



HISTORY OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN AUSTRALIA

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History of the Jewish community in Australia

The history of Jews in Australia all started with the eight Jewish British convicts (perhaps 14, according to some) being transported from Great Britain to Botany Bay, in 1788. They were aboard the First Fleet - the 11 ships that left Great Britain to form a penal colony that would eventually become the first European settlement in Australia. Ikey Solomon and Esther Abrahams, who arrived with the First Fleet, were amongst the first convicts who were Jewish. Most of the Jewish convicts came from London, and ranged from the tender young age of 8, to around 75, though the most common age of convict were around the mid-20s. A larger majority of male convicts were convicted and transported, and all were from a working-class background.

In the beginning, the established religion of Australia was the Church of England. All Jews, together with Catholics and all other races, were forced to go to Anglican services every Sunday. However this did not last, and the Anglican Church controlled their attendance only until the 1840s. The first step that the Jews took to initiate an established Jewish community, was the formation of the Chevra Kadisha (Holy Burial Society) in Sydney in the year 1817. In the year 1820, the Reverend Doctor Cowper, allocated a small patch of land in the corner of the then Christian cemetery. However it was only until the year 1832, that that the actual allocation of land was officially approved. Slowly but surely the extreme minority of Jews started building themselves up. The first Jewish communal services, were launched in the year 1820, in the beginning held in people's private homes. The services were run by Joseph Marcus, one of the only convicts with Jewish knowledge. Eventually 10 years later in the year 1830, Rabbi Yakov Levi Saphir (1822–1886) a visiting Rabbi from Jerusalem, arrived in Sydney Australia, and eventually moved around all the Jewish communities in Australia. He recorded his experiences there and gave for the few Jews of that time, a real taste into the beauty of Judaism. The Australian Jews of that time even succeeded in buying a Sefer Torah! They started to conduct more services, more regularly, and in 1832 Joseph Barrow Montefiore became their first formal president of their community.

Following on from that, the Australian Jewish community started flourishing immensely. In the 1850s, multitudes of European Jews fled to Australia because of the gold rushes in Victoria and New South Wales. Then before the outbreak of World War II in 1939, many Jews fled from Germany, Poland, Austria, Russia and even Italy, to come to the land down under, a safe haven for them all. Along with that, the 2000 who, were deported from England, by Britain on the infamous boat, Dunera. Subsequently between the years 1946 and 1954, tens of thousands of Jews came from Europe and Shanghai, majority of them Holocaust survivors, and until this day numerous Jews have migrated from other countries, whether coming from South Africa, Hungary or Egypt.

As a result of this all, in the early years, many congregations started to establish themselves in, Sydney (1831), Melbourne (1841), Hobart (1845), Launceston (1846 and Adelaide (1850). The first official synagogue was formed in York Street, Sydney, in 1844, using in the beginning only a rented space. Unfortunately, however by the end of the 19th century, there was a considerable amount of assimilation and intermarriage amongst the Jews. Australian Jews were comfortable in their new surroundings, adapting to the lifestyle and culture of the typical Australian. Many Jews, especially the women realized and noticed this was a problem, and for fear of more assimilation and intermarriage, this caused most of the Australian Jews to combine and merge into their own small tight knit communities. By 1938 this had a positive effect, and caused rapid growth of the Jewish communities, and many more synagogues and Jewish facilities were established. For example the Great Synagogue in Sydney, which was consecrated in 1878.

Many Jews also began to settle in Victoria, due to the Victoria gold rushes, in the 1840s, hence the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation was formed in 1841. With the arrival of so many immigrants in the 1850s, and not enough room in the Melbourne Congregation, to accommodate them, the need for larger synagogues was crucial. Thus the construction of a 600-seat synagogue at South Yarra commenced in March 1855. This was followed by many more famous synagogues, and smaller synagogues in St Kilda, Geelong, Bendigo, and Ballarat. By the 1850s, during the time of the Victorian Gold Rush, Melbourne had become the largest Jewish settlement in the country, and a religious court - Beth Din - was set up in Melbourne in 1866. In 1895, the first Jewish newspaper, called the Hebrew Standard of Australasia, was published in Sydney, it is the predecessor of the Australian Jewish News.

Since the expansion of the Australian Jewish community's activities, so was the expansion of the population. Jews have contributed phenomenally to Australia, and many famous Australians, whether involved in politics or government, acting, to even comedy. Jewish women especially have made a significant impact and contributed a lot to Australia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They mastered and excelled in many fields, such as education, politics, business, law, music, literature, the arts and medicine. Dr. Constance Ellis (1872–1942) was the first woman in Victoria, to qualify as a doctor, and was also a leading communal figure. In education, Fanny Cohen (1887–1975) became headmistress of state school, Fort Street Girls' High School. In law Mahla Pearlman (1937) was one of the first female judges in New South Wales, also becoming president of the New South Wales Law Association. In politics Margaret Davis (1967–1978,) was the first Jewish woman member of parliament, in the New South Wales Legislative Council. In business, Helena Rubinstein (1870–1965) began her cosmetics career, producing creams to protect women's skin from the harsh Australian sun. Poppy King (1972), who was involved in cosmetic industry and business, was yet another famous Jewish Australian woman, the list is endless. We can see through these few examples, how much of an affect Jewish women actually had on the Australian Society, and are continuing to have on Australia.

Australian Jewish men and women served in the Australian Armed Forces in wars from the Sudan Campaign of 1885 through to the Vietnam War. During World War I, 11 percent of the Jewish community enlisted voluntarily, engaging in both front-line and home-front action. An estimated 15 percent of those who enlisted lost their lives, a figure higher than that of the general population. In fact Australia's greatest World War I leader was the famous Jewish Lieutenant General Sir John Monash. The brilliant well-known Australian university, Monash University is named after Sir John Monash.

Men also have had a tremendous impact on Australia, for example, two Australian Jewish Governors-General Sir Isaac Isaacs and Sir Zelman Cowen, who both represented Australia and were widely recognised as outstanding legal minds. In New South Wales the previous Governor, Gordon Samuels, and the Chief Justice, Jim Spigelman, are Jewish. Jim Spigelman, who is the son of a Holocaust survivor has been at the forefront of major human rights campaigns, and speaks freely and openly about his Jewish heritage. Jewish immigrant and businessman Sidney Myer, who was the founder of one of the most used department stores in Australia, Myer

The Australian Jewish community have also have established many communal representative organisations, such as The Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ). Which is the sole organization authorised to make representations to the government and the official spokesperson for Australian Jewry. As well as World Jewish Congress (WJC), World Zionist Organization (WZO), B'nai B'rith, National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW,) and so on. It also has created many clubs, such as sport clubs, and many Jewish museums have been set up all over Australia.

Australia is home to one of the most vibrant, colourful and unique Jewish communities in the world. Its distinctive closeness and warmth of the communities, emulates to the entire Jewish world around them. It's incredible how far the Australian Jewish community has gone, from being literally nothing into becoming something that would surpass anyone's wildest imagination, if they had lived in the early 1800s. Nonetheless we must never forget, where we came from, who our fathers are, and where are roots truly lie. We must constantly remember Israel, and pray for our brethren there and support them in any way we can, even while we are enjoying 'the good life' that Australia has to offer. We must recall all the suffering our ancestors went through for our survival, to have the freedom and opportunities we enjoy now. And lastly we must never be embarrassed or ashamed of whom we are, and continue spreading the name of G-d to all, and spread our Judaism willingly and proudly, as Jewish Australians.

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