

Salomon Israel, Writing Master in Oxford, 1745
—*alias* Ignatius Dumay

BY CECIL ROTH

IN my article on the Jews in Oxford after 1290,¹ I mentioned the name of one Salomon Israel—or should it be Israel Salomon—who apparently taught fine writing in Oxford in Hebrew and English in 1745. I knew of him and his activity only from a typically ornate specimen-sheet, bearing his name and profession in English and two Biblical verses in Hebrew, beautifully executed, which is preserved in the Mocatta Library, London, and was reproduced with my article. Other than this, I had found no mention of him anywhere.

I have now gradually begun to build up his biography: and it was worth the while, for he emerges as a remarkable, if not reputable, Oxford character of his day.

On the death in 1800 of Mrs. Eliza Berkeley, widow of George Berkeley, formerly of Christ Church, who had been a canon of Canterbury from 1768 to 1795, it was found that she had left by her will to Mrs. Tyrell, her son's boarding-dame while he was at Eton, 'to hang up in her Eating Room the Ten Commandments in Hebrew written by the Famous Jew (Ignatius Dumay) who was thirty years ago at Oxford and is mentioned by William James in his horridly stupid ungrateful Life of sweet Bishop Horne of Norwich, hoping that it may induce some of the Young Gentlemen to learn the Language of Heaven'.² The lapse of time indicated (the will having been drawn up some time before her death) brings us towards the mid-eighteenth century, the period when the writing-master Salomon Israel was active, and it seems likely enough that he and the 'famous Jew' Dumay are to be brought into association. True, if the conjecture is correct, Salomon Israel must have been converted to Christianity, for Ignatius could not possibly have been a Jewish name: if therefore Ignatius Dumay was described by Mrs. Berkeley as a Jew, she must have meant an ex-Jew. Dumay has a French flavour about it: so has the spelling of the name Salomon, instead of Solomon, suggesting similar geographical origin. Here was a further, if somewhat insubstantial, reason to imagine that the once-Jewish

¹ *Oxoniensia*, xv (1950), 63-80.

² *Archaeologia Cantiana*, LXXIX (1955), 122.

SALOMON ISRAEL, WRITING MASTER IN OXFORD

calligraphist Ignatius Dumay, who was active in Oxford in the middle of the eighteenth century, was identical with the Jewish calligraphist Salomon Israel whose presence is recorded there, still apparently a professing Jew, in 1745.

The conjecture received confirmation by consulting the volume by the Reverend William James mentioned so disapprovingly by Mrs. Berkeley, *Memoirs of the Life, Studies and Writings of the Right Reverend George Horne, D.D., Late Lord Bishop of Norwich* (London, 1795), a work with which, alas, I was not previously familiar. Here is to be found (pp. 101-6) a long though by no means flattering account of Dumay which, without mentioning indeed that his original name was Israel Salomon, makes the identification reasonably certain. Dumay, according to James, who knew him well, and had a deplorably bad opinion of him, was a French Jew born on the borders of Lorraine, who combined we are spitefully informed 'the ingratiating address of a Frenchman . . . with the unprincipled mind of a Jew'. He was however a calligraphist of considerable ability, who 'wrote Hebrew with consummate elegance', and could turn his hand to drawing and any other work of art. Having left France, as James suspected, under a cloud, he arrived in Oxford as a boy, not yet twenty years of age, earning his livelihood as a Jew pedlar, the earliest perhaps recorded here, his stock consisting of a few seals, pencils, and trinkets. James took him up, and encouraged his ability. He now made a number of admirable writing specimens for his patron and other persons in Oxford, no doubt similar to that which first directed our attention to him: by 1745, on the evidence of this document, he had set himself up as a writing master. Naturally, the Oxford theologians attempted to convert him to Christianity, but though ostensibly impressed he was unmoved. In due course he made his way back to France. Here he was in fact baptized as a Catholic, presumably under Jesuit auspices, under the name Ignatius (Dumay?). He then joined the French army, where he had a chequered career: organizing desertion, quarrelling with an officer whom he ran through with his sword, fortunately without fatal outcome, serving in the wars in Germany and being taken prisoner. The opposing general, Prince Ferdinand of Brunswick, whose personal acquaintance he apparently now made, sent him back to England with a letter of recommendation to the Hanoverian Secretary at the Court of St. James's.

He arrived back in Oxford in 1761, now it seems posing as a Protestant, and suffering from sore eyes, the result, he said, of staring at the sun during the recent transit of Venus, though James seems to hint at a more reprehensible cause. He presented himself before long to Dr. Horne, then Fellow of Magdalen of which College he was later to be President, but failed to receive any substantial help from him. He entered therefore temporarily into the employment of Dr. Benjamin Kennicott, then engaged on his monumental, but

CECIL ROTH

according to his critics useless, work on the text of the Hebrew Bible, and assisted him for a year or two in this enterprise. In due course, inevitably, they quarrelled. He thereupon evolved the ingenious plan of forging Biblical manuscripts, in order to demonstrate simultaneously the unreliability of Kennicott's criteria and the inadequacy of his scholarship. It is not known whether anything tangible resulted from this.

Dumay had by now acquired a wife and child and in order to support them taught for a time at a school in Bedfordshire. Before long he returned to Paris, obviously a Catholic once again, and apparently a celibate, receiving there the patronage of the Capuchins of the Convent of St. Honoré. With their encouragement, not to say collusion, he ventured into authorship, publishing anonymously a venomous pamphlet against Kennicott and his methods: *Lettres de M. l'abbé de *** ex-Professeur en Hébreu en l'Université de *** au Sr Kennicott anglois* ('Rome', i.e. Paris, 1771), in which he spitefully bit the hand that had fed him. This was followed soon by an English translation, conceivably from his own hand: *Letters of Mr. the Abbott of *** ex-Professor of the Hebrew language in the University of *** to Mr. Kennicott. Translated from the French* (Paris, 1772); this version being prompted no doubt by the prevalent report that the redoubtable authority on ancient languages to whom it was addressed was unable to read French. A rebuttal was obviously necessary, and it was forthcoming before long in *A Letter to a Friend occasioned by a French pamphlet lately published against Dr. Kennicott* (London and Oxford, 1772), which overlooked or suppressed many of the arguments and was widely believed to be by Kennicott himself. Naturally the matter was not allowed to rest here. On the pretext that the original English version of the letters was unsatisfactory, as indeed it was, another was prepared and published in the following year by William Stevens, Treasurer of Queen Anne's Bounty and cousin of Dr. Horne, one of the severest critics of Kennicott and his methods; this incorporated some additional materials, in which both sides were impartially attacked: *A new and faithful translation of letters from Mr. l'abbé *** to Benjamin Kennicott with an introductory preface, in answer to a late pamphlet published with a view to vindicate Dr. Kennicott from the arguments and facts alledged against him in the French letters; and an appendix. Without the imprimatur of F. T. A. Ricchini, or the Recommendation of Archbishop Assemani* (London, 1773).³

Dumay's connexion with these letters is nowhere indicated in them. His authorship is nevertheless assumed by the Bodleian and British Museum catalogues, and is stated explicitly by Dr. James, who adds, however, that his Franciscan patrons were really responsible for the work. One of the two copies in the Bibliothèque Nationale, moreover, has on the title-page the manuscript

³ This publication was noticed at some length in *The Monthly Review*, XLXI (1774), 11-13; for the original cf. *ibid.*, XLVII. 245.

SALOMON ISRAEL, WRITING MASTER IN OXFORD

note : ' par M. Du May juif converti (" rabin " added above the line) qui avoit été adjoint à Kennicott et avoit travaillé a [vec lui?] '.⁴ The information is reiterated in J. M. Quérard's *Les Supercheries littéraires dévoilées* (Paris, 1847, I. 157) followed in Barbier's *Dictionnaire des ouvrages anonymes* (cols : 1257-8), where we learn that these letters were composed by Joseph Adolphe Dumay, Jew of Metz, converted, assisted by the Capuchins of Rue Saint-Honoré.

The *Letter to a Friend occasioned by a French pamphlet lately published against Dr. Kennicott* sneeringly refers to this association, and Dumay's character, in speaking of Kennicott's assistants in Oxford : ' Another, employed for some years by Dr. Kennicott in the Work of Collating . . . was once a *Soldier* in a Foreign Army . . . What is now become of him . . . these Gentlemen [the Paris Capuchins] I understand can best tell : but if my intelligence be authentic, perhaps they cannot tell what *would* become of him, if his Countrymen were made acquainted with his *History*.'⁵ On the other hand, the author apparently refers to himself in a passage of the original publication in which he states that Kennicott had the benefit of the assistance of a Jewish convert, skilled in the Hebrew language, who had even taught it at Oxford, and was anxious to work with him ; but that he preferred to avail himself instead of the services of this eminent scholar's son, who at the age of sixteen or seventeen knew no Hebrew at all.⁶ The father must have been married, then, at the time of his first Oxford residence.

The name of the University where the author of the *Letters* had ostensibly been Professor of Hebrew is indicated only by asterisks, and it is impossible to fill the gap. I cannot nevertheless withhold the suspicion that, distance lending imprecision as well as charm, Dumay boasted abroad that he had occupied this august Chair in Oxford. How the transition from Ignatius to J. A. [Joseph Adolphe] Dumay took place, unless indeed two persons are in question, I cannot suggest : possibly Dr. James's memory may have misled him, but on the other hand this type of person was not unlikely to shed a name which became unpopular, as that of Ignatius was after the suppression of the Jesuit order in 1767.⁷

Dumay remained in Paris for some time after this controversial excursion, perhaps as teacher of English, and drawing on his English experience by publishing in due course *Méthode aisée pour prononcer la langue angloise sans le secours d'aucun maitre* (Paris, Barrois jeune, 1778). Thenceforth, he disappears from view, James suspecting, though without evidence, that he may have played

⁴ Information from M. Jossierand, Conservateur en chef du Department des Imprimés.

⁵ P. 33.

⁶ P. 115 ; mistranslated in the English.

⁷ Some other specimens of Salomon Israel's Hebrew calligraphy may perhaps be traceable still among anonymous miscellanea in College libraries : I should be glad to know of them.

CECIL ROTH

some part in the mob activities in Paris during the Revolution. Whether or no this is so, one may confidently say that Salomon Israel, *alias* Ignatius, *alias* Joseph Adolphe, Dumay, provides a welcome diversification in the somewhat humdrum eighteenth-century Oxford scene.⁸

⁸ In the article referred to above, on Jews in Oxford after 1290, mention was tentatively made of Mark Moses Vowell, 'Reader of the Hebrew language at Oxford', who sent a communication to the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1751 regarding the authority of the Masorah. That he was of Jewish birth is now certain: according to the accounts of the Hanaper of 1773, he with John Zeres were maintained as converted Jews at a charge of 1½*d.* a day each during the past year, by the Master of the Rolls (in his quasi-sinecure capacity of Keeper of the Domus Conversorum). From a biographical sketch in Bodl. MS. Top. Oxon. c. 72, it appears that he was now seventy years old, having been born in Silesia in 1703, the son of one Leib Wiener: he had studied in Pressburg, Prague etc., and arrived in England in 1739 'with only an Irish halfpenny in his pocket'. From February 1745 he taught Hebrew in Oxford, obviously overlapping and competing with Salomon Israel, and was before long baptized under the name of Mark. In October 1748 he published on a single sheet his proposals for printing a Hebrew grammar, which however does not seem to have made any progress: but he was still in Oxford three years later and, as now appears, survived to old age. The controversial pamphlets referred to above state that Kennicott was assisted in his work at Oxford before 1767 by only one born Jew, an ex-sailor, other than some ignorant and inexperienced youths: to my regret, I have not been able to identify him.

I have described in detail the family record of another contemporary eighteenth-century teacher of Hebrew of Jewish birth, David Francisco Lates (1702-1777) in an article, 'An Italian Family in Oxford in the 18th century', in *English Miscellany*, Vol. 1. x, (Rome, 1958), 163-171.