated. I love cooking."

"I don't regret anything. I don't miss the servants. I like the cold, I can't bear heat; it's healthier here, more sanitation. A more modern way of life here, suitable for Jews."

"I can't have my family and friends over as often as I'd like—the thought of the cooking and washing-up! I love entertaining, but it is too much. I miss the ease and the comfort, nothing else. I prefer the way of life over here, except for no servants. I would not like to live in India now that all my friends are here. I enjoy the shopping, the transport—there's no need of a car here; I enjoy the cleanliness of the city; the television, which keeps us well up with the news."

"I would find anywhere I lived interesting as I enjoy

my work. My life changed when I found my life's work. I would like to go to India for a year to do marriage guidance and family planning there."

"What I regret very much; I could have been of greater use to the people in India than I am to the people in this country, because the needs are greater in India. I enjoy everything here—there is lots to enjoy—theatres, concerts, libraries, historical places, the city's cleanliness, the standard of living, the beautiful English countryside, the land of English literature, museums. . ."

"My life has changed. We are getting more Westernized. It is a good thing and a bad thing. I would prefer it more Eastern—we are more affectionate and emotional. Your best times are where you were born and bred. I've left a lot of good memories in India, but *now* I prefer living in England. I like the democracy here."

"My life hasn't changed all that much. I do things here I wouldn't do in Calcutta, like shopping and cooking, but I prefer it this way. I don't regret anything, not the servants. I enjoy the security of the country here. There was no future in India—it was politically insecure. I prefer the climate and the more orderly way of life here. But uncertainties of colour here make me worried."

"My life is similar in things like family ties, but much changed in attitudes. It is fuller and more reasoned, but this could be due to being older. To me, it seems another world. . .it has changed at lot. I regret the weather and the outdoor activity in the winter. I enjoy the theatre and the opportunity to meet people in wider spheres."

"The biggest change in my life is I have to work like a dog. I am a *coolie* (porter), *borchi* (cook), *jamadar*

(sweeper), *masalchi* (kitchen help), *ayah* (nannie), driver— you name it! There is more intellectual stimulation here, though I have less time for reading. In social aspects it is similar, entertaining, etc. I most object to the pressure under which I am forced to function here. In India there was always time... I regret separation from my wider family who have gone to different lands. I regret not having explored the Indian culture more, even the country. Also, failing to equip myself for life in the West. Also, my comforts—things were more *laissez-faire*. I was not so responsible, being young, and it was a more carefree life. We could take, for instance, a holiday on impulse, and not have to arrange it a year in advance. There is much more pressure here about tomorrow (registering your child at birth for school). I also regret my loss of status. Here, however, there is a widening of your horizons. It is much richer culturally and more stimulating. There is no need to worry about what people will say. You can be what you want to be, more."

"My life has changed in all ways. My work has helped to broaden me and made me think how backward I was."

And, finally, from a young girl who was brought to England at the age of seven:—

"I'm sure my life has changed, because in India I would have had to mix with the community and I wouldn't have had so much choice about whom I mixed with. I regret nothing and I enjoy the freedom here."

She echoes what all the youngest members of the community feel— no regrets. The reason for this is that, in almost all instances, the young people have improved their financial status by immigrating; whereas in the case

of the older generation, there is a loss of both financial and social status.

"My grandson says, here, we are both gentlemen and sweepers. His earnings were much better in India, but the children have more opportunity here."

"I am much worse off in England both financially and socially. I miss India very much from that point of view. But I think most of our community have bettered themselves here; they own their own properties."

"I have only bettered my religious status in England."

So say some of the older generation; but, on the whole, they have reconciled themselves to life away from Calcutta and recognise the inevitability of it.

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The social activities of the community in Calcutta changed with the years. In the early 1900s, they would be driven in their phaetons along the Strand to take the air on a hot summer's evening, or to the Eden Gardens, where they would listen to the band. (An English army band, which no longer played after the 1920s). The practice of drives remained even when motor cars came in. On Sundays or holidays, people would arrange excursions by boat to the Botanical Gardens, where a large crowd would spend the day together, picnicing, or they would visit friends who had homes in the suburbs, such as Dum-Dum, with tanks (artificial ponds) and would swim and talk and eat.

Not only would they take daily trips together, but the community also liked to go for their holidays to places

where other members went. Schools were closed in Calcutta for a month in May, when the heat was at its worst before the monsoons, a month in October, for the Indian *Pujas* and a month in December/January, for Christmas and New Year. During the winter holiday, the place that was most popular as a resort was Madhupur, a village in Bihar, where the community went happily every year. Some of them even owned houses there. For the other two holiday periods, Darjeeling was the most favoured, being a town in the Himalayas about 7,000 feet above sea level and, so, refreshingly cool. Thus the community maintained its contacts and gathered scores of memories and material for tales.

It may have been the lack of outside stimulus supplied by the radio or television, but the community was fortunate in the number of raconteurs of both sexes which it developed in abundance; and when people met at parties, or picnics or on holiday, they often turned to a raconteur in their midst and said, "Tell us a story" and, if the storyteller was in the mood, he (or she) would be egged on and on, until he had exhausted his repetoire, but not his audience. The stories all concerned members of the community and were amusing anecdotes, which the skill of the raconteur translated into hilariously funny incidents; there was no malice in the tales, although they were not flattering; even the subject of them would be laughing and, no matter how often they were heard, the effect was the same. One such raconteuse relates an incident which occurred during World War II, which gives some idea of the flavour of these stories.

"My uncle's flat was just above the Judean Club and we had all collected there one Saturday evening, before the dancing began. I can't even remember who was there, but friends and soldiers started drifting in and gradually, I found myself telling stories. I was in the right mood

and they kept egging me on, one story followed another, they just flowed. They were all rolling with hysterics and I excelled myself with an appreciative audience. A couple of hours must have passed like this, then I said, 'It is nine o'clock; I am going down to dance; it has started' and we broke it up. As we were leaving the flat, one of the soldiers—I think he was an American Colonel—drew me aside and said to me, 'I was listening to you and, although I did not know any of the personalities, I could picture them very vividly. Have you ever thought of making a book?' I said I could not. He asked me to tell him the stories and he would write them down. 'There is best seller material in what you have got'. I told him it was impossible. These things have to be spontaneous. You are talking to a couple of friends and you start reminiscing and the tales come tripping. I remember my father's stories—he had told them to us scores of times but we still gathered round him and said, 'Tell us about this person and that—what Chala did at the wedding' and so on—and each time we'd be in fits."

Another social activity much enjoyed by the Calcutta Jews was train journeys. As they were generally travelling to the same destination, they made enquiries among friends and arranged to travel on the same day. The journeys (other than the comparatively short ones to Madhupur and Darjeeling) sometimes took over twenty-four hours and, as the compartment was filled with family or friends, time passed companionably while the train was in motion and was enlivened at stops by the Indian vendors who plied up and down the station platforms crying *"Pan, biri, cigrate! Char—gurum char!"* and similar appeals to buy.

An older woman describes a train journey to Mussoorie (in the Himalayas, west of Simla) before World War I.

"First, there was the long train journey to Dehra Dun, very hot and tedious in May, but to us everything was a thrill and we were well supplied with ice to help us combat the heat of the 36 hour journey. Leaving Howrah Station at night, we arrived at Dehra Dun, at the foot of the Himalayas, on the morning of the second day. From there, the journey was continued by *tonga* (a horse drawn vehicle) to Rajpur, a little village further up, whence both we and our baggage were conveyed by human agency up 8 or 9 miles of steep climbing to a height of over 6,000 feet. Now, one can go by car all the way up from Dehra Dun, but in those days it meant a *dandy* from Rajpur to Mussoorie. This was a sort of boat-shaped palanquin with a seat at either end facing each other, with four men to carry it by means of a pole slung over their shoulders, two men in front and two at the back. Our luggage was carried by separate coolies, on their backs. One usually arrived at Mussoorie by about 10 a.m."

Another activity that was very popular among community members was amateur theatricals. They were either producing plays or variety entertainments among themselves and staging them at the Jewish Girls' School for charity, or were joining other communities in plays and Gilbert and Sullivan operas performed for a wider public in major Calcutta theatres.

Much of their time was spent meeting in each other's houses to play bridge, *mah jong,* poker, rummy or other card games. Even those who were not gamblers would wager small sums on the outcome of these exercises, the main purpose of which was to pass the time.

Ever since the advent of the 'bioscope' and the days of the Pearl White serials, the cinema was another major pastime of the Calcutta community. Visits to the cinema

took place invariably at the week-ends and often also during the week and community members enjoyed discussing the films with each other and even repeating whole plots to those who for some reason had been unable to attend.

For young people sport was a great attraction and many played hockey (a game in which India excelled), basket ball and badminton, while some engaged in boxing. Most shared with their elders the joys of swimming and tennis, while some of the latter also played golf.

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The Calcutta Jewish community loved entertaining and there was a constant stream of parties and get-togethers, both formal and informal, at which they met each other and sometimes met non-Jewish friends, many of them Armenians, who had established close links with community members over the years. Wealthy members of the community entertained lavishly and, at their cocktail parties there could be found the elite of every community in Calcutta.

"I had wonderful parties in my own home, when I had the best of Calcutta people. The whole house and lawn (120 feet) would be brilliantly lit and everyone would be moving around freely. At one of my cocktail parties there were about 850 guests and the head of one of the leading British business houses said, 'How do you manage with such a large gathering?' I replied, 'It is the simplest thing in the world. Divide the lawn into sections and put so many servants in charge of each section.' We were very particular about organizing it thoroughly, both my husband and myself. In London, things are different

and I cannot do it. I see only the family. It didn't bother me if people dropped in in Calcutta; we kept open house. Now, it depends. If I'm very busy it delays me."

During both World Wars, the community entertained the troops who were in Calcutta in large numbers. No home was too humble to provide a welcome and a meal and, during World War II, some homes were giving hospitality to dozens of soldiers every week. Indeed, so great was the fraternization that one Jewish matron was heard to observe: "If a girl does not get married now, she will never get married!"

It was not only the soldiers whom the community members made welcome. It was in the social tradition of the East to have an open house and they all followed it. But things were different in the West, as they soon found when they came to London.

"When my husband was alive in Calcutta, we entertained a lot. The servants did it all, we just ordered. I like people coming and eating. When I first came here, I accepted all invitations, to learn the new way of life, how to work the different gadgets, etc. I loved people dropping in. Here, people can't drop in because it's not convenient. One is either busy, or out."

"Even now I love people to drop in. I've got so many friends."

"In Calcutta, there were lunches, dinners, parties; we went to the Ordnance Club, Firpo's, Princes'—every week. There were weddings, circumcisions, *barmitzvas*, there was always something. Here, it is much less, as we have to do our own work here."

(One of the younger generation) "In Calcutta we

entertained and were entertained a lot in each other's homes. We went to concerts and live performances whenever possible. In winter, we went to both horse and motor races. There was the cinema once or twice a week and after dinner, we would go for coffee to restaurants. We played badminton three times a week and went swimming at the Calcutta Club. In London we still entertain, but of course it is more bother here."

The one thing the majority of the Jewish community mourned when they left India was the loss of their servants. The social structure of the country defined very clearly the role of each servant and this was adhered to by the Calcutta Jews as by all the other citizens. The servants all lived on the premises in *godowns* (outhouses) and the conditions of their employment followed the general pattern. There were *borchis* (cooks, lords of their kitchens) with their *masalchis* (kitchen helps), who, if they were clever enough to learn the trade, might one day become cooks themselves; *boys,* or table servants, who were Muslims, as Hindus would not touch meat; *bearers,* or house servants, who were valets to the male members of the household and also made beds and dusted the furniture; these were Hindus, perhaps to redress the balance; *jamadars* (sweepers), whose job was to sweep the floors and clean the bathrooms, of which there were one to each room; *ayahs* (nannies or personal maids), who attended the female members and the children; *malis* (gardeners); drivers; *durwans* (gatekeepers); and in addition, *dhobis* (laundrymen) and tailors, who did not live in, but were regularly employed.

In most of these categories, the number of servants employed depended on the size of the household and its status, while it was also possible in poorer households, consisting of only a couple, to combine the role of

cook/boy/bearer in the person of one better paid man. Servants used to take lunch to children in school, kept warm in a '*tiffin* carrier' and they were also made to accompany children to and from school—to quite a late age, if they were girls. The servants would carry the child's books and walk behind him, if they went on foot. The *ayahs* used to get up at night to attend to the babies and bring them to the mother in bed to be nursed, then take them back again and settle them in after the feed.

From their earliest years members of the community were used to taking their servants for granted so that, in this respect, and particularly for members of the older generation, it was hard for them to adjust to life in the West. An older woman, who was known for her violent altercations with her cook, said humorously to a friend who was returning to India on a visit:—

"If you see my cook, kiss him for me on both cheeks and tell him how much I wish he were here!"

Every night after dinner, the cook used to come to the mistress of the house and give her the day's account of all he had bought and then ask her to order food for the next day's lunch and dinner. Invariably, having just partaken of a good meal, the woman would groan and grumble over having to exercise her brain to the extent demanded and would seek ideas from the cook and from anyone else who had not taken himself off in the meantime; this pantomime was enacted most nights and the mistress begrudged the time and effort she gave to the exercise. These same women in London have not only to shop for the meals themselves but they have to carry the shopping home, cook the meal and then wash up afterwards! Similarly, with the laundry. An older woman described it:—

"Sunday was 'Dhobi Day'. The *dhobi* would come fairly early in the morning, bringing the huge bundle of clean laundry back and would then lay it out neatly on the bed and take out the dirty laundry from the various *maila pataras* (soiled linen baskets) and sort it out in heaps on the floor. The bearer would take out your laundry book and pencil and they would respectfully inform you that they were ready. If you were busy at the time attending to some child's demands or on other pursuits of your own, you would tell the *dhobi* to wait and not to pester you. Eventually, however, you got round to taking up the pencil and checking the list of both clean and dirty clothes and the bearer then put the clean clothes away while the *dhobi* went off with the dirty ones. In the afternoon, you would complain to your friends what a tiring day you had had because it was *dhobi* day! Here, in London, *I* am the *dhobi*—or else I carry my bundle to the launderette and fetch it back again. I laugh when I think of it..."

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Considering their background, both the men and women of the community have adjusted very well to the differences in their lives brought about by immigration. An older member who came to London as a young woman in the late 1920s with her aunt, described her experiences:—

"Adjustment was hard when we first came here, not knowing anything about cooking and not knowing anyone in London. We walked down to the greengrocers and asked them how to cook potatoes; do you throw the

water out or does it dry in. This was not so strange, because there is the *bhaji* idea we were used to when there is a little water which dries up. In those days chickens were not 'oven ready'; they were just plucked. We bought a chicken and phoned a relative in Sheffield who said, 'Wash the chicken thoroughly', so we washed it in Lux. The chicken was terribly greasy and no matter how much we washed it in Lux, it was still greasy. We loved chicken soup, so we put it in a pan and cooked it, but it didn't taste nice. We phoned Sheffield again that evening and reported; 'I don't know why it is bitter and stones all over' and she said, 'Did you clean it?' and we said, 'Yes—we washed it with Lux' and there was dead silence on the other side of the phone and she said, 'Did you clean it inside?' and we said, 'What inside?' and so then she said, 'Throw it away and open a tin again.' This reminds me of a friend when she first came to England. She went to Sainsbury's on Saturday night; she bought a chicken and the man asked her, 'Do you want it trussed?' and she said, 'No, I'll pay cash.' We learned fairly quickly but we made silly mistakes. When you bought a gas cooker at that time they gave you a recipe book which gave you full dinner menus. We were doing one and it was meat and onion and all and it was quite nice and then it said, 'add golden syrup and prunes', so it didn't quite seem feasible but we said 'This is English cooking—it must be'—we did it; it was terrible. Later we found the pages of the cookery book had stuck and we had turned over two pages and were doing a pudding.

"Nowadays people have learnt a lot. You see, we were the innocents, the first who came, right at the beginning. Since then, life in India has also changed; many people had flats there, instead of houses, with pantries, and could get some idea of cooking, whereas our kitchens were outside our houses and we were never allowed to

enter them; also, people came on holidays to England, so it was not so strange."

Others, who immigrated after World War II, commented variously:–

"At first I found it rather difficult, but I learnt to cook and did a lot of it for my family, from not knowing how to make a cup of tea. But I must say I miss my servants. It did not take me too long to adjust–but I loathe the winter and I miss the sunshine."

"Before, I was accustomed to doing nothing for myself. 'Bearer, pick it up!' I'm getting used to chores and cooking. It's hard work and it's difficult, but it keeps me occupied. I am adaptable, so it did not take long. I have faith in God and His goodness and if he has put me in this position, it is all right." (A woman of 80).

"I have adapted easily to life here–the climate and transport don't bother me, even though I had a chauffeur-driven car in India. I lived in foreign countries for several years when I was young." (A man of 80).

"It did not take me long to adjust to life here, although I was over 80 when I came. I keep house for my family, who all go out to work. Nine out of ten people here are very good and want to help me but I'm very independent. Once we were in a new area and it was a fine day. I went out and asked which bus to the High Street. I had never been before, but they told me and I went. I was 87 then. I have since been many times."

"I have adjusted very well to life here. It has not been difficult at all. I do the shopping and my wife does the cooking. Men used to do the fruit shopping in India."

"The climate in Calcutta and London are both horrible—one too much heat, the other too much cold. It took me very long to adjust to life here; I took on too much as I was easy-going and couldn't say no. I was weighed down. It is easier now that the children have grown up."

"I love London and England and made frequent visits here. I had completely adjusted mentally before I arrived, so it did not take me long. I don't miss the servants. The climate is O.K."

"I haven't found much difficulty in adjusting to life here. I came straight into it at 18 and I looked upon it as an adventure."

"I have not adjusted to this life. I just get on with it. I hate it. You can't bank on one day of sunshine. The weather is unpredictable. You survive as best you know how. I do not accept my burden. I object to having to listen to my servants' life stories—boy friends, happiness, food etc. I don't want this social intercourse with my servants."

"I adjusted very easily. I started with packaged foods. Now I can cook all our dishes—not *hushwa*! I hated the sun in India; I enjoy the climate here, by and large."

"My parents prefer to be here. My mother did not know how to cook in India. They brought a help from India. She did the housework and looked after my younger brother. Now my mother cooks very well indeed."

No one was forced to leave India. They came voluntarily and are free to go back if they so wish. But all

seem to feel there is no going back, although a few have left England for Israel. The past is a closed book and it is necessary to live now as Londoners. This the members of the community do with much success and, if sometimes they look nostalgically backwards because, in Noel Coward's words, "what has been is past forgetting", at the same time they realise that life in Calcutta, as they knew it, no longer exists. It is over.

CHAPTER VIII

Education & Work

There are three ingredients in the good life;
learning, earning and yearning.

Christopher Morley
Parnassus on Wheels

During the lifetime of the present members of the Calcutta Jewish community, there existed the Jewish Girls' School and the Talmud Torah for boys, yet not all the community received their education in these establishments. In the beginning, boys could attend the Girls' School and later only in the primary classes and most of the older generation did so with their sisters. The Talmud Torah never succeeded in gaining the popularity that the Jewish Girls' School enjoyed with the majority of community members.

When many of the community moved from the vicinity of the Jewish Girls' School and settled in areas further south, they sent their children to the nearer Christian schools, generally run by Catholic or Protestant orders on missionary lines. To these local schools the children went daily but their home influence was sufficiently strong for them not to be unduly indoctrinated. There were, however, boarding schools in the 'hills' (as the mountains of India were modestly called) and many parents sent their children to these, in Darjeeling, Kurseong, Kalimpong, Shillong, Mussoorie or even as far as Kodaikanal and Ootacamund in South India. The children left Calcutta in February or March (if the parents

were specially concerned, they sometimes kept them at home until after Passover) and did not return till December. During this time they were exposed to missionary fervour, only counterbalanced by their parents' weekly letters, all correspondence being openly read by the school authorities. In a few cases, the children were sent to boarding schools in England.

In spite of these schools being missionary ones, some of them had liberal attitudes to their non-Christian students, whom they permitted to conduct their own morning prayers, although this permissiveness was not common. An older woman relates her experience of a boarding school in the Himalayas, run by a very broadminded Englishwoman.

"How tolerant and broadminded our headmistress was will be seen from the fact that, although she was a Roman Catholic, she herself conducted the prayers for the school, which was predominantly Protestant, the Catholic children having a Catholic teacher to conduct their prayers in one of the classrooms, while we Jewish children were exempt from either and also from attendance at church on Sundays. In later years, however, as our numbers increased, our headmistress suggested that we, too, should get together and have our own prayers and one of us older ones would conduct them. We were also exempt from attending class on Saturdays and she suggested that we devote this time, which we did, to studying whichever book of the Old Testament was allotted to Cambridge students who were Jewish, in place of the New Testament book which was for gentile students."

This was the exception rather than the rule, however, and it must be said that the increasing tendency of the community to educate its children as boarders who were away from home for over nine months of the year in a

non-Jewish environment contributed towards a loosening of their ties to their religion, although it did not seem to affect their family feeling.

Formal education among the older members of the community usually stopped at 15 or 16 but, among the younger generation, there were more who went to college to gain a degree or a profession. This did not mean, however, that the older people lacked intelligence. On the contrary, many made use of their natural resources as did this woman, who said:—

"I had no formal education at all. I was never sent to school. A British sergeant's daughter, living in the barracks near by, spoke only English and taught me. I was 16 or 17—within a year I was reading the *Exchange Gazette* from which I was taught my ABC and words. I got paper to write on from the sweepers who emptied waste paper baskets from the offices. Much later in my life I was taught French by a friend."

The standard of intelligence among community members was above average, although academic qualifications, previously, were not considered necessary to the main business of life. An older man said that, when he was offered a double promotion at school, he refused to accept it as he did not wish to work.

"I did business at school," he said; "sold sweets, ice cream, ran a cinema on Saturdays and Sundays for a hundred boys, played marbles, made pickles and exchanged stamps. I had a different partner for each activity."

This early start was continued in various successful ventures throughout his business life. Another man, who left school at 15 to go into a competitive business world, continued to use his talents even after retirement to this country and, at 84, said:—

"I make baskets and trays to keep myself occupied. I have sold them to big department stores. I go round there myself by bus."

In cases where community members, old or young, did pursue higher education, it was always with excellent results.

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The most popular pastime of the community in Calcutta was reading.

"Reading is part of living."

"I used to go through a book a day."

"At the Jewish Girls' School, you were taught your ABC at three. I was reading Hans Anderson and Grimms' Fairy Tales at six and by eight or nine, children's books like "Anne of Green Gables", romantic novels by Berta Ruck, anything I could lay my hands on. My nose was never out of a book. Although Calcutta did not have the wealth of public libraries that London has, we were fortunate in the kindness of the Indian people. I remember going to "my" bookshop in the New Market and standing for hours in its tiny premises, while I read its owner's books. Even when my presence impeded the progress of some more legitimate customer, he never reprimanded me, but gently indicated that I should allow the customer access to my corner. That I spent all my meagre birthday money and pocket money in his shop was not the cause of such leniency—it was inherent in his character!"

"I used to buy books to build up my library and when I left India I gave away 2000 books."

These, and similar remarks, were made by respondents.

Among the older generation, most fathers and husbands did not consider it proper for their womenfolk to go out to work and, unless there was financial need or the women in question were very determined, the wives and daughters remained at home. A number of them did social work mainly among their fellow Jews but also occasionally among the Indians, while others occupied their time with their families or in reading, studying (things like languages, painting, fencing or any other mental or physical activity which might take their fancy) and in social intercourse. A few of the older generation helped their menfolk.

"After I left school (early 1900s) I did whatever was required of me by my father, family and the community. I liked community work and carried on after marriage."

"I learned to type in Calcutta and worked for my uncle for two years (1920s). My family would have objected but I was one of the first to be allowed to work because it was in my uncle's office. In London I have done typing, selling washing machines, running a guest house and social work."

There had never been any objection to a woman becoming a teacher or a dressmaker and some of the community had done so; also a few exceptional older women had become doctors and lawyers. It was when the majority of the young girls wished to take up secretarial work after leaving school that they met with parental opposition, but the battle was soon lost to the youngsters and, by the 1930s, Jewish girls were much in demand in the business world of Calcutta and, later, when they brought their skills to the London market, were asked by their employers: "Can't we get some more girls like you?" Now, it is taken for granted that girls will train for a profession or a job, like their brothers, and the men of the

younger generation are no longer antagonistic to the idea of their wives going out to work: indeed, one young man said:—

"Most definitely, my wife must work!"

When asked if they thought a woman's place was in the home and what was their opinion of modern feminine emancipation, the community had very definite views.

"Definitely, a woman's first place is in the home. I wanted to be a doctor even after marriage, but my husband said I was needed more with my children. I was very ambitious and, though I wanted to marry, I was sorry to give up my studies at 16. Men and women should be treated as equal; but nature has equipped a woman to be a mother and a wife—that is her first duty. She can be emancipated in her home, give her ideas to her children and her husband. A woman cannot do justice to a career and a home. After her children are grown up, then she can pursue a career."

"Yes, first and foremost a woman's place is in the home, but not entirely. If she needs a job to make a living, then she must work. Modern women? You call that emancipation? Twisting your body while singing and having jute for your hair and mini-skirts up to your bottoms? Emancipation to me means living, working if necessary, and mixing in the world; using your brain, having ideas of your own, but everything within reason."

"To a certain extent, it is right in these times. I would let my wife work and have a profession, but not if there were children."

"I don't approve of modern feminine emancipation. I feel it impairs the home life, because it takes up the wife's time and attention, so she can't give enough time

for her home. It is all right if they go to work without impairing domestic serenity."

"I don't think a married woman should work for her living; her place is in the home. If she wants a job, she shouldn't get married. (Unless she *has* to work). If she is unmarried, let her work."

"If a woman can work and keep her home, it is good for her to get out of the house. It is a question of adjustment. One has to compromise. I don't think a woman should take a job at the expense of the children when they are young, but she should not sacrifice her own desires. I do believe that women should be free to do what they like."

"Yes, I do approve; I think it's wonderful. I want an interesting wife, I don't want a cabbage and someone just telling me about the price of Ajax. I like to discuss things with her; also, women crack up if they have too much concentration at home. I think the Calcutta women could discuss things with the men; if a woman is tied to the house, she should also look after her personal welfare and get an interest."

"*My* place is in the home. A woman should be in the home when her children are young. Women's Lib. is not for me. What they are fighting for is unrealistic. If they achieve what they set out for, they will be sorry."

"Modern feminine emancipation? I like it; very much so—within reason. If you mean like the Russians, forget it—weight-lifting and all that." (A young man).

"Women's place is not any more in the home. I feel that the Women's Lib. movement is a little mixed up. They don't know the difference between being equal and equivalent to men. They should have equal pay, career

opportunities, etc. but not want to be men. They should be proud of their femininity. I feel quite a number of the leaders of Women's Lib. are frustrated in love." (A young bachelor).

"Women's place? It depends on the woman. Modern feminine emancipation is all right if they don't get too aggressive—as long as they remember they are women." (A young woman).

"I don't think women's place is in the home. I'm not in favour of Women's Lib. I like to have the best of both worlds with equal pay but to be treated in a feminine manner."

In view of the community, the role of each sex was clearly defined. Men should work; women should look after their children. If they had no children, or when their children were grown up, they could work.

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In Calcutta, a number of the women in the community would spend their days playing bridge or *mah jong* or rummy and in their spare time, the men would join them playing bridge and poker. In London, it has not been possible to continue with these pastimes due to lack of time caused by the necessity to perform household chores, as well as a variety of alternative attractions. In Calcutta, women had a great deal of leisure; they were used to this and found ways of occupying themselves without being bored.

"I was always busy; visiting, shopping, needlework, machining, entertaining; there was no time."

The New Market in Calcutta was the main shopping

centre of the community. There, under the one roof was concentrated numbers of stallholders selling a large variety of goods and, whether one wanted silks, food, hardware, books, jewels or countless other things, one could spend a couple of hours or more in a leisurely manner, examining the wares displayed before making a selection. Thus, friends would arrange to 'pick up' one another, would go by chauffeur-driven car to the New Market, choose fabrics for a new dress or two, to be given to the tailor or dressmaker later, stop for a coffee at a restaurant and go home in time to welcome their husbands for lunch.

"I spent my days with my children; when they grew up, in social work and in studies. I did not care to play bridge and *mah jong.*"

"A woman should spend her time making a happy home. A man should work and consider his wife and home and not neglect them." This was the ideal of the older generation and a younger man echoes it:

"Nowadays, I think it is essential that a man should help his wife. A woman should look after the children, husband and home."

But both an older woman and a young man share a realistic view of modern conditions:—

"I can't say how people should spend their days. Times change and you have to be with the times."

"My wife and I would work, if we had no children. If we had, I would prefer her to stay at home, but if she's dying to work, O.K."

Among the older generation, there did not seem to be a conscious choice of jobs; today in England, children have a careers' master to guide them before they leave

school and their choice is almost inexhaustible but, in Calcutta, people took what was at hand and did the best they could with it.

"My husband learned shorthand and typing as a boy and worked in a Greek-Jewish firm until it failed. After that he joined a Jewish firm where he stayed all his life and worked his way to the top. In those days (about 1910) there were no choices available to our boys. They mostly went into some business."

"My husband trained in shorthand and typing and went into his father's business (manufacturing) which, in the course of time, he and his brothers managed successfully."

"It was just opportunity, what work you did. There wasn't much choice."

"I joined my guardian's firm. There was no choice and this came up. Later, I had my own business."

"My father wouldn't hear of his daughters working, so there were no choices available. My sister, when she was over 30, went to work against my father's wishes. She went for one day, but wouldn't take orders—she resented it, so didn't go again."

"While I was studying in college, there was an exam for All-India public service. Other boys were doing it, so I did. I felt I wanted to stop studying and go out to work. I wanted to be independent. If I'd known what the salary was, I'd never have sat for the exam, but I got a great deal of satisfaction from the job—more than any other. I was a 'judge', making many decisions. I had to live away from Calcutta and there was no Jewish life so, eventually, I gave it up."

"I became a secretary—the most usual choice for a girl of our community in Calcutta. Had I passed my B.Sc. I would have done scientific research. Our college was in an area of violence and in a dreadful state of rioting (1948/49)—buses being burnt, etc. I was the only Jewish girl; there were five girls in a class of 60-80. In the Honours class, there were only two girls, I was one—the only non-Indian in the whole school. My mother felt it was too dangerous and I had to stop. Nobody passed—perhaps a couple of people."

"In Calcutta my father wouldn't let me work at anything else but teaching women and children privately. In London, before my marriage, I was learning Personnel Management in a firm where I was working as a secretary."

"I chose teaching but I became disillusioned with my headmaster for his principles, so I left it for journalism, which I enjoyed very much. Here, I have returned to teaching as journalism in London is too much of a rat race."

And varied remarks from some who could make their choice in London:—

Three young men:—

"It was a choice between chartered accountancy and hairdressing. I didn't do 'O' levels here because the courses were different from India, so I became a ladies' hair stylist."

"I started off at the bar; my parents had imagined me as such because I'd always thought I'd be a barrister. I was told it wasn't so easy here, because you have to have connections. I went to see a Jewish barrister and he told me the difficulties; I realised my parents wouldn't be able to support me for ages till I built up a practice

and, as I wanted to stay in law, I switched to being a solicitor. I am not sorry."

"When I joined Hatton Garden, I joined as a clerk. They asked me to bookkeep and I did and learnt it the hard way."

And two young women:—

"Having come out of show business in my teens, I wanted something to do with people as opposed to typing, so I joined a travel agent. Also, I was independent; I wrote my own letters. I learned the trade and then I started on my own."

"I only considered secretarial work and the London College of Fashion. My parents said I'd better do secretarial work as I could always get a good job and earn good money, so I did."

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The Calcutta Jews were almost unanimous in wanting their sons and daughters to have professions:—

"I wanted all my children to have careers, including my daughter, as long as she wasn't married."

"I wanted my children to be well educated and go to university; otherwise, I'd have liked my sons to follow me in my business."

"I would rather give children a profession; something to depend on."

"I wanted my daughter to have a profession and she did."

"I will encourage both my children to have a profession."

Almost all the responses were in that strain; and, indeed, one family at least achieved their aim; of their four sons, one became a chartered accountant, one a doctor, one a rabbi and one a solicitor. There were one or two replies which differed slightly:—

"I wanted marriage for my daughter; for my sons, I wanted them to work, to get settled, not to go astray."

"I wanted my daughters to be well and happily married. My sons should have a profession and happy marriages."

"My sons and daughters should get married to good people and found families. All children should be educated Ph.Ds. Daughters should look after their homes; men should be usefully employed."

"I want my children to be happy above all else. I'd like them to have professions because we live in a competitive society. I hope I will be able to accept whatever they choose to do."

The majority of the men in the Calcutta Jewish community found work in the offices or concerns of the Jewish firms which were mentioned by respondents as they existed in chronological order, some of them overlapping with others before they closed down. These were David Sassoon's, E. D. Sassoon's, E. Meyer's, M. A. Sassoon's, Curlender's and B. N. Elias's. Jewish men worked as clerks, assistants, managers and even directors in these organisations whose activities were widespread. In the early years of the century, the trade was mainly in opium, which was bought from the British in India at auctions and shipped to China. This came to an end before World War I. Some of the firms went into manufacturing and, by the 1920s, the last two were running a bone

mill, a jute mill, a tobacco factory and many other concerns which could (and did) absorb the mainstream of Jewish male workers. At one time (and possibly even today) the Agarpara Jute Mill was the only Jewish jute mill in the world.

"Any Jew who wanted a job could get it in Jewish firms. Those who had some money had their own businesses."

"Our men went into business mainly; either in their fathers' business or B.N.E.'s. One good thing our Jewish firms did was to provide jobs for all the Jewish community. There were very few Jewish professional men."

There was not much scope for artistic development among the Calcutta Jews and what there was usually found expression in music and drama which were sometimes pursued professionally; but the crafts, so popular among other Eastern Jewish communities such as the Yeminites for instance, were mainly ignored. *Ketuboth* were painted by Jews, but the silver cases of the *Siphrey Torah* and embroidered *parachiot* were executed by Indian artisans, although they might have been designed by Jews and certain designs were passed down through families.

Of those people who did not go into business, some had shops. One man before World War I had the agency for Dewar's Whiskey and had a wholesale and retail wine shop; this was followed by another man with a similar shop in the 1930s. One had a general store; another, a fine goods emporium; a family had a pickle factory whose wares had a high reputation and were exported; a European Jew who married into the community had a jeweller's shop; there were also a handful of other shopkeepers in the New Market, chief of which sold the Jewish titbits much prized by the community. Perhaps half a

dozen people were pedlars—generally new immigrants from Baghdad—who went from house to house among the Jews (and possibly also the Armenians), offering bundles of clothes, food stuffs from Baghdad, Jewish cheese and other delicacies for sale. These pedlars sometimes came, followed by an Indian coolie carrying a huge basket or box filled with their wares. They were generally well received by the householder and joyfully by the children, the Jewish cheese in particular being popular with all. An older man told this story:—

"One cheese pedlar 'put one over' another by buying rennet which he discovered was sold in bottles from abroad, instead of getting it locally from a *kasher* killed calf. Pedlar number two could not understand why his rival's cheese was so much better than his and kept a watch on him. He discovered the reason and took a delegation from the community to pedlar number one's house where stocks of rennet in bottles were discovered and pedlar number one's non-*kasher* cheese was henceforth scorned."

Other men of the community worked as share brokers or jute brokers and quite a few were landlords or property owners; in the case of the landlords, they rented the houses from the original owners and then sublet them advantageously. An older woman said:—

"In my circle, all I remember is the men were able to start bridge after lunch. Half the men did not appear to work. One British Jew we knew was one of the odd ones who went to work regularly—nine to five. We thought of him as English and unusual. My grandfather did social and community work. He had properties. No one did nine to five unless they had their own business. There was no visible means of support. They made their living through properties, stock exchange or lived with their parents."

One family went into cabinet-making and produced very good furniture. A man joined the Calcutta police, on the administrative side and another was a practising optician. Others went into the British Indian Army during World War II and some stayed on when the British left, one rising to eminence as an Indian General. There was a scattering of doctors, barristers and solicitors, including a few women, one of whom was a dentist, but women generally became secretaries or teachers and, in one or two cases, nurses.

Matters are quite different among the younger generation. Not only have they received a higher education on the whole, but, unlike the lady whose menfolk stayed at home, they are all in full-time jobs. The young men are salesmen, accountants, engineers; they work with computors or in electronics:—

"A lot of the younger generation are taking professions here and are doing quite well at them," said a respondent.

In Calcutta, most of the community had had "no choice" in the type of work available and, thus, in the sort of lives they were to lead. However, the closeness of the community made up for this lack of freedom, for everyone else was in the same boat. In London, the opportunities for education and work are limited only by their own desires and capacity, the system is not to blame. Members of the community are unanimously in favour of the advantages to be enjoyed in these spheres in England and can give their hopes for their children full rein as they scan the wider horizons.

CHAPTER IX

Identity

In the coming world they will not ask me: "Why were you not Moses?" They will ask me: "Why were you not Zusya?"

Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol

The question of identity is a very subtle and complex one. When considering a Scottish Presbyterian in Scotland or an Italian Catholic in Italy, it might become somewhat simpler but, were the two to change places, they could conceivably feel confused. A Jew brought up in a sovereign state, particularly if his family has lived there for many generations, usually finds no difficulty in identifying himself with his fellow citizens, unless they make the difficulty, as in Nazi Germany.

But for the Calcutta Jewish community, the situation was vastly different. The citizens of Calcutta were predominantly Indian but under this label were many sects, the two main ones being separated by an unbridgeable gulf; the Hindus and the Muslims. There were also many minorities, the most powerful of all being the British, who were, in fact, the sovereigns of the state. The British kept to themselves and mixed only with other Europeans in their clubs; the Hindus and Muslims did likewise in their homes—and the minorities did the same. Among their fellow citizens, the Jews perhaps had most in common with another minority, the Armenians, (as

the Jews in Bombay had with the Parsees), for both had a Middle Eastern background and both had retained their identity in spite of a long sojourn in this land.

How did the Calcutta Jew identity himself? Did he feel British, Indian or Jewish? This is what an older woman said:—

"I was brought up in a land where to be an Indian was to be a member of a conquered race, to be British was presumptious, (yet the schools we attended taught only British culture), to be Anglo-Indian was unthinkable. It was, moreover, a land which not only permitted individualism, but encouraged separatism—in such a soil where else could one's pride develop but in one's Jewishness? In short, I am very proud to be a Jew." And another:—

"Our life in India was in a conquered country, so it was very difficult to identify either with the Indians, who were the conquered race (and there was no Indian citizenship as such) or with the British, who were the conquerors and ignored you. This meant we lived very much in our own community with our own life. Now that I have come away and look back, I feel I still have a very warm close tie with India; I don't know that I feel British even though I have been here for sixteen years, for even now, because of our colour and our way of speech, we are immediately asked what nationality we are and it is apt to be greeted incredulously when we say 'British'. In India, we were accepted as part of the Jewish community. No one would ask us 'Where do you come from?' because there were so many other communities in India who were all accepted—Parsees, Armenians, Anglo-Indians, Marwaris, Jews etc. Here, one is always asked 'Where do you come from? and, if one says, 'India', it is immediately taken for

granted that one is Indian; the question of our ethnic origin doesn't come into it at all. We find it extremely difficult to explain we are not really Indian strictly speaking; we are not either Aryan or Dravidian, that our origin is from the Middle East and we have had a purely British education in Calcutta!"

A younger woman said:—"I came to London when I was eleven; through my schooldays and thereafter, I found it impossible correctly to explain what I was. Nobody understood! Finally, I evolved the formula:—'I was born in India of Middle-Eastern stock' and this seemed to be accepted."

There could also be a divergence of identity between members of the same family, as we see from this story, told by an older woman:—

"My brother, who had been away for many years in England receiving his education at a public school and Cambridge, returned to Calcutta and heard my sister and me conducting an argument in what we considered a perfectly normal manner; that is, each of us made known her point of view, using all the skills of a hearty vocabulary and healthy lungs and, if we happened to speak simultaneously, that was of no account, since neither was listening to the other anyway. My brother was horrified and intervened, insisting that that was no way to conduct an argument. On being asked what was, he said, "Well, you can say, "I'm afraid I don't quite agree with you" '. Both my sister and I burst into peals of laughter and, over the years, my brother realised that such English decorum was not for us!"

Other comments were:—

"I think it a great pity that, while we lived in India,

we were completely ignorant of the country or its background. The history we learned was English history—Plantagenets, Tudors, Cromwell and, perhaps in the higher classes, British Empire history, embracing the United States and Canada, no less than India; the geography was England in detail, with the rest of the world, including India, in addition. Literature, of course, was Shakespeare, Milton, Browning; I had never heard of Tagore until I left school. We took examinations, the papers for which were set in Cambridge and were marked in Cambridge. As little children the games we played were 'Oranges and Lemons' and 'Here we come gathering nuts in May' singing without any awareness of irony, of 'a cold and frosty morning' with our May temperatures well into a hundred! Our singing lessons found us "weeping" for the "fair daffodils" which "hasted away so soon" when our streets were a glory of *Gul Mahor* ablaze in their breath-taking beauty. We knew no songs to them nor were they pointed out as something even more noteworthy than daffodils—which, in any case, we had never seen. Our only other culture was Jewish, from our families and from our community. We knew we were Jewish, we were accepted as Jewish and as nothing else."

"I was aware of being Jewish in a very special sense. For instance, before I was ten, I knew that one day I would get a monthly period. I remember my surprise when I discovered, much later, that the physiology of all women was the same, for I had thought that this happened only to Jewish girls."

These respondents spoke for the whole community, all of whom identified themselves first as Jewish, next as British, because of their British education in India, which made them feel they belonged to England. Exceptions were those members who had come to this country as children and who felt more British than Jewish. There

were only two respondents, one old and one young, who felt Jewish first and Indian second and both these had come to England because of their families; it might be fair to say the reason the Calcutta Jews had emigrated to Britain was because they felt more British than Indian and that those who felt more Indian had stayed behind and therefore were not available for questioning.

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Many of the young people who were brought to London by their parents as little children have had to face problems of identity. Whereas in Calcutta it might have been possible not to stress a religious training, the general structure of the community was such that a child would grow up aware of who and what he was and could take it or leave it. In London, these children had to find their own answers and make their own places—outside the community, if they so wished. Some of these children were sent to boarding schools and returned on holidays to homes where their Jewish education varied considerably. One such young woman, who might be said to represent a minimal exposure to Jewish culture, gave her story:—

"At a very young age I was sent as a boarder to a private school, which took children of all nationalities. I learned I was Jewish from the only other Jewish girl in the school (she was English). The other children used to tease her and bully her (not for being Jewish, but because she was smaller than they were) and I used to fight up for her. She told me I was Jewish, because I used to go to church every Sunday. I didn't even know —at least, I knew, but didn't know what it meant; it was

just a word. She was brought up going to synagogue and all that. This is where I learnt the justice that exists you make for yourself in your own sphere. First of all, my principal at school thought I was Indian and loved me; then, when she discovered I wasn't Indian and didn't do yoga as well as I should do had I been Indian, she went off me and then went on me again because she knew I was Jewish, so I realised, I suppose, I was something different, neither good nor bad, because we had every race, every colour, every creed at school and it really didn't matter.

"The first time I realised I was part of a Jewish *people* as opposed to just a religion, was when I was with my father in Calcutta when I was eighteen and we did *Rosh Hashana* with friends. It was the first time I had been with my father, never having been more than six weeks with my father in every year when he came to England; I was then alone with him doing something which I knew I had done every year with my mother over here and I realised, excluding the time difference, that she was still doing exactly the same, six thousand miles away from me and it choked me with emotion at that time, because it was the only feeling whereby I was a part of something in the world which was obviously different; because it would only have been the Jews who would have been celebrating anything at that time.

"Now, the thing is, I have always fought being Jewish. I don't believe in being anything, I believe in an international religion, but I also understand that, if people didn't continue a tradition, there wouldn't be any left; consequently, I respect them and I expect them to respect me. I don't have any Jewish friends to speak of—I certainly have more Christian than Jewish friends; I will always feel Jewish, I will always be Jewish, this is something I cannot get away from.

"So, when somebody asks me, 'What are you?' what do I say? I am not English—I don't look English—I can say British. I am not Indian, although I was born there. I am not Israeli and, indeed, I am no Zionist. So I feel very lost and I feel that I've spent most of my life fighting the fact that I'm Jewish, because I've been brought up in a very, very Christian society; so, really, I have no feeling whatever, except for the fact that I am a human being; yet with this feeling, I am constantly fighting my environment which is totally Jewish, relations whom I love—it's a way of life. Although I fight it, yet in my heart of hearts I invariably come back to it, I am very drawn by it. I can't describe it, because whatever it is, I am not Christian; Christianity, again, is another way of life. It's very difficult really."

Some of these young people have tried to resolve their problem by marrying Christians. One young man, who went to public school and then to Cambridge and who is still unmarried, gave this thoughtful assessment of his identity:—

"I feel that from the East I have acquired a fatalistic attitude to life. So far, I have not raged against things which I considered to be inevitable, no matter how much pain they caused. My English education and love of English literature have led to an ironic and detached view of conflict and I tend to look upon enthusiastic believers with scepticism. But, ultimately, I find the Western analytic habit of mind unsatisfying, though I am greatly influenced by it. I need to communicate my intuitive perception of fundamentals to others who are on my emotional and intellectual wavelength without bickering over peripheral issues. I seem to succeed in doing this most often with Jews, who are not rooted in their immediate environment but have a deep sense of history and are never long directed from the essential

human element in what is taking place. I feel at home with these people, not so much because they are Jews, but because it has been the Jews' unique distinction to have been for so long a minority to be reckoned with in every country they have settled in that, as a lightening conductor, they have repeatedly been struck by flashes of pent-up human bitterness, fear and frustration and been instrumental in dissipating these terrifying forces. Where members of other races and beliefs, through their experiences, have arrived at this stark and unadorned view of life, I feel at one with them but it is my impression that they are exceptional members of their races, whereas the Jews with whom I feel so great an affinity are in some way typical."

And another young man, with a similar background of public school and Cambridge, had this to say:—

"According to the context in which I find myself, I am many things at different times—amateur musician, social scientist, married man, etc.; but one thing underlies all the others and colours each of them; that is that I am both a Jew and Jewish. And among Jews, who are usually a minority wherever I go, I am a minority type. For in the West I feel myself a Calcutta Jew; among the majority of so-called orthodox, I am reform; among the liberals I am too Zionistic; among the Zionists, too liberal; among the English I feel at home, but foreign, and in Israel I feel English. The security of our Jewish experience in Calcutta separates me from the anxious nature of previously persecuted European Jewry. My Jewishness, both in background and in religious foreground, means in turn that I am a particular kind of musician, married man, etc; it keeps me always socially alert and, in particular, perhaps has brought me in my work to an interest in the new field of cross-cultural psychology. My

identity is perpetually at a cross-roads; the only thing I know for sure is where I have come from and, from where I stand, I can look several ways and think of future paths which, if I followed any particular one, would help by reflection to define what I am now.

"If I stay in England, I will develop a present aspect of my identity as an English Jew—even then with a question mark as to what way the next generation might turn or have to turn. If I go to Israel, I will feel the English experience to have been but an episode, and a most pleasant and worthwhile one, on a journey to Jewish citizenship. But, even in Israel, I would not feel settled, as I think that, economically, politically and even religiously, those who remain Jews in Israel will have to continue participation and even belonging with other nations. Quite simply, there will not be enough scope in Israel to cope with Jews' activities; they will have to go 'abroad' to work. More complicatedly, there is too much of value in Jews' universalist experience to afford to lose in submersion in a new and narrow nationalism. Some Israelis set out to be secularists but, to me, especially in these days of Israel's rebirth on a basis of Biblical covenants, a secular Israeli is a contradiction in terms.

"It takes longer to explain ourselves than it does for one who can say he is a Yorkshireman, or a Welshman, and that is the end of it; but along with others of my background, we must remain, and even see value in being people whose identity is always purposely flexible."

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The Jews in Calcutta mixed almost wholly with their families and their community and, even when they did

have other friends, the need to identify themselves never arose. The question only came up when they left India. To those of the community who were firmly rooted in their background, there was no problem; they continued to mix mainly with their families and the community in London, feeling most at home in this milieu. Their circle is still large and all consuming. But many of the younger generation feel they do not belong there. Some have kept their identity as Jews, mixing with the local Ashkenazi Jews, while others feel antagonistic to the Ashkenazim or it may be vice versa. These young people have mainly Christian friends, although, like the young woman quoted, they have not cut themselves off completely from their Jewish background.

When asked if it was important for them to live in a specific area when they came to London, it was therefore not surprising to learn that the answer of community members was overwhelmingly, "Yes".

"I wanted to be among my own people who lived in Hampstead. That is why I chose this area."

"It was important to live in the north-west area near our family. We would be like crows elsewhere."

"I wanted a nice Jewish area so my children could mix with Jews, so I chose Golders Green."

"Definitely. I wished to live round my own community and my brothers and near the synagogue."

"When I first came, it was not important; I moved around, I was like a Bedouin. Now, with my community here, I wish to live with them."

"We bought a house here because our friends were living here."

"Yes, it was important to live in Stamford Hill because all the family and friends lived here."

The Calcutta Jews are not alone in this respect. The United States government, in a desire to spread equality, introduced 'busing' in its schools (that is, taking children from one district by bus to schools in another district, mainly so that black children could get the advantages of the scholars in 'white' neighbourhoods and that all citizens could be thoroughly mixed). Stephen Fay, in the *Sunday Times* of London, reported:—

"The strangest group of dissenters is in San Francisco. The most outraged cries are coming from Chinatown. The Chinese fear that families will grow apart if their children have to go to schools miles away in which they are only a small minority. The San Francisco school authorities have decided that the Chinese were living in a ghetto...so the leaders of the community do not deny it exists in a ghetto. They simply argue that the ghetto is where they choose to live.

"Dr. Denis Wong, a chemist who speaks for the San Francisco Chinese, states emphatically: 'You can't take our freedom away to give it to someone else'. They are insisting on the freedom to preserve a cultural identity. America may have been intended as a melting pot of races by nineteenth century idealists, but the Chinese are stubbornly refusing to melt."

The Calcutta Jews have a word in Arabic to describe were they live: it is *mahalla*, which means neighbourhood. Living in the *mahalla* gives them a sense of security and warmth and they have been jokingly heard to remark to visitors, "You must pay toll when you come into our area," so completely have they identified it as theirs,

whether it be in Golders Green, Stamford Hill, or West Hampstead.

There were some members of the community who felt an affinity with the Arabs, but these were mainly among the older generation:—

"Yes, I feel akin to them. I feel the brotherhood of Jews and Arabs. (I wouldn't want to enter Germany)."

"We have the same habits; feeding people, dropping in—the same cultural background."

When the younger generation expressed this, it was more an intellectual appraisement than an emotional tie:—

"I am anti-Arab, but we are both Semitic, so we have something in common."

"Yes, we are of the same ethnic origin and Eastern background."

But the majority of the younger generation felt no affinity at all.

When it came to Israel, the response was different. Almost the entire community identified with Israel, even to the paradox that, while some maintained that England was home for them and they belonged in England, they still said they would want Israel to win if it ever came to war between England and Israel. Equally, the majority would want England to win if it came to war between England and India. The question of which country was home to them and where they felt they belonged was not an easy one to answer.

"I don't know. I don't feel any place is my home. The world is my home."

"The country where your loved one is, that is your home. I belong to God."

"Now, London is my home. I belong wherever my home is."

"I think England. I belong in England because we've been brought up in the British way of life."

"I suppose England is my home. I don't feel I have any roots, here or anywhere. If England accepted us wholly, it would be different, but I don't feel that we are accepted. England is always reluctant to accept foreigners. I'd like to belong to Israel, but I don't feel I belong anywhere."

"I am a Londoner; no country is home. I don't belong anywhere. I am a 'marginal man'!" (A young woman).

"I don't quite feel I belong in Israel, although it is the nearest place to home."

"The country that I am resident of is home; I feel I belong in Israel."

Those who felt England was home and they belonged there and those who felt it was Israel, were divided almost equally. And this division persisted when asked if they were content to remain in London.

"Sure. I even bought some ground in the cemetery."

"Yes, till I die, because I can't live in hot countries and, now, with my high blood pressure, I can't live in Jerusalem because of the height."

"Yes. Forever."

"For the rest of my life."

"I have no choice. If I had a job or facilities there, I'd go to Israel."

"If my husband got a good job tomorrow in Israel, I would leave."

However, in spite of their attachment to England, most people said that if England became anti-Semitic, they would go to Israel. One or two said they would go to America or Canada, as these were English-speaking countries.

"I would leave immediately and go to Israel. I would rather die there than here."

"Yes, even at my age—to hell with them; after all, I'm a Jew. Good knows where I'd go; I'd love to go to Israel."

"Of course I'd leave any country that became anti-Semitic. I'd wait a bit to see the directions things took. I'd go to Israel."

"Yes, if it became like Germany, I'd leave. I've learnt from Hitler's lesson. I'd go to Israel."

But among the younger generation, there were those who took a different view.

"I don't think one can ever leave for anti-Semitism. One must fight it, also one must fight the anti-Asian feeling. Now, big firms on their application forms ask where your parents were born (as most of the children are born here). They did not do this a few years ago."

"Yes, I'd leave, after I've caused enough trouble. I'd go to India or Israel."

"No, I'd stick it out. I wouldn't give up my life and friends."

One or two thoughtful young people were hesitant in their approach to Zionism:—

"I steer clear of it because I don't know what it means. I am pro-Israel as a Jewish state. It is the only salvation for Jews. Any Jew who says he can do without Israel might as well say he is not Jewish."

"I wanted a religious Jewish state, not only a secular state. Israel satisfies me in its religion."

"I don't think Israel and Zionism are the same."

But the majority of the community identified Zionism with Israel and were wholeheartedly in favour:—

"After Hitler, I feel Jews do have a right to a home. I have my leanings towards Zionism. If I were younger, I think I would have gone to Israel, but not now. I could not cope."

"I like it. I would have lived in Israel even now, only I can't manage the language." (An old woman).

"I am for Zionism, although very orthodox Jews were not. I might have gone to Israel in later life, but I was too old for life there."

"I am pro-Zionism. It was very exciting when Jerusalem was relieved after 2,000 years."

"I admire those taking all the trouble. I believe Israel should be for the Jews."

"Going to Israel awoke a real Jewish feeling in me. Setting foot in the Promised Land was wonderful. Though

I was never persecuted, it is like a perpetual ache—only when it stops, you're aware of it."

"If I had to make the choice, I'd be Israeli first and British second. I'm keen to see the country develop and be a great nation. I believe in it being a centre and a spearhead as it has been in the past."

"I have no strong feelings about Zionism and do nothing active, but I am very happy that Israel exists."

Two young bachelors had slightly different views:—

"It is important for the Jewish people and the Jewish community, but not for me."

"My feelings about Zionism are mixed. I feel Jews should have a homeland, but I don't want the Arabs to suffer. I pity them."

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Before World War II, the Jewish community was firmly rooted in Calcutta. Individuals may have left, but that the community as a whole should ever do so never entered anyone's mind. People came to England on visits but, to all, Calcutta was 'home'. Thus the older generation's replies mirror this clearly:—

"All my life there was no thought, no dream of leaving Calcutta. Now, nothing is stable. There is nothing sure or certain in life, but death."

"I thought I would stay in Calcutta all my life. I expect to stay here all my life."

"In Calcutta, it was very stable. I felt a house I bought was for ever. Here, I feel the same."

"Yes, of course; I thought I'd stay all my life. I never thought I would leave Calcutta. I loved it. I think we Calcutta Jews eventually will all go to Israel; this is just a halting station. We are over here just to take the best of England to Israel. Here, no one knows what is going to happen, the world is in a turmoil."

"In Calcutta, I felt my environment was stable and would last forever; I thought in terms of permanence, although I loved England when I visited here. But from 1951 I was adjusting my mind to going. I do not feel stable in London. I can't see our community staying and lasting here. I can see anti-Semitism starting here; youth's intolerance growing."

But for those who grew up after World War II, the picture was quite different:—

"I always wanted to leave; I knew my family and community would not remain in India. I feel we will remain here permanently."

"After 1948 we all felt we could not stay on in India, even if it meant coming to a lower standard of living, as we had no life there as young people. I do not feel my present environment in England now is stable, as Jews and as Eastern Jews."

"In Calcutta, when I was of college age, I always knew I'd leave. I never expected to make India my home. I knew I'd go to England. I knew my community was breaking up; there were money restrictions and so on. I have a debt to India, in so far as we've never been persecuted there, but I'm happy to be here now. If there

were any change in circumstances, I'd have no qualms in leaving."

"I felt secure in Calcutta but I knew I wouldn't live the rest of my life there. Here? I don't know how many doors are going to open for me."

"I feel my environment here is stable. England is my home and I will live here permanently."

The years of immigration of the respondents covered a forty year span, from 1929 to 1969, but the vast majority left Calcutta after World War II, in the '50s and the '60s. The reason for the exodus was the departure of the British. The Calcutta Jewish community had lived and flourished under the British Raj and, by this time, were wholly indoctrinated by Western standards and ideals, so that, when India gained her independence and Indian schools quite rightly restored their own languages and culture, this was alien to the majority of the Jews. They wished their children to be educated in the same values that they had and so took them to England, America and Australia, or to Israel. The Indian government also introduced various financial restrictions to protect its currency in the international markets and this irked the Jews, in both their business and private capacities; they feared a time might come when they would not be able to take any of their money out of the country, or even to leave it themselves. All this contributed to their emigration. And those Jews who, due to inertia or love of India, would not have left, soon found themselves in a minority so that, if they wished their sons and daughters to marry Jews, they were forced to join the stream and go. A very large proportion—perhaps the largest—chose to come to England. Many had a love for the country, its institutions and its literature, a love that was reinforced by their previous visits, so to these the choice came naturally; others

might have preferred one of the other English speaking countries, whose climate or customs suited them better, but, tired of waiting for visas, chose England instead. Still others came in the wake of family and friends, reluctant to leave India or indifferent.

"I came because all my near relatives had left."

"I came here for my sons' education; also my husband felt there were no prospects in his company, he thought they would close down or he would be made redundant."

"I came because my aunt was coming with her husband and child and I was living with them."

"Basically, because of the complete breakdown in Jewish religious and social life; there are no Jews left in Calcutta. If I had to leave Calcutta, I chose London because my family was already here—but all our family is thinking about going to Israel."

"I wanted to venture to new places, I was bored. I'd heard so much of England. There were no opportunities in Calcutta—it was not enough."

"We came because my sister was going to London University, so all three sisters came here with my aunt."

"I came here to further my education." (Most of the young people).

"My father retired."

"The reason for my family coming here was that there was no future in India."

"To improve my prospects." (Other young people).

One young man, who emigrated recently in order to

make it easier for his parents to follow him, gave his views:—

"I came for my parents. I did not come for myself. I had good prospects in Calcutta. But the community is dying in Calcutta for many reasons. (1) The creation of the state of Israel. (2) Now, for people who want to lead a decent sort of life, even Indians, there is no scope in Calcutta for young people; even the best Indians are found outside India. Those who fought the British feel they should remain in power and don't let the younger blood in. (3) Hindus are timeless. Jews are industrious and want to get on with things—the standard of living, generally speaking. (4) Jews are like lemmings—they all move if one person does."

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It was difficult for the Calcutta Jews to assess their place in the social structure of India and now, of England. The majority said, with this woman, "I never considered that." If they did consider it, their reply was likely to be:—

"We never felt inferior to anybody, we felt different."

"No feelings either way. Socially, our parents never let us mix with anyone, that is, non-Jews, though we had quite a few Indian girl friends from school. The Indian families were just as strict. The only time I mixed with the English community was through work and when I joined the Clogs, an Opera Group."

"I don't think I really thought about this like that. I felt a bit superior to the servants. I never had any

Indian friends. I never felt the British were superior. I preferred the Indians to the Anglo-Indians. Here, I feel superior to the working classes, the labourers."

"I had no superiors. Anyone on the same intellectual and social level was my equal, regardless of colour etc. All others were inferior. By my generation, we were accepted by British clubs and also Indians were more acceptable. Money was not the criterion."

But some of the older generation, who remembered the British in the heyday of their power, remarked:—

"I felt the British put themselves in a position of superiority, refusing to mix with us, and I resented it."

"In India, the British considered themselves superior but, to me, everyone is equal, though perhaps I grew up with the feeling that the Indians were inferior—but I lost the feeling. Anglo-Indians, poor devils, are definitely considered inferior. It was all right if the father was Indian and the mother European, but not vice versa. Parsees, Armenians and other Jews were definitely equal. I felt inferior to people I didn't know who were very wealthy—non-Jews. In the Jewish community, wealth was no criterion for feeling inferior. We don't come across the rich people in London, so I don't feel inferior here."

"I felt the British were our superiors (the ruling class); also educated Indians were our superiors (the intellectuals); the wealthy Indians were our superiors. Equals were the business classes, the middle classes (Parsees, etc.). Inferior, lower working classes and servants."

"When I was in India, I wasn't aware of class or wealth. I felt the Jews were in the middle—the Europeans were higher and the Indians lower. Now, it's the individual I'm concerned with."

"In India, I felt the British were superior, the Indians inferior. Class and education would make a difference and money too. Here, I feel I'm the same as anybody—money used to be very powerful, but not today; people are all treated equally here."

When asked if there were any parts of their background that they had felt to be a handicap and how this had affected them, most of the community answered "No." Those who mentioned being Jewish, qualified it in some way:—

"In Christian schools in India I felt aware of being Jewish. There was a difference. But I felt proud to be Jewish."

"As a youth, I remember being a Jew affected my mobility. I was a wolf cub. I could not go to camp because the food there was not *kasher*. In England there would have been Jewish camps. But there was no anti-Semitism in India."

"Being Jewish in this country is a handicap, not in India."

A young man who came to England with his family after India got her independence, and who said he was Indian, found this a handicap in looking for work.

"You weren't considered British," he said, "the way I spoke and behaved. I was told to say I was Israeli in order to get jobs and I succeeded."

Some respondents felt they would have liked to have been better educated; others felt they lacked experience:—

"I was more 'green' than youngsters of my age when I first came here. They weren't more mature but more

experienced and knowledgable. I found it difficult to make friends outside my family. In India we weren't encouraged to be regarded as individuals, we were suppressed. In India one felt things would be done. The decisions were made for you and you had no responsibility. I had to get out of that way of thinking."

And still others felt the burden of their upbringing:—

"My parents being so narrow and so strict has been a great handicap to me. It crippled us. I got out of it young, but the others couldn't."

But the majority, like this woman, found nothing of which to complain:—"No, I considered nothing to be a handicap. I was quite happy to be what I was."

When asked the contrary, if there were anything in their background which had been of help to them and of which they were proud, the answers were confident and affirmative.

"I am proud of my parentage, my ancestors, my Jewish background."

"My faith has been of great help to me. I have a very strong faith, given me by my father."

"I am proud of the principles and rectitude of my parents. My upbringing has been of help to me in every way—discipline, self control, faith, service, love, loyalty, etc."

"I feel I had very good parents and the stability of my background was of help."

"I am proud of my family's dedication to social service. I must have unconsciously tried to emulate them

when I came to this country. My whole background has helped me. I made it help."

"I am proud of my family; my father was very poor, he raised himself. He used to carry his shoes in his hand to save leather. My brothers and sisters and I are all well educated and financially secure. My parents have been of great help to me. They instilled in me the thirst for education. My community looked up to education and emphasized it."

"I am proud of my close family background and the fact that I am Jewish."

"I am proud of my family name and upbringing, its values and life attitudes. I am proud to be Jewish and to be a member of one of the old communities (the Baghdadi). My upbringing has helped me; people know you are honest, they react to you differently. My firm said: 'You are different from the Anglo-Jewish boys'. Money never came into it—in India, money wasn't used to discriminate, so we had different values."

"I am proud of the fact that I was born in India and therefore came in contact with a wide range of nationalities, which was of benefit to me. I am also proud of being Jewish—I can't say what else I'd care to be. A good education has been of help to me. Because we were cut off in India, it made me read a lot and have an enquiring mind and be interested in things outside the country."

"My warmth and relaxed attitude with people have been of help to me. When I did my teaching practice in London, the class that gave me the most trouble in the beginning became the most friendly in the end."

"The fact that I'm Jewish has helped me. My boss felt Jews were more intelligent and worked better."

"My outlook on life has a second view (Eastern), which the English do not have and which I feel is beneficial."

There is no doubt that the Calcutta Jewish community accepted its origins and had confidence in itself. In India, the only time it might have been made aware of anti-Semitism, if at all, was in the Christian schools its children attended:—

"Indians are lovely people and would never say anything against one's religion. In Christian schools, in Scripture classes, they taught Jews killed Jesus. I felt awkward."

"Maybe as little boys the Catholic children said, 'Dirty Jew' but, don't forget, in India there was no anti-Semitism."

"When I was in a Christian boarding school for boys in Calcutta, the first year or two they called me 'Jew' until I was known."

"At school in India the boys said, 'You dirty Jew! You Jew bug!"

In Calcutta, some of the community might have been made aware of discrimination due to colour but in this respect, they were one of the vast majority. An older woman said:—

"The British people who were the conquerors were white people, so colour consciousness did exist in our community. In my own experience I discoved in an Indian school there was even a consciousness of colour among the Indians themselves, because one of my Indian pupils who later married and had a daughter told me, as the child

was dark, she would have to pay more dowry to get her married. The Aryan conquerors of India were also a fairer people than the Dravidians, so this may have been a legacy from their days, which was reinforced by the attitude of the British."

It was only on coming to England that members of the community experienced discrimination on counts of both religion and colour and this discrimination caused them to feel isolated by the majority of their fellow citizens here, as they had not felt in Calcutta. A young woman said:—

"With regard to colour, I am worried about the future because of the feeling of antagonism which wasn't there before but which is there now, I have not had any experience of anti-Semitism. I worked in a purely English firm when I first came and there was no discrimination. I was even given my Jewish holidays."

"When I applied for a job, two firms said, 'We don't take Jews.' And, once or twice when looking for digs in Camden Town (1948), they said, 'Sorry, we don't take foreigners'."

"My husband asked his bank manager, academically, if he would consider employing our son, who is dark. He said, honestly, that he would not. This was in the days before the Race Relations Act. My husband felt his colour handicapped him in getting a job here."

"I felt lonely so I wanted to help. I applied to be a companion to a blind lady. When they heard I was from India, they refused. This happened to me on two occasions."

"I never experienced discrimination in India, not even in the civil service. In England, in Golders Green,

two children, 8 or 9, one a negro, shouted at me as I was coming home from synagogue, 'I hate you, you are a Jew.' "

"My mother was refused a job on the phone, when they heard she was from India. However, when she *went* to the same place, they couldn't believe she was Indian."

"In India, I never experienced discrimination. In England, I have, because of being a foreigner and dark. Not for jobs, as I kept to Jews only. Educated English people—graduates and Dip. Eds.—have said to me, 'I did not expect you to speak English so well'."

"I was punched for my colour in London."

"My colleagues at work wisecrack about my being Jewish."

However, a young woman of superb self-confidence, gives an opposing and amusing picture when relating her experience:—

"I have never known any discrimination. When I was working in London, the personnel manager of the firm asked me, 'Where did you go to school?' 'Not in this country!' I replied. 'Where? 'In India.' This seemed to throw him into some confusion. 'But you're not Indian, are you?' 'No.' 'Where did you go to school? 'Loretto Convent.' This confused him still further. 'You are Jewish, aren't you?' 'Yes.' 'We deal in pigs. You don't mind do you? 'Not at this distance'!"

It was interesting to see what impact this country had made on the new immigrants. What did they dislike in what they found and what pleased them? Many disliked the permissive society and the attitude of youth to age; all liked British democracy, equality, justice.

"I don't like to see the way the old are left in this country and not taken care of by the younger members of the family. In India, however poor the Indians, this would never happen. I do like the democracy in this country."

"I regret that I am unable to provide my wife with all the comforts she had in India. I like everything here—the shops, the crowds in the streets all nicely dressed, Speakers' Corner about Israel and so on."

"I certainly get disappointed when I see the naked women and on TV they talk about sex. Is that the thing to teach to children? Girls making advances are disgusting. I like the old life and ideas better." (An old woman).

"I dislike the permissive attitude of this society. I believe in discipline."

"People tend to want to make money without giving value for it. They want something for nothing. I like the freedom here. There is more understanding than before between peoples and governments."

"I dislike destruction for the sake of destruction—destroy all old things to make new ones, when it's not always necessary; just to be new. I don't like dragging people down to a level for the sake of equality. What I do like is the young people's sense of adventure. We had it, but we were tied. They live and try and are lively and enterprising. This is a hopeful sign; those that come through and survive will make a wonderful new generation. This is a chaotic time."

"I dislike the moral degradation. A very bad lowering of moral standards. A country which permits sodomy

will be wiped out. What has always impressed me about England is its law and order and discipline."

"Nothing displeases me. I like the orderly life over here. They are civic minded. Government officials are more fair and efficient. I like the health service."

"I don't like the material rat race which you get drawn into yourself. You have to prove yourself against others. As a parent, I don't like the general degeneration of morals in this country. However, things are improving. I like the housing and sanitation and the beauty of nature around me."

"I dislike the breakdown of the family unit and family life, but I am happy that here people can do what they like and can be their own man."

"I do not like the fact that people are not willing to accept differences. What I do like is the British sense of justice. It is greater than in America."

"I like everything—the culture, museums, galleries. . ."

What the members of the community thought to be valuable in life covered a wide range of both the abstract and the particular:—

"I value the universal aspect of life. The idea that we are all more or less one."

"To me a good marriage is important; travelling, seeing places; maintaining my Jewishness and traditions."

"Prayers and the love of God—this is valuable to me."

"Faith and trust in God—to accept His will and bow to it. Hope for rectitude from others in every way."

"It is important to work hard, honestly, without counting each little cost. Give full value and do your best. Everything must be done truthfully and honestly, even relationships."

"I value a sense of tolerance, a belief in people. Faith in something other than oneself. Whatever someone else does, one is capable of doing it oneself, so one must not judge."

"Many things are valuable (a) Relationships—a frank and honest relationship is very valuable. (b) A sense of security emotionally as well as financially. (c) Education for my children—I place this first in life. (d) Peace and comfort, free of want."

"The moral principles you have and total commitment to your religion."

"It is important to live in a free state—I couldn't think of living in a Communist one. A happy home is valuable, also a comfortable one."

"To be straighforward and honest and not consciously to harm anyone. I think you should help people when you can and be available when they need you. I think a moral code towards your fellow men is very important."

"Integrity, kindness, warmth, morality, respect for self and others—these are valuable."

"Honesty and manners—behaviour and style, feeling it. Basically, I am a very strong person on principles; it's important to have them. I'd hold to my principles despite provocation." (A young man).

"I believe it is valuable to go on learning, to discover new things."

"Life is valuable. My home and family and friends." (A young girl).

"Justice. Fighting for what one believes in. An exchange of one's whole being in order to survive within the social structure of life. I care not to hurt anyone, if I can help it."

"Human relationships."

"Everything is important—a good education, a job, marriage and a happy life." (A young bachelor).

What have been the main purposes in their lives? In this respect the Calcutta Jews differed in no way from the rest of humanity. The young men wanted to work and to succeed in their work, to enjoy living, to learn, to reach the top of their professions. to rear a family. The young women's responses varied somewhat:—

"Relationships with people around me, this is the main thing. I make money to subsist."

"To be loved, needed, wanted and to reciprocate these things. To have an education, marriage, children. To have financial security, good health and friendship."

"I don't have any purpose. I live from day to day."

Two young women said this and were repeating, without knowing it, the fatalistic attitude of many of the older women, who not only took life as it came, but included in their acceptance a life of service to their fellow men. This they felt very strongly and many regretted that, due to their age and infirmity and the different conditions of life in London, they were unable to fulfil this purpose as they had done in Calcutta. One of the older generation, now in her sixties, who has been committed to social work in England for several years, said:—

"It was a conflict between this and business. I am glad social work won."

Like Jewish communities everywhere, the Calcutta community has a strongly developed sense of duty to its members, as was seen by the numerous organisations set up in Calcutta to deal with those in need and the many people of both sexes who devoted a great deal of time and interest to community matters and still do, in Calcutta for the few who remain there and in the various other places where members of the community have now settled.

How long will this sense of identity which they have brought with them last? From all we have seen and recorded here, there is little hope. In London, eventually, the Calcutta Jewish community, as such, will cease to exist. Perhaps it may survive in Israel, if Israel, like India, is tolerant of minorities. India gave to its minorities a generous and instinctive hospitality, while allowing them, like a good host, to live according to their own needs and wishes. In England, today, we have racial discrimination. The English do not like 'foreigners', they do not like differences. Yet they are a fairminded and law abiding people. Laws have been passed to check discrimination; with thousands of people moving from their 'native lands' all over the world in yearly emigration, progressively more people will be 'sojourners' in the ever-shrinking world of the future. Do we really want a 'Universal Man'; gray face, background, ideas, culture—uniformly drab, or even uniformly glittering? Perhaps, in time, it might be felt that a completely conforming mass would be boring and that, instead, a country which enjoyed the separateness of its citizens, of Indians, Pakistanis, Sikhs, Cypriots, West Indians, Chinese, Italians and even the ubiquitous Jews, who lived in closely knit groups and fostered in their children a love for and pride in their

ancestry, hand in hand with their regard for the country of their adoption, such a country would be like a rich tapestry, whose different coloured threads blended beautifully to make a harmonious whole.

Perhaps, in time...but, until that happens, England asks foi conformity and the Calcutta Jews are adapting to their new life as far as they are able. That they will not surrender their Jewishness seems plain from the testimony of those exposed even minimally to their heritage. A White Russian friend of a member of the community told her:—"My parents are dead and all their friends. Through my work I meet all sorts of people and I have a large circle of my own. Yet I do not feel English and whenever, on rare occasions, I meet any other White Russians—I may not even know them—I feel that I have come home." This woman was born in England of Russian parents some sixty years ago. Sixty years hence, will the children of the Calcutta Jews be feeling something similar? Or will they be like their Ashkenazi bretheren, English Jews with no memory of their Eastern European origins? Will their Middle Eastern background and their years in India be completely wiped out?

Maybe they will pause to consider that a loss of identity is possibly a major cause of the unhappiness in our society today. If we can say, with Browning's Rabbi Ben Ezra, "The future I can face, now I have proved the past," it is only because we know the past; we know and accept the importance of every bit of history which has made us what we are, our individual history, which the Freudians would have us trace back to the womb, or our community history, which we can trace back as far as the records will let us.

In the large urban societies of the Western world, man is not concerned with his neighbour and, when he

is not ignoring him, looks to see what he is doing, in order that he himself might conform the better, or 'keep up with the Joneses'. The difference between this and life as lived by the Jews in Calcutta is best described by these extracts from Bruno Bettelheim's "The Informed Heart", referring to the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe.

"This watching and being watched is very different from the intimate living together in a group that was common in the villages and small towns of the old world. There, too, everyone knew what went on in other homes; but these were not strangers, watching and copying or competing with each other. They were people who lived together most intimately, as if in a very large family. All was not love or mutual helpfulness there; on the contrary there was often much ambivalence and pettiness. But there were always strong emotions, however mixed, binding the group together intimately. We have lost this emotional intimacy which is built on associations stretching over generations, and in doing so have gained a much higher degree of potential freedom. But as long as we pattern our lives on that of our neighbours this potentiality has not become reality, and we have lost a great deal of emotional intimacy without having gained an equal measure of freedom."

And again:—

"...the relative strength of inner controls may be based on a relative absence of choices; the business of life is strictly regulated by tradition and carried down to the individual through his parents. Therefore, the individual is always sure of himself and of what he is doing; he also feels in accord with his parents and age mates, which increases his self respect. These societies also allow amply for instinctual gratifications, both of sex and aggression.

Lack of freedom (in the modern sense) is made up for by spontaneous satisfaction in the family sphere..."

So, as a great part of the Calcutta Jews still cling to the warmth and comfort of old friendships and old traditions, they face the knowledge that many have faced with them in what is a universal experience. They will have lost their heritage; but they, at least, can still retain their tradition as Jews, if no other part of their identity; unlike others who have lost everything, a loss sometimes heartbreakingly final, as expressed in the moving words of Black Elk of the Oglala tribe of the Sioux Indians of North America when speaking of his own people (quoted in Dee Brown's "Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee"):—

"The nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no centre any longer, and the sacred tree is dead."

POSTSCRIPT

A *kadeesh,* the traditional Jewish prayer read in mourning for the dead, is not in fact a mourning, but a hymn of praise.

As this enquiry ends and is discovered to be a *kadeesh* after all, for an identity that can never be what it was in Aleppo, Baghdad, Calcutta and the many sister communities of the East, it, too, is a song of glory for an existence remembered with nostalgia, that seemed secure and permanent, but which will soon be no more than a dream.

To

Dear Friends,

With our best wishes,

Have a lovely holiday.

From,

Sophie & David Elias.

26-11-84