David Kessler 1906–1999

David Kessler, who died on 24th November 1999 at the age of 93, was for well over 50 years at the helm of the Jewish Chronicle, the world’s oldest Jewish newspaper. Taking over as Managing Director from his father Leopold, a mining engineer who had moved in Zionist circles and had assisted Theodor Herzl, David was subsequently the newspaper’s Chairman and was responsible for turning it into the most important and influential newspaper in the Diaspora. His active engagement in editorial and business policy alike, and the exercise of his imaginative mind, shrewd instincts and inexhaustible energy, did not stop with the paper itself, but led also to a diversification of literary, scholarly and publishing activities under the umbrella of Jewish Chronicle Publications.

It was this organization which owned and maintained the Journal of Jewish Studies from 1951 (volume 2, no. 2) to 1975 when the Journal came under the auspices of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. David’s capacity for bold intervention was demonstrated in 1970, with the appointment as editor of Geza Vermes, who—as readers scarcely need reminding—is still very much in post, and whose more detailed retrospect on this history can be found in last year’s spring issue. The editor was also now freed from accountability to an advisory board. Thus the notable stability and the high standing of JJS through the last quarter of the twentieth century flow directly from the care and vigilance of David Kessler.

David was a prominent figure in Anglo-Jewish life, aptly associated in Rabbi David Goldberg’s speech at his funeral with ‘that Anglo-Jewish Edwardian generation’ whose consciousness of their own good fortune accentuated their sense of responsibility to society. This sense of service was fully shared with his wife Matilda. One of David’s major interests was the fate of the Falashas of Ethiopia and, as Chairman of the Falasha Welfare Association, he was involved not only in the transfer of a large part of the community to Israel, but in the protection of those who remained. In 1982, his travels and academic enquiries on the subject resulted in The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, which went into a second edition. David served for a period as chairman of the Wiener Library and he strove, though in vain, to keep the Library’s holdings intact in this country. Beyond the confines of the Jewish community, he was a founder member of the Minority Rights group. On his home territory of North Buckinghamshire, he was well-known as a discriminating campaigner on environmental issues and as a historian with an unrivalled feel for the local countryside and its buildings. Various of David’s interests and tastes were admirably combined in a delightful essay published in his ninetieth year and entitled The Rothchilds and Disraeli in Buckinghamshire. In 1996 David was awarded the OBE for his public service. Within his own very wide circle of friends, however, it is above all for the liveliness and breadth of his interests, his always stimulating companionship and, not least, the warmth
of his hospitality that David will be remembered. The editors of JJS express their sorrow and their gratitude, and salute the passing of a generous and enlightened benefactor.

Tessa Rajak