

BEST OF FRIENDS

ANGLO-JEWRY AND THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY

By Walter Zander*

The most valuable contribution which the Friends in this country have made to the Hebrew University has not been the £1,250,000 which they have remitted to Jerusalem since the war; nor the books and manuscripts they have collected, the scientific equipment they have bought, the scholarships, fellowships and visiting lectureships they have established and administered, the academic connections they have created, and the countless services they have given to the University in the vast field of scholarly and scientific requirements.

It lies in the independent initiative which they showed, and in the responsibility they have shouldered in the interest of the University at certain critical moments of its development.

The outstanding case in which they took the leadership concerned the securing of staff.

Mostly young idealists: In the early years of the Jewish National Movement many hoped—and quite understandably—that once the University was established, the great Jewish scholars and scientists would leave their countries of residence and rally to Jerusalem. They believed that, whatever problems the University would have to face, there could never be a shortage of distinguished teachers. For a number of reasons this romantic hope did not come true.

From the time of its establishment until the end of the Second World War, the University had to draw its teaching staff mainly from those countries in which the Jews were suffering persecution and from which they sought an outlet. Those who came from the free world were mostly young idealists who had still to prove their academic distinction in practice.

The destruction of the reservoir of Jewish life in eastern Europe coincided with the University's growing need for teaching staff. But the attempt to attract scholars and scientists from outside Israel was not sufficiently successful under the conditions prevailing at the end of the Second World War.

Letter to Jerusalem: It was at this point that the late Professor Samson Wright came forward with views which were destined to change the whole approach to the problem. He held that the University's future teachers had to be found from among its present students, and that to the best of them opportunities had to be given for further training in the great centres of learning in the west. His vision meant a turning point in Israel's intellectual and academic development.

It was not shared by all at the time. But Samson Wright insisted, and in a memorable letter which he wrote to the University authorities on behalf of the Friends in July 1953, he set forth succinctly his point of view:

"The heart of the University is its staff. We think that in the main the new members of the staff must come from its own graduates; and we are therefore planning to extend the provision of fellowships to select graduates and junior members of the staff who could come to this country for a period of advanced training or research work.... In this way, we hope that over a period of 5-10 years, we shall be able to render substantial services to the University by helping to fill vacant positions, and by increasing the efficiency and happiness of existing senior members of the staff."

Invaluable core: This was the charter upon which the Friends in this country built up a large system of post-graduate fellowships. True, in the beginning many doubts were expressed, and not a few feared that fellowship holders would fail to return to Israel after they had experienced the higher standard of living and superior working conditions in the western world. Yet the faith of the founders was rewarded and their hopes were fulfilled.

Today, some 80 graduates of the University who have held fellowships in this country are members of the academic staff of the Hebrew University. These young men and women, carefully selected from the best graduates, form an invaluable core among the teaching staff. They can look forward to a long and creative working life and I believe that the research facilities offered them by the British Friends has been the most valuable contribution they have made to the University.

Another example where the Friends in this country took the initiative was the creation of the Lionel Cohen Visiting Lectureship for the Study of English Law at the Hebrew University. This Lectureship has taken to Israel some of the greatest names in British law, including the Lord Chief Justice and the Master of the Rolls.

Ben-Gurion's support: Most recently, the Friends in this country have taken the leadership in efforts towards the introduction of Asian and African Studies at the Hebrew University. These have become a matter of extreme urgency in view of the increasing part which the peoples of these continents are playing in world affairs.

* Dr. Zander is Secretary of the British Friends of the Hebrew University

This effort of the British Friends received the special support of Mr. Ben Gurion, and it is noteworthy that the President of Israel, Mr. Ben-Zvi, made the need for the development of Asian and African Studies at the University the central point of his address at the opening of the Hebrew University's 1959/60 academic year.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel, the relationship between the Friends of the Hebrew University and the University itself has undergone far-reaching changes. When in 1945, the first post-war meeting of the Board of Governors was held in London with Dr. Weizmann in the chair, the affairs of the University were directed from this country, as indeed were those of the Jewish Agency. Today, the leadership is rightly in Israel.

Experience and wisdom: But it would be a mistake to assume that the Friends abroad have become mere fund-raising agencies, under the direction of head-quarters in Jerusalem. The Friends have still great contributions to make to the development of the University by offering the experience and wisdom of their most outstanding members.