

The shul president who's worth his weight in gold

When Leon Silver opened the Aron Kodesh at the East London Central Synagogue in Nelson St, a stash of Sifrei Torah were revealed which were shrouded in ancient velvet with embroidered texts in silver thread gleaming through the gloom, caught by last rays of afternoon sunlight.

Leon said that no-one any longer knows the origin of all these Sifrei Torah, which were acquired as nearby shuls closed or amalgamated with the departure of Jewish people from the East End since World War II. Many Sifrei Torah were brought over in the nineteenth century from all across Eastern Europe, and some are from the eighteenth century or earlier, originating from communities that no longer exist and places that vanished from the map generations ago.

Leon Silver is President, Senior Warden and Treasurer of what is more correctly called Nelson Street Sefardish Synagogue, one of the few remaining active shuls in London's East End. Leon has selflessly devoted himself to keeping this beautiful shul open for the small yet devoted congregation – mostly in their



eighties and nineties – for whom it fulfils a vital function. An earlier world still glimmers here in a shul that may not have seen a coat of new paint in a while, but is well tended to by Leon and kept perfectly clean with freshly hoovered carpet and polished wood by a diligent cleaner of ninety years old.

Leon's cool grey eyes sparkled as he spoke of this shul that means so much to him, and of its place in the lives of his congregation.

"I grew up in the East End, in Albert Gardens, half a mile from here. I first came to the shul as a little boy of four years old and I've been coming here all my life. Three generations of my family have been involved here, my maternal grandfather was the vice-president and my late uncle's mother's brother was the last president, he was still active at ninety-five. My father used to come here to every service in the days when it was twice daily. And when I was twenty-nine, I came here to say Kaddish after my father died. I remember when it was so crowded on Shabbos, we had to put benches in front of the bimah

to accommodate everyone. Now it is a much smaller congregation but we always get a minyan.

I'm a professional actor, so it gives me plenty of free time. I was asked to be the Honorary Treasurer and told that it entailed no responsibility – which was entirely untrue – and I've done it ever since. As people have died or moved away, I have taken on more responsibility. It means a lot to me. There was talk of closing us down or moving to smaller premises, but I've fought battles and we are still here. I spend quite a lot of hours at the end of the week. We have a Kiddush after the davening: cake, crisps and whisky. I do the shopping and put out the drinks. The majority here are quite elderly and they are very friendly; everyone gets on well, especially when they have had a few drinks. In the main, they are East Enders. Now, even if young Jewish people wanted to come to return to the East End there are no facilities for them. No kosher butcher or baker, just the kosher counter at Sainsburys.

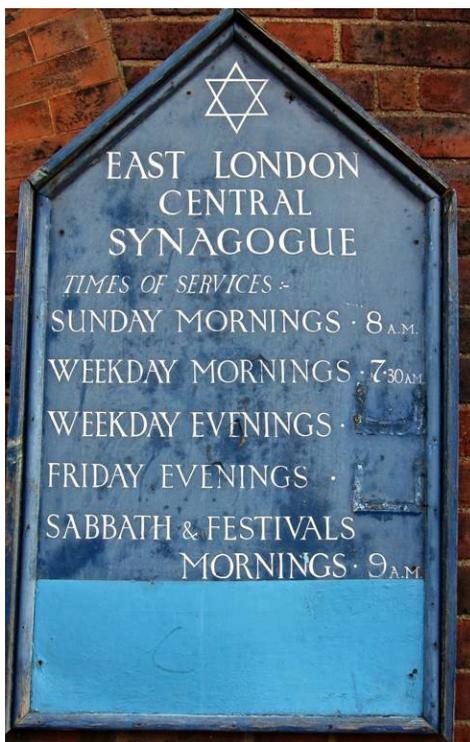
My father's family came here at the

end of the nineteenth century, and my maternal grandfather Lewis (who I'm named after) came at the outbreak of the First World War. As a resident alien, he had to report to Leman St Police Station every day. He came from part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and he came on an Austrian passport, but when my mother came in 1920, she came on a Polish passport. Then in 1940, my grandfather and his brothers were arrested and my grandmother was put in Holloway Prison, before they were all interned on the Isle of Man. Then my uncle joined the British army and was told on his way to the camp that his parents had been released. My grandparents' families on both sides died in the Holocaust. My mother once tried to write a list of all the names but she gave up after fifty because it was too upsetting. And this story is true for most of the congregation at the synagogue. One man of ninety from Alsace, he won't talk about it. A lot of them won't talk about it. These people carry a lot of history and that's why it's important for them to come together.

When Jewish people first came here, they took comfort from being with their compatriots who spoke the same style of Yiddish, the same style of pronunciation, the same style of worship. It was their security in a strange new world, a self-help society to help with unemployment and funeral expenses."

Thanks to Leon, it is easy to understand the imperative for this shul to exist as a sacred meeting place for these first generation immigrants – now in their senior years – who share a common need to be among others with comparable experiences. Polite and softly spoken yet resolute in his purpose, Leon Silver is custodian of a shul that is a secure home for ancient Sifrei Torah and a safe harbour for those whose lives are shaped by their shared histories.

Thanks to the Gentle Author: Spitalfields Life for permission to publish this story which appeared this week on his website which profiles interesting personalities of London's East End from the present and the past.



Reubens revived

AD Kahn

The West End of London's only kosher restaurant Reubens, which shut earlier this year, is to reopen after a buyer was found for the sought-after venue.

Reubens closed its doors in May, 46 years after opening, due to a family bereavement and the site was placed on the market with agents Davis Coffey Lyons.

It has been taken on by restaurateur Lee Landau, who is behind the S Group, which includes café chain Soyo, pizza and milkshake bar Pizaza, the upmarket Delicatessen in Hampstead and Pita in Golders Green.

Reubens will reopen following refurbishment. Jonathan Moradoff, director of agency and leasing at Davis Coffey Lyons, said: "Reubens had become a culinary institution in the Jewish community over many generations, as well as for tourists enjoying attractions in the area.

"Mr Landau already is very highly regarded in kosher cuisine which puts him in a fantastic position to capitalise on the following that Reubens has established over so many decades in London."

Mr Landau added: "We are thrilled to be giving Reubens another lease of life, while importantly maintaining the integrity of this well-loved institution."

