

Obituary George Gee

BY THE JC
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Born Gillingham, Kent, January 12, 1921.

Died London, July 21, 2008, aged 87.

Active in communal life for over 60 years, George Gee made United Synagogue history as the first person voted president in a contested election.

A warden of Brixton Synagogue in his 20s, he became the longest-serving US treasurer from 1961-73, then vice-president for eight years. He chaired US committees on placement, the chief rabbinate, the chief rabbinate conference and Singer's Prayer Book publication.

In the 1970s he was a long-serving member of the Shechitah Board and Kashrus Commission. As US president from 1981-84, he chaired the World Conference of Synagogues and Kehillot.

His war service led to his chairing the Jewish Committee for HM Forces from 1971-98, when he became life president. He was also treasurer of the Friends of Jewish Servicemen and Women.

His most personal connection was with the Jewish Deaf Association. Founded in 1951 by his father-in-law, Julius Newman, to provide Jewish amenities for one of his own children, its care was shouldered from the mid-1970s by George as president and his wife, Evelyn, as chairman.

In 1998 he organised the JDA's move from Stamford Hill to new premises in North Finchley. Only two weeks before his death he welcomed JDA guests to a garden party in his Highgate home. He always respected the dignity of members. Though he never learned sign language, they lip-read him.

George Gee moved as a child to South London. His father, Albert, was an earlier warden of Brixton Synagogue under Rabbi (later Dayan) Morris Swift, who had a deep influence on young George.

Barely out of City of London School, he went into the army in 1940. An officer in the Royal Engineers, he served in the 1944 Anzio landing and the later stages of the British military mission to Greece. He married on leave in 1944.

Joining the family business, Aygee Ltd, founded by his grandfather in 1881, he developed it into the UK's largest private glazing contractor and glass merchant, and headed industry bodies. Aygee was sold in 1985 and he concentrated on his property interests.

He loved the history and art of glassmaking and was senior past master of the Worshipful Company of Glaziers and Painters of Glass. From 1976-2002, with a short break, he chaired two trusts for preserving and restoring historic stained glass and other pieces.

Issues during his US years included funding for Jews' College, which moved out of the West End in 1982, and the campaign to allow women onto synagogue boards of management - implementation finally began in 1988.

The contested 1981 election completed the democratising of the US. The challenge arose when his predecessor, S S (Salmond) Levin, wanted to override the two-term limit he himself had set.

George's act was not taken in any revolutionary spirit. He was a courteous man with deep veneration for Jewish law and tradition. His sense of fairness led him to update and improve ministers' conditions of employment.

The end of his three-year term in 1984 coincided with controversy over the appointment of Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu to head the London Beth Din, arising from the dayan's uncompromising reputation and large salary.

But he always upheld the dignity of the rabbinate. His last committee post in 1989 was to choose the current Chief Rabbi - Sir Jonathan Sacks.

He loved sailing and once moored his yacht in Caesarea's Roman port. After being diagnosed with lung cancer a year ago, he toured stained glass windows in Ireland and conducted Seder.

He is survived by his wife, Evelyn; son, Duncan; two daughters, Trudy and Caroline; and six grandchildren.

The Chief Rabbi writes: George Gee was a gentleman in the fullest sense of the word. He was gracious, charming, a man of total integrity, a man who embodied the best of what the United Synagogue meant to so many for so long, and one of the reasons why I joined it.