

COMMUNITY

By David Dombey

As a young boy living with my sister and our parents in suburban Streatham, I vividly remember them taking us children often to the East End where Basil and Rose Henriques had established a Settlement to care for the local community. This was in the late-1920s when Aldgate was the home for thousands of Jewish families who had escaped from the persecution of the 'progroms' in Eastern Europe, (which included my grandparents who came to the UK from Poland at the turn of the nineteenth century). The slum living conditions that these families endured still have a lasting impression on my now fading memory – a really decrepit area with crumbling houses and tiny rooms, houses with only one tap, all with outside toilets, no gardens and little cooking or heating facilities. Basil Henriques had come from a rich Portuguese Jewish family background and after his Harrow and Oxford education had decided to devote his life to performing social work. He found premises to start boy's clubs for different age groups to teach Jewish lads, who were learning at school to speak English whilst their parents all spoke only Yiddish at home, about what life in Britain could be like for them. He was joined by Rose Loewe, who set up similar girl's clubs. They later married and Basil persuaded the Carreras cigarette magnate, Bernard Baron, to donate funds to build a purpose designed six-storey building to house many lifelong activities

(from a pregnancy and family planning clinic to the synagogue's burial scheme) right in the heart of Aldgate. This was called the Oxford and St. George's Settlement and included a synagogue, which was the only one to be affiliated to both the Liberal and Reform Synagogue movements.

My parents had both been members of these clubs; they got married in this synagogue in 1925 and devoted much of their spare time throughout the rest of their lives to support the synagogue and the many social activities which the Settlement arranged. In particular every year the Henriques couple ran a six-week tented camp in Sussex for the different age groups, including one week for the aged "boobas", so that they could all enjoy the open air and even venture into the sea for the first time in their lives. Basil Henriques became a local juvenile magistrate and was later knighted for all his life's work in the community.

And so to my next story about a local community – this time in Northern Ireland. When Brenda and I were married in 1953 I was working for the same cigarette company, Carreras, as a works' chemist. Within a few weeks we discovered that a Belfast pipe tobacco company, Murrays, had been taken over and I was invited to go there to work with their 86 year-old chemist (dear old Mr. Burns). So, as young newlyweds, we emigrated to Belfast and tried to settle into this divided society, where we lived in a mixed community of Jews, Catholics and Protestants.

However the factory itself was situated in Sandy Row, a strictly Protestant area of Belfast, and when I later took over as Factory Manager, I quickly discovered that it was Company policy that we only employed folk who professed this brand of Christianity. Later when I instructed the Personnel Manager to take on two Catholics as store-men (much against his better judgement), the news soon spread and these individuals were so persecuted by the other men that we had to let them go. Every year we watched the annual so-called Loyalist parade through the mainly Catholic areas of Belfast, with large banners proclaiming "No surrender to the Catholics" with serried ranks of Protestant marching men in uniforms carrying swords and beating huge drums - a really frightening experience. You cannot imagine the hatred felt by one community for the other which resulted, after Brenda had sensibly persuaded me to bring the family back to London, in the infamous 'Troubles'. I understand even to this day the enmity between these two factions of Christianity still exists. Unfortunately such examples of inter-faith animosity persists around the world and is responsible for many of the conflicts that feature in our daily news bulletins – a sad reflection on many divided communities.

Another story brings me up to today – for as many of you know Brenda and I have for the last thirteen years been running a Senior Forum in Sutton. We campaign for issues affecting the elderly trying to overcome the depressing loneliness experienced by so many old people who live alone, by arranging meetings and outings so that they can leave their homes for a while and meet others of their own age. I'm glad to say that this has been highly successful and we're rather proud that we have managed to start a close community of older people in our town. The social isolation which so many Seniors feel is a topic which I hope that Dame Joan Bakewell will express in her new recently appointed role as the UK's Spokesperson for Older People.

My last story is, of course, our KLS community. Forty years ago Brenda and I had the privilege of helping to start this wonderful community and we have watched with pride as it has grown into the close-knit family that we are today. Over the years we have seen many members volunteer to do many different jobs – some short-lived, like the hardworking group who kick-started our recent renovations – others long-standing like Joyce Tyrer who has been organising Torah readers for more years that I can count. But short or long they are all equally important to our community. Sometimes the work done is obvious to everyone – like our long-suffering Chairman – often we hardly notice who is doing all the work.

But the rewards are always there – the knowledge that you are helping others, the self satisfaction that our community is thriving, thanks in part to all the contributions from our many volunteers. KLS will only continue

so successfully if all our newcomers take their part, giving of their personal expertise, supporting when they can and becoming an integral part of our family.

So what joins all these stories? I feel that more folk need to be persuaded to join the ranks of voluntary helpers to assist those in the community who need some form of help. With our ever increasing population of folk aged over 70, who are still fit enough to enable them to assist others in our mixed community of religions and races, they will surely find that this work can give a "meaning to life" – which many feel is their interpretation of what Religion should all be about – that certainly is the basis of my religious belief.

Unfortunately these days many people only dream of escaping their current lives in the unlikely event that they happen to buy the winning lottery ticket. Their main aspiration is to look after "No.1" – 'Blow you Jack – I'm all right !' seems to be the overriding belief of those who recklessly drive at fantastic speeds (no doubt emulating the current No 1. racing driver) with little thought for other motorists – still less for any slow moving pedestrian ! The last thing on their minds is to volunteer to do anything for the rest of society – we simply cannot find folk to fill the many gaps in local voluntary groups, who badly need help.

No matter what our colour, religion or background, all communities need some form of cohesion to overcome the prejudices that can become the source of conflict - and this cohesion needs the help of a sturdy band of volunteers to dispel the myths and heal the unnecessary divisions in our society. This was certainly one of the major themes of the recent Queen's Christmas broadcast.

If any of my thoughts have made you feel that you could help this community of KLS to do even occasional jobs, please do contact Maggie in the office or Jenny Osorio and they will be able to tell you what you can do – you will not regret it
- and your community will appreciate it.