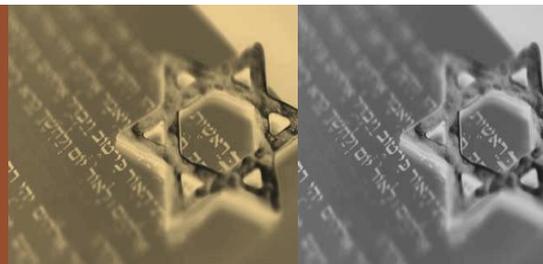


CHAPTER SIXTEEN: COMMUNITY NUMBER NINE THE JEWS OF GREAT BRITAIN



The Jewish community of Great Britain is one of the world's largest and in the nineteenth century was perhaps the most influential Jewish community in the world, interfering successfully on behalf of many other communities around the world. That was in the halcyon age of Queen Victoria when Britain felt that it ruled the world. Since then many changes have occurred and the community struggles with many of the same problems that we see in other communities around the world. One thing that distinguishes the Jewish community story in Britain is the fact that it has actually two distinct parts: a medieval part which lasted for some two hundred years and a later one that has lasted so far for over three hundred and fifty years. The two were separated by three hundred and fifty years and there are no direct points of continuity between them. This is rare in the Jewish world. Welcome to Great Britain!

1. Who are the Jews in the national community? Where did they come from? How many are there? What is their geographical distribution inside the country?

Records of the presence of a Jewish community in Britain date back to the Norman Conquest. Expansion was slow during the 11th and 12th centuries whilst hostility was highlighted by a massacre in the northern city of York in 1190. A century later Edward 1 expelled the Jews and although Marranos are said to have established a presence in London following the expulsion from Spain in 1492, the formal readmission of Jews to England occurred only during the period of Oliver Cromwell in 1655. Ashkenazim from Western and Central Europe later joined the Sephardi community gradually outnumbering it. By the mid-nineteenth century, Anglo-Jewry is said to have totaled 25,000.

The community was transformed by the arrival of Jews from Eastern Europe between 1881-1914. This immigration was part of the mass movement of Jews to the New World motivated by the promise of economic opportunity and religious freedom. In Britain however, the passage by Parliament of The Aliens Act in 1905 severely restricted Jewish immigration and the First World War brought it to a halt.

The meeting between the Anglo-Jewish establishment, which by now was well integrated into British society and the newcomers, who were Yiddish speaking, traditional or socialist in orientation, was tense. The former made a determined effort to Anglicize the immigrants, their efforts particularly successful in the field of Jewish day school education.



In time, the Eastern European immigrants and their descendants overturned the leadership of the community. Struggles ensued especially concerning the democratization of the community and its attitude towards Zionism. The old-timers were for the most part critical of the Jewish national movement whilst the newcomers and their descendents were supporters. In 1938 the Zionists captured the Board of Deputies, the major Anglo-Jewish representative organization, when they succeeded in securing the election of Selig Brodetsky, himself an immigrant, as president.

By this time, a further wave of immigration to Britain was well underway. This was to comprise some 60,000 refugees who fled Nazi Germany and other central European countries. Amongst them were 10,000 children, unaccompanied by their parents on a program called the *kinder transport*. For the most part these children were not to see their parents again. With the end of the war, a small number of Holocaust survivors arrived in Britain whilst since 1956 other refugees have found haven from Hungary, Egypt, Iran and Iraq. There is also a sizeable Israeli community in England.

At its largest, the Jewish community probably numbered no more than 450,000 but since that high point in the 1950s, it has been in numerical decline. Today the community is estimated at 285,000, less than 0.5 per cent of the total population. Britain is fashionably described as a multi-cultural society with 6 per cent of its population comprised of ethnic minorities. Moslems are now greater in number than Jews but for the most part they are not from Arab countries but rather from the New Commonwealth.

Anglo-Jewry is geographically concentrated in Greater London where approximately two-thirds or 196,000 reside. In the London Borough of Barnet, Jews comprise 16 per cent of the population whilst in the London Borough of Hackney a smaller proportion in this case of strictly Orthodox haredi Jews can be found. Outside the metropolis, the largest Jewish community is in Greater Manchester (30,000), with smaller communities in Leeds (9,000), Glasgow (6,700), Birmingham (3,000) and Liverpool (3,000). The seaside towns of Brighton (8,000), Southend and Westcliff (4,500) and Bournemouth (3,000) are especially popular with the retirement age population.

2. How can they be defined economically? What are their professions and occupations?

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jews were predominantly working class and lived in the poorer neighbourhoods particularly in the East End of London. Many were employed in the clothing, furniture and fur industries but in time most succeeded in climbing the economic ladder often following a grammar school and even university education. With economic stability, Jews moved out of the old neighborhoods and into the suburbs. In London, this movement paralleled the development of the underground railway system as it extended northwards and eastwards, first to Hackney and Stoke Newington and later to Golders Green, Hendon and Edgware. Today the community has extended even further northwards



and a sizeable Jewish population is to be found in Hertfordshire. The movement eastwards took Jews to Ilford and Gants Hill. This pattern of economic and geographic mobility was replicated in the provincial cities of Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool and Glasgow.

Today, Anglo-Jewry is for the most part affluent and shares English middle class values and its lifestyle. Over half of Anglo-Jewish men and women are in the professions whilst only six and two per cent respectively are in manual labour. Jews are over represented as taxi drivers, some one third of London taxi drivers are Jewish. Jews are also well represented in the arts, academia, media, politics and the judiciary. Business remains very popular. According to the listings of Britain's five hundred most wealthy people, fifty are said to be Jews.

Jews have succeeded in gaining high office. As early as 1855, Sir David Salomons became the first Jew to become Lord Mayor of London. In the same year, Lionel de Rothschild was finally admitted to Parliament having been elected four times yet refusing to swear a Christian oath. In 1871, Sir George Jessel was the first Jew to be a member of the government whilst the first Jewish cabinet minister was Herbert Samuel, appointed Home Secretary in 1905. During Margaret Thatcher's long period in office as Prime minister, a record of five Jewish Cabinet ministers was established. Although Jews had a closer affiliation for many years with the Labour Party rather than the Conservatives, it is the latter who have recently elected a Jew as their leader.

3. What is the religious orientation of the Jewish community?

Unlike the Jews of America, most British Jews are affiliated to synagogues. Surveys report that 70 per cent of Jews are members of one of the community's four religious groupings; 61 per cent are affiliated to central orthodoxy, (the United Synagogue, the Federation and Sephardi synagogues); 27 per cent to the Reform and Liberal movements, 10 per cent to the strictly orthodox or haredi and two per cent to the Masorti (similar to the American Conservative movement). Of course, membership does not necessarily reflect theology or practice. A more accurate way of understanding the nature of Jewish identity is by polling Jews and asking them for a self-definition. According to community polls which have adopted this method, 31 per cent described themselves as traditional, 26 per cent as secular, 18 per cent 'just Jewish,' 15 per cent as progressive and nine per cent strictly orthodox.

Despite the Jewish community's reticence to define itself as 'ethnic,' particularly in the public arena, this may be a more accurate description of it. Again, surveys conducted by community research teams show that the overwhelming majority of Anglo-Jews share a strong sense of mutual responsibility, solidarity and belief in common origins rather than religious convictions. Although in America, ethnic connections are expressed in part through the community center movement, in England there are only two communities, which enjoy such facilities, these being Liverpool and Ilford.



Religious affiliation has undergone some dramatic changes since the Second World War. At that time, the United Synagogue dominated Anglo-Jewry and its Chief Rabbi was the key religious figure both within and outside the community in some measure paralleling the position of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Church. Today, this seeming hegemony had been undermined by the expansion on the right of the haredi communities and on the left by the progressive movements especially the Reform. Illustrative of these trends is the growth in the share of haredi marriages in the total number of such communions. In 1998, some 21 per cent of synagogue marriages were conducted by the haredi sector. This expansion can be explained both by the high fertility rates amongst this community and by the *hazara betshuva* (return to God) movement.

The disenchantment and even alienation of some women with their role in the synagogue has led to differing trends in religious affiliation. Some women have left the United Synagogue for the Reform, Liberal and Masorti movements whilst others have organized to affect change within that synagogue organization.

4. What Jewish educational and cultural life is there in the community?

Until the 1960s, the overwhelming majority of Jewish parents sent their children to state schools and where possible to the private sector which offered the promise of academic achievements. This meant that for most children Jewish education was supplementary, imparted most popularly on Sunday mornings. Parents viewed the critical age for their children's Jewish education as from 8-13. Once the barmitzvah had been secured, children were rarely to be found in Hebrew classes. On the other hand, informal settings, youth clubs and youth movements were relatively popular.

Since the mid 1960s, an increasing number of parents have sought a Jewish day school education for their children such that today more children attend these programs than those offered by the supplementary system. The major factor that explains this transformation is the disillusionment with the academic results and social milieu of the state non-denominational schools. However, other factors such as a Jewish revival and greater tolerance towards expressing religious and ethnic difference have also contributed to this change. Once again, demographic factors are relevant here. The increase in the share of the haredi population amongst Anglo-Jewry especially due to its propensity for large families has led to a major expansion in its day school system. In 1992, some 5,330 youngsters attended its school and nursery facilities but by 1999, that number had almost doubled to 10,090.

The changing attitude towards Jewish day school education is also reflected by the fact that the Reform movement, once bitter opponents of 'separating Jewish children from their fellow countrymen,' now runs several schools of their own. In the early 1950's, some members of the Zionist Federation expressed similar reservations about day school education but nonetheless the organization embarked on the establishment of a network of primary schools. Orthodox groups opposed the Zionist entrance into the field of day school education fearing that the ethos of these



schools would be secular, in keeping with the model of Israeli non-religious state schools. In fact, the Zionist Federation was careful not to offend these sensibilities and their schools might better be described as religiously traditional. The overwhelming majority of Jewish day schools in England are Orthodox, whether haredi or modern. The latter are sensitive to the fact that not only do they compete amongst themselves but also with the non-denominational private sector. Much effort is therefore directed towards academic achievement in general subjects. Ironically, parents and school inspectors alike have bemoaned the achievements of the schools in Jewish subjects although more recently changes have been made to alter this state of affairs.

An unusual feature of Jewish day schools in England is that a large number of them receive state and local government funding that covers 85 per cent of their maintenance and capital costs. This practice extends to all denominational authorities although the major recipients of this funding are the Church of England and Roman Catholic schools. More recently, the government has extended this arrangement to include Muslim, Sikh and Greek Orthodox schools provided that they meet the strict criterion set for the employment of teachers, the school curriculum, the school premises and administration and can prove public demand.

There exists a wide variety of Jewish clubs, organisations and youth movements in Britain. These range from the scouts, Jewish lads and Girls Brigades through Netzer, the Reform Zionist youth movement to the Federation of Zionist Youth, Jewish Youth Study Groups, Bnei Akiva and Betar. A high point of these activities are the teen tours to Israel, which have become a rite of passage for a large number of Anglo-Jewish youngsters.

There has been a steady growth in the number of university courses and even degree programs that deal with Jewish and Israel subjects. Jewish studies departments exist at universities in Oxford, Cambridge, London, Leeds, Leicester, Manchester, Southampton, Lampeter and Leicester.

Adult education has blossomed over the last twenty years; Torah study has never been so popular, and interest in Jewish culture, languages and the Holocaust has been facilitated by organisations such as the Spiro Institute. The annual Limmud conference brings together Jews from all over Britain and almost the whole spectrum of Jewish affiliation. Considered a veritable festival of Jewish learning, it invites speakers not only from the UK but also the United States and Israel.

5. What is the situation of assimilation and intermarriage in the community?

The expansion of Jewish education has touched many but by no means all. There are those Anglo-Jews who see their Jewishness as peripheral to their identity. Some are alienated from what they see as an introverted and highly particularistic community. Others believe that Judaism is archaic and has little meaning for their lives. In the atmosphere of an open and generally tolerant society where individualism is widely embraced, it is not surprising that many Jews have left the community. This goes a



long way to explain the decline in the size of Anglo-Jewry. Out marriage has grown and the number of marriages under synagogue auspices have shrunk from 1,017 in 1999 to 907 in 2000 and 845 in 2001, a decline over 15 per cent.

One is left with the sense of paradox; on the one hand, there is an energetic and more intensive core of Anglo-Jews but on the other a growing and alienated periphery.

6. Are there any major historical circumstances that affected the inflow or outflow of Jews to and from the community?

The first of the major factors that have affected the different waves of immigration were the desire of Marranos to find a place of refuge where they could live their Judaism openly and the openness and tolerance towards things Jewish on the part of the Puritan movement in the mid 17th century. The great emigration from Eastern Europe in the late 19th century and the early 20th century was a major turning point in the life of the community. Tens of thousands of immigrants came in the 1930's and the immediate post war years as a result of fascism and Nazism. In the 1950's, the failure of the Hungarian revolution of 1956 brought a number of Jews into the country as did events in Arab lands in the same period.

Zionism has caused thousands of Jews to leave the community but events in Israel have also led to a considerable influx of Israeli Jews into England. Many of the latter keep their distance from the Jewish community and create their own social and cultural frameworks.

7. Are there welfare problems within the Jewish community? Are there welfare organisations within the community?

Another characteristic of the community is its ageing. More than 25 per cent of Anglo-Jews are over 65 years old compared to the national average of 16 per cent. The organized community is well aware of this reality and has, over the last number of years attempted to address this challenge by fund raising and streamlining organization. A good example of the latter was the bringing together of several welfare organizations under the framework of Jewish Care. Policy research has also been expanded to assess future requirements.

Recent government policy has gone some way to help fund the needs of the aged and Jewish residential facilities. But such funding always falls short of the overall need and Jewish philanthropists and the broader public are asked to bridge or at least narrow this gap.

Some cynics have characterised much of Anglo-Jewish life as focused around fundraising activities. Of course, voluntary communities can only exist on the basis of the generosity of their members. But the dilemma is how to distribute limited resources. Over the years, there has been competition amongst the fundraisers



between Israel related causes, Jewish education and welfare. An effort has been made to resolve these tensions by expanding what was the JIA (Joint Israel Appeal) to become the UJIA (United Jewish Israel Appeal), which deals not only with Israel related concerns but also the broad field of Jewish Continuity.

8. What is the feeling of physical security of the Jewish community? Has there been and is there today a problem of anti-Semitism?

Anglo-Jewry has been fortunate in that it has not suffered the extremes of anti-Semitism as evidenced in Central and Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, there have been manifestations of the phenomenon, at the beginning of the twentieth century and later in the 1930s with the rise of Fascism. In the folklore of Anglo-Jewry, the Battle of Cable Street in which Mosley's Fascists were stopped from marching through the East End of London in 1936 is said to have led to the eclipse of that movement. In fact, the official Jewish community warned Jews to 'stay away' from the confrontation and local elections held later witnessed electoral gains for the British Union of Fascists.

Damage to Jewish property was experienced at the time of Britain's departure from Palestine when in response to the attacks of the Irgun and Lehi against British personnel and institutions riots erupted in Glasgow, Liverpool and Manchester (July 1947). But despite the violent denouement to the British presence in Palestine, events did not lead to a profound crisis between the British Government, the public and its loyal - if Zionist - sympathetic Jewish citizens.

During the 1960s and especially the 1970s, there was a growth in the activities of the nationalistic and xenophobic right. In the main, these were directed against the immigrants from the West Indies, India and Pakistan but it was clear to the Anglo-Jewish defense organizations that Jews were also identified as part of the 'outsiders.' Arguments emerged within the community as to how to combat these racist groups, particularly because the broad coalition body established to fight the radical right – the Anti-Nazi League – was allegedly dominated by anti-Zionists.

More recently, there has been a rise of anti-Semitic attacks against the Jewish community and its institutions. This is part of a broader trend in Europe where France, Belgium and Denmark have been more seriously hit than the UK. Nonetheless, the number of incidents has risen sharply and caused concern to the Jewish Security Trust, the major Jewish organization involved with protecting the community from anti-Semitism. There is little doubt that the increase in violence is connected to the so-called Al Aqsa intifada, which has been raging in Israel and the territories since September 2000. Muslim sympathizers with the Palestinian cause have attacked Jewish cemeteries, synagogues and even physically assaulted Jews. The radical right has also been linked to this activity. Much concern has been raised within the community about the behaviour of radical Left wing groups particularly on university campuses who are believed to have crossed the fine line between anti-Zionism and antisemitism. Indeed, certain newspapers have been guilty of this



transgression, for example, the left wing, *New Statesman* carried on its front page a cartoon that suggested a Jewish media conspiracy was operating in England.

9. What are the major problems on the agenda of the Jewish community?

Apart from confronting anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, the community has made major efforts to turn the tables on its demographic decline. Funding for Jewish education has increased dramatically over the years. In particular, this has been motivated by the belief that Jewish education especially Jewish day schools are a panacea to the problem of alienation and intermarriage. Trips to Israel have also been highlighted because of the belief that this experience strengthens Jewish identity at a critical age. Although the number of youngsters participating in these trips has declined due to the *intifada*, Anglo-Jewish youth has remained committed to these programs especially when compared to other English speaking Jewish communities.

Thirty years ago, any discussion of the future of Anglo-Jewry would have had to mention the dearth of students in the rabbinical and education programs offered by the community. (Until today there is no communal service program offered in the UK). Although problems remain in this area the numbers of applicants to the rabbinical and educators programs at Jews' College and at the Reform movement's Leo Baeck College testify to the fact that there has been a growth in interest concerning these career options amongst Anglo-Jews.

An additional item on the communal agenda is the attempt to revamp some of the old, well-established institutions and to determine if they answer contemporary needs. In particular, voices have been raised as to whether the Board of Deputies founded in 1760 is in its present form and structure serving the community well. Similarly, there have been attempts to make the United Synagogue more appealing to its potential constituency and by so doing avoid its decline. The Chief Rabbinate, for so many years the widely accepted voice on religious and spiritual matters both within the community and to the broader public is continuously involved in a struggle to maintain its links with the haredi groups on the one hand and the non-Orthodox on the other.

A further area of concern is the relationship of Jews to other religious and in particular, ethnic minorities. Attempts to find common ground with Moslems have not been easy especially because of differences of opinion over Zionism and Israel. But this question is also part of the wider issue as to whether Anglo-Jewry wishes to identify itself as an ethnic group with all the implications of such a self-definition.

10. What are the demographic trends within the community? Can anything be said about the future of the community?

Briefly it can be said that we are witnessing two opposite trends within the community. On the one hand, we have already mentioned a falling away of numbers in the community. There are less Jews now that there were a few



years ago and this trend has already continued for close on half a century. On the other hand, there is unquestionably a strengthening of much of the remaining community. It can therefore, perhaps be suggested that these two trends will struggle with each other over the next period. The community will indeed continue to lose numbers. How many, depends on the strength of the movement towards a more vibrant Judaism. In this struggle, we suggest, lies the future of the Jewish community of Britain. One other trend should be mentioned. Most of the provincial centres of Jewry are losing strength and declining in numbers, reversing a trend that developed at the end of the 19th century. It seems that we can expect a return to a community that is more exclusively based around London, returning to the early 19th century pattern.

11. What is the general contribution of the community to Great Britain as a whole?

There is no question that Anglo Jewry has contributed immensely to the development of British society. On the whole the contribution has been towards the economic development of the society. This is a trend which has continued since the activities of the first Marranos in trade and commerce. Over the years, a large number of Anglo Jewish businessmen have made a great impact on the commercial and economic development of the country, a contribution that has been recognized by the conferring of honours by the country on many Jews. Jews have made a certain contribution to academia and to the cultural life of the country although arguably this pales in comparison with the parallel contribution of American Jews in these fields. It should be mentioned that in line with the general tendency of British Jews to see themselves as extremely British, much of the contribution of Britain's Jews has been made by them as British or English subjects rather than as Jews.

12. What is the relationship with Israel in the Jewish community of Great Britain?

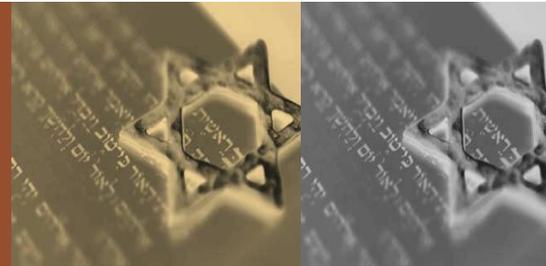
The community has been supporters of Israel since the founding of the Jewish state. The earlier ambivalence which characterised the community leadership has on the whole vanished. However, many in the community make a major differentiation between Israel's existence and the specific policies of Israeli governments. The high point of support for Israel was undoubtedly 1967 where the two things – support for Israel's existence and for its government policies - came together in a tremendous outburst of Jewish concern for Israel before the war and pride at its achievements after the war. Since the mid to late 70's, there have been some strong voices of criticism within the community. Recently, in the Al Aqsa intifada, the community has tended to rally round out of a feeling that it was Israel's right to exist that was at stake. This does not necessarily imply support for the specific policies of the government and on this issue there is a strong debate within the Jewish community and in its press.



In addition, Israel visits are a major feature of the lives of many teenagers and the youth organizations that sponsor them. Zionist youth movements have seen many of their graduates coming on Aliyah, a central part of a fairly large Aliyah movement over the years. At the moment however, this trend seems to be on the decline.



Introducing Anglo Jewish voices



Ruth was born in the early 1940's to parents who came from Europe before the war. She teaches sociology at a left-wing college in London.

"I'm not ashamed of being Jewish. Far from it. But I am fairly ashamed of my community. I don't see anything about this community that isn't mediocre. I don't see any creativity. I don't see any passion. I don't even see any learning going on. Not in the way that learning is meant to happen, with excitement, with engagement, with meaning. Quite honestly, the way that things are going on here I don't really see why the whole thing is so important. If all that three or four thousand years of culture and history can produce is this kind of mediocrity where the name of the game is conformity and keeping up with everybody else and not embarrassing the name of the community, then I frankly don't understand what the big deal is all about.

Look, I've read a lot about Jewish history and culture and one thing I can tell you. Forget about the religious side for a moment. Jews have been the radicals of society for thousands of years. From Abraham onwards, they've been at the forefront of just about every movement for change in the world. To be Jewish, the way I understand it, means never to accept the status quo. Always to think and to examine things for their real value. Not getting caught up in fashions but working for - believing in - things which matter. That's what I think being Jewish means. To fight against the world for the things that you really believe in and to work for a better world. Now I personally don't accept the traditional religious beliefs. I'm an atheist, a non-believer. But I see the Jews fighting for a belief that they hold and which everybody else fights against. They have passion. They have their beliefs. They are even prepared to die for those beliefs if they must.

Now, I ask you: Is that Anglo-Jewry? I don't see anybody here willing to fight for something worthwhile. Besides fashion and furnishings, who gets really enthusiastic about anything? This is a community which exists rather than lives in a creative and vibrant way. And it's not a small community. They talk about some 350 to 400,000 Jews here. Don't you think that that's enough people to create something meaningful? How many Jews were there in Ashkenaz in the Middle Ages? Not more than a few tens of thousands of Jews, I'm sure – but look what they managed to create. And here? Us? Enough said."

Richard is Ruth's son. He is a student in Manchester.

"I'm very close to my Mum. Really I am. I have a lot of respect for her opinions and I guess I always have. I always listened to her and often agree with her. Now when



she talked about her feelings for Anglo Jewry in the mid 70's, it might be that she was right. It's hard for me to judge, but I have a shrewd feeling that if I had been an adult then, I'd have agreed with her. As I said, I usually do. She's usually right. How many kids say that about their parents?

But I don't recognize the community that she's talking about! O.K. That's a bit of an exaggeration. I know that it's there, still, today. But the truth is that parts of the community have changed out of all recognition. Every winter, I go to the Limmud conference, and we get some two thousand people coming together and having an absolute blast! She talked of learning? It happens with a vengeance. Till all hours of the night – and then we sing and dance. Now if that's not community, what is? And passion??? There's no lack of that there. And it's not as if Limmud is the only thing. There are lots of interesting things happening in this community. You should see the adult education classes. Many of them are bursting at the seams. And this is the same Anglo-Jewry, sterile and uncreative, that she was talking about then.

The interesting thing is that she wasn't the only one. There was a whole group of young Jewish intellectuals that were all saying the same thing. So how do you explain it? I have no real answer to the question. But it seems to me that something has begun to move, something has begun to change in this community, and it's all to the good. It's been needed for years. Maybe we're coming of age. Maybe we don't need to feel so defensive in terms of our relationship with the English non-Jews. Perhaps many of us are starting to feel really confident to declare that we are proud to be Jews without the need for apologizing. I'm not sure but I can tell you this. Whatever it is, it's good. I just hope that the many thousands – the tens of thousands, maybe even the hundreds of thousands here who haven't realized what the whole thing is all about, wake up before it's too late and start to get involved before they drop out of the community. And my mum? She's coming with me to Limmud next year."

