



WHITHER PERTH JEWRY?

THE striking feature of the Jewish community in Perth is its vitality. This small Jewish community, numbering between 3,500-4,000 souls, encompasses the full variety of the fabric of modern Jewish life. Its institutions include a Jewish Community Centre, a Hospital, Old Age Home and Retirement Village, and Jewish Kindergarten and Day School from years K to 12 all set within the magnificent grounds of the Maccabean League. As well, in close proximity, is the newly built synagogue of the Perth Hebrew Congregation and the Liberal Temple David which conducts its own kindergarten.

This article seeks to examine some of the factors which have contributed to the differences between two of our small and comparatively isolated Jewish communities — Perth, a vibrant society, and Brisbane, possibly facing the threat of disintegration and extinction. It is based on research which could not be exhaustive, but presents the findings of a period of intensive research and interviews with some of the leading figures of Perth Jewry.

PERTH is possibly the most geographically isolated Jewish community in the world. As Louise Hoffman, active in oral history in Perth, commented, Perth is an outstanding example of the geographical effects on a Jewish community.

The distance between Perth and its nearest Jewish neighbouring community, Adelaide, is great and the community there is smaller and weaker. Adelaide does not act as a magnet to Perth Jewry unlike the larger Jewish centres of Sydney and Melbourne which have attracted members from Brisbane, Adelaide and Hobart. Over the years, Perth has lost members to Melbourne and Israel and through intermarriage so that its population has remained comparatively stable despite intakes through the various phases of migration. However, its numbers have not declined and in the last decade the community has increased in size.

Above all, Perth Jewry has not suffered from what may be called a 'brain drain' of religious leaders through the appeal of the larger Jewish centres which could offer more desirable conditions and salary. Numerous examples could be given of religious leaders, shochtim and so on who left Brisbane and Adelaide for better positions in the larger centres.

Both the 'push' and the 'pull' factors attracting Jewish people away from Perth were less strong than those prevailing in Brisbane and Adelaide. The unique character of Perth Jewry was moulded largely by the type of migration it received.

The Perth Jewish community is as old as the colony of Western Australia. The first Jewish settler, Lionel Samson, arrived in 1829 two months after the colony was founded. He married Fanny Levi in England in 1842 and brought her out to the new colony. Until the period of the West Australian gold rushes in the 1890s there were a handful of Jews only living in Western Australia. Between 1890 and the outbreak of World War I the Jewish community of Western Australia expanded rapidly from 81 Jews in 1891 to 1,259 in 1901 and 1,790 in 1911.

BY SUZANNE D.
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Among this first phase of migrants were many Jews from Safed in Palestine. This group which started to arrive before World War I increased in numbers after 1919, escaping the economic hardships of the Holy Land. Most of these early settlers from Palestine planned a temporary migration only. Their desire was to make sufficient capital to enable a return to Palestine. Many of this group, largely impoverished, disembarked at Fremantle, the first port of call in Australia, thinking they had arrived in the eastern states! Most did not have sufficient money to pay the fares to Melbourne and Sydney, even if they had wished to do so.

After the first arrivals settled on this basis, a process of chain migration began as those in Perth brought out other members of their families from Safed. Some of these families were long established Jewish families from Palestine while others had come from Tsarist Russia and, after a brief sojourn in the Holy Land, they moved on to Perth which also attracted a significant number of Jews fleeing direct from Tsarist Russia.

Of all the foreign Jewish settlers in Perth in the period 1881-1920, 9% came from Palestine while, with the effects of chain migration, 39% came from Palestine in the period from 1921-1930.



THE Jewish settlers from Safed and Tsarist Russia brought with them to Perth a strong tradition of orthodoxy and Yiddish culture, unlike the diluted orthodoxy of Anglo-Jewry practised

particularly by the Sydney Jewish community at the turn of the century.

With the rapid expansion of West Australian Jewry from less than 100 souls in 1890 to over 1,200 in 1901 Jewish institutions were established rapidly.

The first congregation was founded in Fremantle in 1887 but this was superseded by the Perth Hebrew Congregation founded in 1892 and opening its synagogue in Brisbane Street in 1897. The Fremantle synagogue was built in 1902 but was to be short lived. In 1908 the congregation was absorbed into the Perth Hebrew Congregation and all that remains of the synagogue is a Magen David on a shop front. Jewish communities were also founded in the gold rush towns of Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie.

For the more orthodox Jewish settlers, the Anglicised pattern of service followed by the Perth Hebrew Congregation had no appeal. They founded the Perth Jewish Association, a second, more orthodox congregation which built a synagogue known as the Palmerston Street shule.

In the decade before World War I Perth Jewry established more than houses of worship. It developed a strong Zionist tradition and a flourishing Yiddish theatre, again at a time when Yiddish culture was virtually unknown among the Anglicised Jewish community in Sydney.

The unique pattern of Perth Jewish life was influenced by the forceful personality of its first permanent minister, Rabbi I. D. Freedman who was to serve the community for 42 years from 1897 until his death in 1939. Rabbi Freedman, born in Hungary and educated at London University and Jews' College, London, realised that the future of Perth Jewry lay with the East European Jews in the community. He identified with them, absorbed them into the Perth Hebrew Congregation and in this way was able to retain the cohesiveness of the community.

At the same time, Rabbi Freedman was able to appeal to the highly Anglicised element in the Perth Jewish community through his close links with the general community. Rabbi Freedman was Jewish chaplain with the Australian troops in France, he was active in charitable work, later became President of the Returned Services League (RSL) and was a member of the Senate of the University of Western Australia. He was a close personal friend of both the Anglican and Catholic archbishops in Perth and was

said to play golf with each of them.

In his obituary, published in the Journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society, Perth Jewish journalist and writer, Philip Masel, noted that "In the forty years that followed, the State (of Western Australia) grew in greatness and he grew to greatness with it... The credit of whatever West Australian Jewry has achieved belongs to the example, inspiration and assistance of Rabbi Freedman".

This tradition of rabbinical leadership has inspired his two successors. Rev. Rubin-Zachs came from Adelaide to Perth to conduct Rabbi Freedman's funeral and stayed with the community. In 1956 he was granted the honorary title of Rabbi in recognition of his services to Judaism and he also remained in this one post until his retirement.

In 1966 Rabbi Shalom Coleman became the third Rabbi in the 92 year history of the Perth Hebrew Congregation, leaving his position as minister of Sydney's South Head Congregation. This history of rabbinical continuity has provided Perth Jewry with a sense of stability which both Brisbane and Adelaide Jewry have lacked in certain phases of their history.

Another striking feature of Perth Jewry is its strong support for Zionism, apparent from the earliest days. Australian Zionism, in Herzlian terms, was founded in Perth by Rabbi Freedman in 1900. While other rabbinical leaders, particularly in Sydney, stayed aloof from Zionism or even actively opposed the movement, Freedman remained its staunchest supporter, and this tradition was carried on by Rabbi Rubin-Zachs who was also President of the West Australian Zionist Association.

PERTH Jewry responded to the call from Zion not merely in words. When Israel Cohen, the first Zionist emissary to visit Australia, arrived in Perth in 1920 he was amazed at the warmth of his reception. Perth, numbering only 1,900 Jews, raised £10,200 while New South Wales Jewry, five times the size, raised only £15,500. This discrepancy continued for many decades with West Australian Jewry raising almost as much as the much larger Jewish community in New South Wales for UIA appeals.

By the 1950s Perth Jewry was

well assimilated into the general community and its numbers had not been significantly swelled by the pre and post World War II refugee migration. Eric Silbert in his book *Dinkum Mishpochah* claimed that the established communal leadership actively discouraged these migrants from remaining in Perth by telling them that much better employment opportunities existed in Sydney and Melbourne.

Dr Mossenson, whose father came from Safed and whose life reflects both active participation in the general community in the field of education and close commitment to Jewish causes, believed that the local Perth community which was "trouble free" was prepared "to export potential trouble" — Sydney and Melbourne could deal with the Jewish refugees.

These attitudes meant that Perth Jewry was not numerically reinforced and with losses through marriage to other states and through intermarriage faced a weakening of its communal fabric. Most of its younger members were second and third generation Australians who lacked a firm grounding in Judaism.

The answer to these problems for a few dedicated young members of the community lay in the founding of a Jewish day-school in Perth. This idea, which initially seemed like an impractical dream, has become a reality inspired by the dedication, determination and hard work of a few outstanding communal leaders.



The idea of a Jewish day-school for Perth was first suggested in December 1955 in the columns of the communal newspaper, the *Maccabean* by Mr Joe Berinson (at present a minister in the Labor government of Western Australia). He followed his initial article with comments by various members of the community — most claimed it could not be done.

In January 1956 the Seeligson Trust (based on a bequest from the late Phineas Seeligson who left almost the whole of his large fortune for charitable purposes to the Jewish community after his death in 1933) decided to withhold financial support on the basis that there was no suitable Jewish teacher in Perth. Yet, despite this inauspicious start, a Jewish day-school was created!

In 1958, Dr Ossie Toffler found a suitable Jewish kindergarten teacher, a Miss Sarah Finklestein, whom he had known in Sydney. With monetary support from the Seeligson Trust, a free school, the Seeligson Kindergarten, was started in February 1957 at the synagogue premises at Brisbane Street.

In 1959 eleven children enrolled in the first class of the Carmel Jewish Day School which developed with a new class being added year by year until by 1964 a full primary school had been established.

The most difficult problem was to persuade parents to send their children to a Jewish day-school. The two main objections were first that parents were worried about the educational standards

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of the new school and second that the isolation of Jewish children would leave them less well prepared to integrate into the general community in adult life.

As Mr Berinson commented: "On the educational side one needed to employ good teachers and the answer was established after two or three years. People could see good standards for themselves". On the isolation issue, they relied on the experience from elsewhere, especially Melbourne where "no one was growing two heads". Supporters of the school argued that the Jewish children were still living in a non-Jewish environment.

The problem of Perth Jewry was not too little contact but too much as shown by the high rate of assimilation and inter-marriage.

The high school of the G. Korsunski-Carmel Jewish Day School was established later in 1971 when more finance became available through the Seeligson Trust. Initially the high school was to cater only for pupils up to year 10. In 1975 the school faced a period of financial crisis but due to the changing of the terms of the G. Korsunski bequest through a court challenge and the beginning of federal assistance to non-government schools, this crisis was overcome.

At the same time, students from year 10 petitioned the school board for the school to continue on to year 12 and this request was met.

The new school, the building of which began in 1963 after purchase of land from the Maccabean League, has grown to become a bastion for the future of Jewish life in Perth. One controversial issue is that the school will not accept children of a parent converted by the Liberal movement.

Part of the success of the day-school movement in Perth and, indeed, the successful survival of the whole Jewish community, lies in its geographical concentration. In both Brisbane and Adelaide, Jews are dispersed throughout the city and it is not possible to point to any area as one of particular Jewish concentration. In this respect, Perth is very different.



IN A socio-geographical study (published in the journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society) Roger Hill has demonstrated how the original Jewish concentration in the City of Perth around the Brisbane Street Synagogue gradually moved to North Perth into the developing suburb of Mt Lawley.

The first Jewish settlement in Mt Lawley started before World War I and was intensified in the 1920s. It later spread to the neighbouring suburbs of Coolbinia and Menora, and Yokine and Dianella.

Initially, the religious institutions of the community did not follow this demographic shift, probably because of the comparatively static nature of Perth's Jewish population growth after 1920. In the early 1950s, the two synagogues, in Brisbane Street and Palmerston Street

were still in the City of Perth. When the Liberal movement began to develop in 1952, an attempt was made to take over control of the almost defunct Palmerston congregation.

The leaders of the Perth Hebrew Congregation stacked the Palmerston AGM with their membership and prevented such a takeover. In the long term this episode, which created great bitterness between the two sections of the community, was fortuitous. The new Temple David was built in the area of Jewish concentration in Mt Lawley.

When Rabbi Shalom Coleman assumed the ministerial leadership of the Perth Hebrew Congregation, he determined to create a more orthodox environment. For a Jew to be Shomrei Shabbat, it is necessary to live near the synagogue. Clearly the Jewish population did not wish to move back to the city centre. Because of this Rabbi Coleman determined to move the synagogue to the Jewish people to facilitate orthodox observance.

In the period from 1966 to 1974 this was achieved. At first efforts were made to buy land from the Maccabean League at Yokine for the new synagogue. A land grant from the government, in an area adjacent to old age homes, was then negotiated for a synagogue and youth centre. It is of interest to note that the street where the new synagogue is built is named after Rabbi Freedman. The Perth City Council bought the Palmerston Street Synagogue which helped to provide money for the new shule. Ironically, the Palmerston Congregation which was formed as a breakaway from the Perth Hebrew Congregation was to assist this same congregation which used funds from the sale of its property to build the new synagogue. A year earlier, in 1973, the Jewish Communal Centre was opened at the nearby Maccabean League grounds in Yokine.

By the mid-1970s Perth Jewry had achieved a communal cohesiveness distinguished by a geographical concentration containing the full variety of Jewish institutions. It is now possible to be a fully observant Jew in Perth without feeling socially isolated — a situation which does not exist in Adelaide or Brisbane because of the geographical dispersion of the community and the lack of kosher and religious facilities.

At the same time young people can choose to identify themselves with any other aspect of Jewish communal life — Liberal Judaism, Zionism, or simply the social, cultural or sporting activities.

It is these factors which have made Perth an attractive place to settle for many South African Jews — as well as the fact that it is only half the distance from Cape Town compared with Sydney and Melbourne.

This newest phase of immigration is strengthening the community. Many of the newcomers support Carmel School immediately, as they were accustomed to the Jewish day-school movement in South Africa. The Jewish Welfare Society is again active — not so much in giving financial assistance but in providing new households with the basic necessities such as linen, crockery and cleaning utensils until all the newcomers' household goods arrive by ship from South Africa.

It would be wrong to paint a picture of Perth as a panacea of Jewish life. The community is still very small and isolated. The problem of finding suitable marriage partners within the faith continues. Many young people are attracted to the larger centres of Sydney and Melbourne.

However, it can be safely said that Perth Jewry is "alive and kicking". A visit there is a worthwhile and heartwarming experience for any student of the history of Jewish survival.

IT WAS the year 1931; Yom Kippur day at the Great Synagogue.

Joey Davis, aged six, had been sent out to buy a surreptitious lunch okayed by God; by Him, it was permitted little kids could eat. He pushed himself through the shul doors and ambled down the aisle because he fancied joining his dad, second row, centre-front, facing the bimah. "Best seat in the House," said his father with pride.

Munching contentedly as he strolled, he was oblivious to the choked cry that sprang from the Shammus' mouth. He did sense a halt in the cantor's tuneful repetition of the Amida at Mincha, and was even dimly aware of the stifled chortles and muttered imprecations that accompanied his passage. But he wasn't all that bothered.

Both his hands clutched a bread roll from which pieces of cucumber and beetroot protruded, with coy glimpses of green lettuce here and there. Slightly disconcerted by the suddenly tense atmosphere, he allowed a slurp of bleeding beetroot to dribble onto his white shirt.

"Oh! Jesus!" His elder brother gave a small wail of amused laughter, rose to his feet, and grabbing Joey by the pants, gave him a bum's rush down the corridor and out towards the exit.

For a moment, Joey's father gazed impassively at the small drama, then reimmersed himself in the service. Mildly, he wondered if an angel with a flaming sword might come screaming through the ceiling to smite his small son. Nothing happened, so he mentally shrugged. Joey was Joey. By him, even the Lord must occasionally shrug.

His wife, upstairs in the gallery, became aware of a concert of horrified hisses intermingled with muted glee, and broke off an exchange of recipes on which she and her friend Nora Collins were discussing. Mouth agape she watched Joey, in a thwarted attempt, bend down to retrieve his dropped bread roll. She also noted the congregation fascinatedly observing the blasphemy.

The Shammus, turned to stone, glared down at the profane half-consumed food-stuff. With a small apologetic shudder, Mrs Davis continued looking on as Joey was man-handled by a grinning brother and given a heave-ho from the sacred precincts.

Joey's sister, aged 17, was oblivious to it all. She was busy. Holding up two fingers of one hand and pointing to herself with the other, her eyes were locked onto the eyes of a good looking young man downstairs who was vigorously nodding his head and pantomiming the same gestures. Roughly translated it meant "See you in Hyde Park at 2pm".

The pretty young woman sat back, satisfaction coloring her cheeks. Then she went into the same routine with four butterfly-gowned young women who exchanged similar gestures with several other beauties. Her name was Esther Davis. Her mother resumed the exchange of recipes with her friend.

The cantor took up his missed beat. The rabbi, whose eyes had never left the Talmud anyway, continued his absorption in the ancient words. The president threw a dirty look at Joey's father. Mr Davis gave an immense shrug. Being Joey's father one had to learn to shrug him off in order to survive.

The half-eaten roll that was Joey's lapse spilled forth bright red ribbons of beetroot, a flash of lettuce and a fragment of tomato. No-one seemed inclined to touch it. It remained where it lay. The Shammus pointedly gazed at the star-studded ceiling of the baroque synagogue, hands raised high in a supplicating gesture.

It was tacitly presumed Joey's brother would dispose of the

A YOM KIPPUR FASHION SHOW!



BY OLGA TOLTZ

impiety when he returned. Except for an envious stomach rumble from Aaron Slutskin, it was ignored. A silent rebuke to Lou Davis, father of the small sinner.

THE upstairs congregation lost interest. They had other things to think about.

"A scandal," hissed a group of pious aged ladies. "A disgrace. On such a holy day!" murmured a stout matron to a skinny matron. "Don't they look gorgeous?" murmured someone's elegant grandmother. "Making an absolute travesty of Yom Kippur." "Disgusting. What'll the goyim think?" "They look like a bouquet of sweetpeas." One sole admiring comment from a side aisle on the opposite side of the gallery.

Esther heard most of them and snorted. Old fuddy-duddies. Organdie. That was the fabric for this year. Organdie in all the soft shades of sweetpeas, just as the indulgent grandmother had said. Nine beautiful Jewish maidens, dressed to the teeth in wide floppy hats, wearing frilled and beflowered and flounced long organdie dresses. Organdie hit the top of the fashion charts in 1931 and more or less unbeknownst to each other, the girls had decided, to coin a current phrase, to 'let it all hang out'.



Sharp on the stroke of 2pm the exodus commenced. Drifting delicately through the frosted glass doors, they made their separate departures. They floated past the female congregation of chanting, head-buried-in-sidurs, plus an occasional over-zealous breast thumper, and wended their way down the stairs, navigating both approving and disapproving gazes with aplomb.

The busy traffic in Elizabeth Street halted for them as they streamed across the roadway. They really did resemble a bunch of sweet peas. Lining the park opposite the synagogue, the boys waited, grinned and openly admired. The chaffing and giggling commenced and floppy hats drooped as laughing

eyes threw back innocent raillery and exchanged more intimate looks that sent shivers down female spines and tautened certain parts of young male anatomies.

Click! Click! Click! Some enterprising (or bored) press photographer took shots of them. Some of the girls brazened it out. Some tried to cover their faces.

"After all," murmured a nervous voice, "it's Yom Kippur. Not Purim." "Who cares?" A defiant belle who looked as though she should be scattering coins to the starving masses, beamed into the camera lens.

Someone's mother grabbed a sweetpea by the elbow, and muttering harsh words dragged her back into shule. "I never should have let you buy that dress in the first place." The angry voice hissed away as it waited for the traffic to allow them to pass.

They stayed in the park for over an hour. Several other parents grimly crossed the road as word travelled through the synagogue. Then came the final touch. Joey Davis came dawdling over to join them.

"Everyone's talkin' about youse. Youse all gonna cop it when ya get back." That seemed to dim things. Though they made a valiant effort to regain the jollity and staginess of the preceding hour, it would not return. So they straggled back in twos and threes. The synagogue bore mute witness to their return. Almost mute. They were either pointedly ignored or furiously hissed at.

Like a bunch of wilting sweetpeas, they sat out the rest of the service. Each of them felt a sense of foreboding. None of them had known so many would appear in organdie gowns. It was just one of those coincidences. Instead of one or two upstaging the others, they'd made a ballet out of Yom Kippur and were edgily aware of it, though none would confess the fact.

The elders smouldered. The press had a small field day — muted only because a juicy murder occurred later in the afternoon. But 'never again' swore relatives and friends. The girls put a bold face on it. Some of them live amidst at this moment. Alas, not all; some have gone to that place in the sky where fashion is of no account.

But those who remain will remember the fashion parade in Hyde Park on Yom Kippur 1931.

(Joey Davis, by the way, got a wallop from his dad when they eventually arrived home. Not so much because he walked into shul eating a salad roll on Yom Kippur, but because it was time he received one anyway and the Yom Kippur business was a good excuse.)