



**The Bentwich family at 58 Avenue Road, September 1913**  
Clockwise from upper left: Margery, Norman, Susannah, Herbert, Nita Michael;  
Dorothy, Naomi, Carmel; Jose, Thelma, Hebe , Budge

When Herbert Bentwich returned from the Maccabean pilgrimage ready to move the family to Palestine, Susannah had no intention of leaving England. Realizing that Herbert's energies needed a new focus, she encouraged him to pursue a long cherished dream of becoming a barrister and thereby possibly appointed a judge. When he was learning law, Herbert Bentwich studied to be a solicitor because his parents needed support, and qualifying as a barrister was a more expensive process and less certain source of income, than qualifying as a solicitor.

For twenty years Bentwich's practice had provided a comfortable life for Susannah and the children. Nevertheless his ambition to be appointed a judge stayed at the back of his mind,

## Points of no return

and since all judicial appointments were made from the ranks of barristers he would not be eligible until he became one. For a man in his forties to abandon a flourishing practice and become a barrister was a risky move. But Bentwich decided to try; he encouraged himself by thinking of eminent judges who had started as solicitors.

As a first step he decided to take a partner. It would give him some leisure to prepare for the change, and looking ahead he expected the solicitors who took over his practice to be a source of the briefs that a barrister depends on. From among many applicants for partnership he chose Robert Thesiger Watkin-Williams, who was well qualified, and also the son and grandson of judges of the High Court.

In 1897 Bentwich was well known in his profession. . He was an acknowledged expert in copyright law. He researched his cases diligently and pursued them zealously. He brought the same conviction of rightness to his clients' legal disputes as he did to political disputes in communal affairs. He worked long hours, and expected the same of his staff. Once, during the summer when the family was at the seaside, Herbert wrote, "I beat the record last night by staying here with a full staff till past two in the morning to complete a brief for counsel."

Watkin-Williams was an easy-going English gentleman, who brought to the firm his personal charm as well as the distinction of tradition. But he did not approve of Bentwich's driving pace. When a member of the staff quit on a week's notice, Watkin-Williams told Bentwich, "A decent man who is worth anything would never stay here with the hours we keep. He does exactly what I should do in his place." Nor did Watkin-Williams share Bentwich's intransigent style. A case came up in which Watkin-Williams advised a compromise. Bentwich disagreed. He wrote: "If you prefer always to give way, and put up even with a loss, to avoid apparent difficulties with other people, you will certainly gain the character of an agreeable opponent, but you will run considerable risk of losing what is infinitely of more value, the reputation of maintaining and insisting upon the right... I would prefer to keep the reputation in the firm which I am proud to have secured for myself. "

The partnership fell apart.

In 1901, at the age of forty four, Herbert Bentwich began to read for the Bar. Two years later he was called to chambers at the Inner Temple. Though he loved being there, he lacked the flexibility and flair needed by a barrister. Moreover, having quarreled with his former partners, he had no ready access to briefs. He became the proprietor and editor of the Law Journal, an authoritative publication that flourished under his care for twenty years, but his

## Points of no return

income diminished.

At the same time, Bentwich involved himself heavily in Zionist politics. In 1898 he went to the Zionist Congress in Basel, where he was welcomed warmly and given a post of honor. He was also asked to draft rules for a Jewish Colonial Trust. After a year's hard work, he could find no way to accommodate Zionist realities to the rules defining an English Company; at the Third Congress, after taking a prominent part in the discussions, he resigned as legal advisor. He remained a leader of English Zionists, and one of their regular delegates to Zionist Congresses.

Bentwich, was a disciple of Ahad Ha'am, who believed that "Every true Jew, be he Orthodox or liberal feels in the depths of his being that there is something in the spirit of our people-- though we do not know what it is-- which has prevented us from following the rest of the world along the beaten path...has led to our producing this Judaism of ours." (quoted by Hertzberg in The Zionist Idea) and that Zionism was important as a road to spiritual renewal. In line with his belief in the essential connection between Jews and the land, Bentwich stood with Weizmann in insisting that there was no home for spiritual Zionism except in Zion. When Russian pogroms led Herzl and others to favor a British proposal to offer Jews an autonomous settlement in East Africa (Uganda), Bentwich, like Weizmann, opposed the move. He was accordingly, an oddity among English Jews, in being a Zionist, and at the same time a controversial presence among English Zionists, many of whom favored plans for autonomous Jewish settlements outside of Palestine. He remained, nonetheless, a leading figure among English Zionists. Chaim Weizmann lists him as one of ten men present on February 17, 1917, at the first full dress conference leading to the Balfour Declaration (T&E p238).

Susannah, lukewarm about the whole Zionist enterprise, questioned what she saw as Herbert's over-involvement in Zionist affairs. Herbert heard her, but remained involved. From one Congress he wrote: "I am afraid you will rather shrink at the hosts of new friends I am making here; but I assure you that it is a real pleasure to meet so many earnest devoted men, and it is something even for our children that our family name should be recognized amongst the leaders of a movement that will live in history, and perhaps secure a glorious future for our people."

As the years passed, Susannah increasingly resented the amount of time and energy that Herbert gave to Zionist meetings and projects. She once wrote: "There are so few evenly balanced educated minds interested in the question [that the work is] very arduous. I know it

## Points of no return

takes it out of my old man, and I, like Mrs Herzl, do not take too kindly to it in consequence. He is fatigued for a day or more after meetings, and although it may be for a good cause, it is bad for the wife and means a very big sacrifice.”(LRFp21)

Nonetheless Susannah was a gracious hostess to every guest, and Herbert felt free to invite anyone at any time. The Holm was his castle.

Together with professional frustration and Zionist quarrels, Herbert Bentwich faced upsetting shifts at home.

Lilian, the oldest child, grew up as the ideal daughter, beautiful, gentle, and good, trying to be everything that Father and Mother wished. Annie Dispecker (who became a lifelong friend) gave her first impressions:

"When I rang the bell at 58 Avenue Road a young lady, aged about seventeen, opened the door, and my first impression was of wonder at her beauty: she was the prettiest and sweetest girl I had ever seen, and her dress was tasteful and very becoming. I think she liked me too, for we conversed, she in broken German, and I in broken English, for some time until Mrs Bentwich came in, and my appointment as governess was arranged. One of my duties was to accompany Lilian to Lily Monagu's Girls Club, where she taught immigrant girls English, and very soon, when my English improved, I took a class also. I well remember the fun we had riding on top of the bus, eating oranges out of the large bag which Lilian brought with her for the girls. She loved to be generous; to treat her younger sisters to sweets on Shabbas; to buy flowers and arrange them for her mother; to prepare little "surprises" for everyone; and by Sunday there was never a penny in her pocket."

When Lilian was eighteen, returning with her parents and Norman from a holiday in Norway, her diary shows complete identification with her parents. She wrote: "Mama, Papa, and I start for Cromer, where we find most of the chicks in their Sunday best, awaiting us at the station....The bonne bouche; though I have spent a glorious time I have missed my little dear sisters..Nita has made all look lovely with floral decorations. Spent a happy evening. the chicks, Nita, Margery, and Budge playing the fifth trio of Beethoven which they had prepared in our absence. Laus Deo."

Two years later a young rabbi, an English Jew with a pulpit in New York, came to London with an introduction to the Bentwiches from Solomon Schechter. Within a few weeks, Lilian fell passionately in love with him, and he with her. He proposed marriage and she accepted. Herbert Bentwich opposed the match (he may have hoped for a son-in-law, who was richer and lived in London). In any case he insisted on medical certification before giving his consent to the marriage. When Rabbi X was diagnosed as having a "weak heart,"

## Points of no return

Herbert forbade the marriage, and would not even an engagement that might allow the young man's health to improve. He said there was too much risk that Lilian would be left a young widow. (Ironically, the rejected suitor outlived the man that Lilian married.) Lilian was heartbroken. Susannah was distressed. Family myths of harmony and paternal infallibility were shaken.

The next summer Israel Friedlander visited London, also with a letter from Solomon Schechter introducing him to the Bentwiches. Friedlander, a brilliant scholar born in Poland and educated in Germany, had been recruited by Schechter to teach at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Lilian was inspired by Israel's broad knowledge, his Yiddishkeit, and his idealism. He in turn was impressed by the family atmosphere and charmed by Lilian.

In August 1904 Herbert and Susannah's annual "honeymoon" included the six older children (Lilian, 22, Norman, 21, Nita, 20, Dorothy, 18, Margery 17, Budge, 15). It was a strenuous three week tour of the Swiss-Italian Alps. They crossed glaciers, and hiked up to forty kilometers in a day. On the Italian side of the border none of the Bentwiches could make themselves understood; a letter home describes a slapstick scene of Herbert struggling to get a boiled egg for breakfast. Being Bentwiches they also took musical instruments along. One evening Susannah arranged for an impromptu concert. Norman wrote home: "In the evening we delighted-- I mean I hope that we delighted -- all the people in the hotel; and by 'we' I mean Mother, Margery, and I, and by 'all the people in the hotel' I mean most of the inhabitants of the village... with violin squeaks under the name of Bach duets."

Two weeks into the trip, Israel Friedlander and his friend Dr Benderly met up with the Bentwiches, bringing kosher meat and welcome currency (Herbert had run out of cash). They spent several days together; and when Israel left to return to America, he had Lilian's assurance that she would marry him the next year. Again Herbert objected to the match.

This time Lilian insisted on her right to decide. As a compromise, the couple was allowed to correspond through Mother. Susannah received Israel's letters, and answered with reports about Lilian, and with strong hints of what she, Susannah, would like to see in their relationship:

In your next letter to me I should like you to refer in some way to Lilian's keeping up with her music. I fear she is sacrificing this lately to rather much German. It would be a thousand pities to neglect an accomplishment for which she has taste, and which cost her so much time and thought. I handed your enclosed Hebrew article to Lilian according to your commands --I think she has been too busy to read it. Every spare moment has been taken up with the essays. She has finished another, 'Positive and Negative.' [Lilian was

## Points of no return

trying to translate Ahad Ha'Am's essays from the original Hebrew]. We are always certain of one thing, and that is, whenever she comes home from the East End she is merry as a bird, and one sees her at her happiest.. I fear the West End functions cannot boast of as much.

Herbert Bentwich kept trying to dissuade Lilian from what he considered an imprudent marriage. Lilian was not to be moved. After some months she wrote: " I am unwilling to believe, yet I am persuaded that you do not quite understand me....I would ask you to put more trust in me, and to let me feel that you do not consider me weak and stupidly impressionable.... I have far too great a capacity for loving and want to be loved too much to marry a man whom I do not love, and who is in any way unworthy of those who are nearest and dearest to me. Trust me, dear Papa, to act as I know you would have me act.

On September 26, 1905, Lilian and Israel were married, in the garden of The Holm, and went to live in New York.

Encouraged by Susannah, the other daughters were pursuing individual goals. Nita found a focus in building a life with Michael Lange in Palestine. Budge studied art at the Slade school. Dorothy went for training as a nurse; Naomi, who had strong intellectual interests, supported herself as a typist when her father refused to fund her studies at Cambridge. Hebe, hoping for a scholarship to Girton, spent some months in Paris, studying at the Sorbonne. Herbert felt defeated. He wrote to Susannah: "As regards the children I ask you to help me back to the position from which I have somehow been displaced, of the representative on earth of the Father in heaven, with all the reverence, love, and gratitude which this must carry with it."

In those years Margery was a flitting carrier of each parent's dreams. She gave successful concerts in London, and in Berlin, and Breslau, but would not? could not? in any case did not fully submit to the "penal servitude on the four strings" that Kreisler had given as the basis of achievement. She was also a sometimes enthusiastic Zionist; but she did not make a committment to life in Palestine. She fell, briefly, in love with a young Zionist rabbi, but the relationship soon foundered.

In 1911 Margery and Budge accompanied their father to the Zionist Congress in Basel. There Margery wrote to Nita that though Michael could not have stood the nerve racking noise and the hammering calls to order, she, Nita, "would have felt the great ideal and faith which is wrapt up in the movement. You know the feeling at the end of the Neilah service on Yom Kippur. Well it was something like that, only intensified a hundredfold. The Congress so still and

## Points of no return

quiet after all the turmoil that had gone before; the splendid body of men on the platform, each one with a different point of view. but all making for the same point through different ways."

At this Congress Margery met Arthur Ruppin and other Zionist leaders, and she undertook to translate Ruppin's book *Die Juden der Gegenwart* into English. Eventually she finished her translation, and on October 11 1912, the proofs arrived. As she went through them carefully and laboriously, she said that by that time she "hated the sight of them." In England both Budge and Margery became involved with giving talks at Zionist gatherings.

In the spring of 1913, Margery was twenty-six years old. She wanted to be independent, but her income from concerts and teaching did not support the life she was used to. She wrote to Naomi "it must be grand to be actually earning one's living." Mrs Ruppin, who was establishing a musical conservatory in Palestine, invited Margery to join her staff as a teacher, and she was tempted to accept.

In April, having agreed to speak at a drawing room meeting on Palestine, Margery felt anxious. She worried that it would be a fiasco "even at this distance it is rather a nightmare and takes the taste out of life for all other things." When the talk went well, Margery asked Naomi to make a copy of it, saying "I cannot be ashamed of it as I meant every word....Perhaps someday something will come out of it, and anyhow this much has already come that I am great friends with Dr. Hochman! What it may lead to depends on us both and it is a great responsibility. It is lovely to feel that one can be of help to anyone, even if it puts a great strain on you."

By May 7, Margery considered herself "practically engaged (to Rabbi Hochman)}, but "Mother and Father want us to wait a month or so,...till they are satisfied it isn't a passing impulse on my side. If you want to know what brought me to the final conclusion read Peer Gynt, and pray for me to grow more like Solveig,.... How sweet to lead a man straight. But I am not worthy. I can think of nothing else naturally, and today and tomorrow look blanks to me because I am not to see him till Thursday evening. But there is heaps and heaps to do to make myself ready. I am so helpless and incompetent in great matters. But I mustn't be led by him; I must either lead him or both of us go headlong downhill."

A week later she wrote to Naomi again, "I am getting along all right, but lots of breakers ahead. Can you let me have my papers back or if you are an angel type me an extra copy?" And on May 24: "Ever so many thanks for typing my stuff. One gets a better idea of the value of things when you see 'em in print. I knew my stuff was poor before but never knew how thin till I

## Points of no return

read it in the typed copy. I have promised to speak at Mrs Model's and shall try to do something better if I can....As to the other matter it is harder than you think; harder than ever I thought because he does not love me. He has made his heart hard and impenetrable so that he is no longer capable of loving anybody. He imagines he does and that is what makes it so hard. He is so blind, so misunderstanding. But I must go on. It would be cowardly to give up now. I have had some bad times I can tell you since last week.....Pray for me to grow strong and see straight.

In the middle of June she was no longer engaged to J. H. and "very far from being happy....we play at being friends and every time we see each other it seems to open a wound afresh." On July 4 she wrote: "My darling Nay, Your letter was very sweet and comforting, but with the bitter aftertaste of being all a hopeless mistake. If you only knew how vilely I am constantly behaving on no provocation whatsoever. I hate myself more often than I should, and am always repenting the thing I did an hour ago....[Hochman] neither writes nor phones and we haven't met anywhere. It is a wonderful relief, and yet! Last Saturday we arranged that he should come in for a talk during the afternoon, but as it was a glorious day and I had an invitation for a country walk with Herman Cohen and party I phoned him up in the morning and asked him to come at 6 o'clock instead. Of course he got the huff and didn't come. So there we are."

In July Margery wrote to Naomi that she was learning to play the organ, with "quite a famous organist" (Sidney Reid), and she was studying harmony with Rebecca Clarke. "Altogether the fiddle gets neglected, but I think to its advantage in the long run." A week later "Mrs Ben Yehuda of Jerusalem was here this morning trying hard to persuade me to come out to the Music School. Don't persuade or advise me, but don't be surprised if I decide in that direction. I must think of it seriously at this time."

Margery worried about being financially dependent. She thought of going around to all the schools in London to see if they wanted a violin mistress. She wrote, "I must get money and be independent; I simply hate to ask Father for everything, as on this trip to [the Zionist] Congress. I know it is a struggle for him, and that he hates to deny us anything when we want it."

In the winter of 1912-1913 Hebe, age 19, was in Paris studying at the Sorbonne to perfect her French, in hopes of getting a scholarship at Girton. While there she met and fell in love with Eugen Mayer, a German lawyer, employed by the Jewish Colonization Association (I C A), a philanthropic association designed to assist poor Jews in countries of persecution, to help them emigrate and settle elsewhere in productive employment. Its offices were in Paris.

In August of that year Susannah rented a house on the coast of North Wales. and Eugen

## Points of no return

came over from Paris to visit. He stayed in a town five miles away, and to spend the day with the Bentwiches, he walked over rather than wait for the train. Margery described him as "of a very sensitive and artistic nature, extraordinarily at his ease with all the family....there is no doubt of mutual great affection between him and Hebe....You may imagine whether Hebe is happy or not!"

In the summer of 1913 Herbert and Susannah Bentwich sold their lease on 58 Avenue Road. Their children were moving away. Lilian lived in New York with her husband and three children; Norman was a legal advisor to the British Civil Service in Cairo. Naomi was living in Cambridge. Nita and her husband, preparing to settle in Zikhron Ya'akov, no longer needed their house in London. There was an eager buyer for the lease on 58 Avenue Road; Nita and Michael transferred their lease on 21 Cavendish Road to Herbert and Susannah.

The year before, Susannah and Herbert had taken their daughter Naomi to Europe to celebrate her twenty first birthday. On a walk there, Herbert told Naomi how deeply in love with Susannah he had been. He thought there had never been such a love in all the world. Susannah said, "It was a good thing I was too young to know what it meant."

Leaving 58 Avenue Road Susannah gave up the dream of family unity that The Holm had embodied. A formal photograph of all the family (except for the Friedlanders in America) in front of The Holm looks like a statement of achievement in the face of defeat.

In the fall of 1913 Susannah wanted time to prepare for the Bar Mitzvah of Joseph in February 1915. During the winter of 1913-1914 she moved the family into the house on Cavendish Road with what seemed to Margery "much of her old vigor and all her old courage."