



Perth Jewish Roots

Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society of Western Australia Inc (JHGS-WA)

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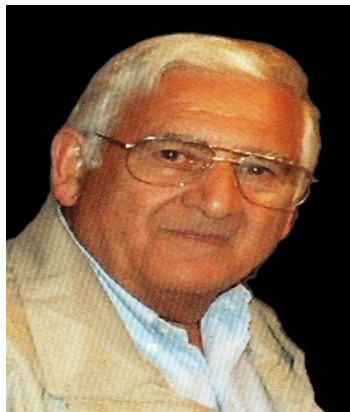
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NEWSLETTER

AUGUST 2025

EVENT THIS MONTH

GENERAL MEETING



Guest Speaker: Mackie (Max) Machlin OAM

Topic: “Machlin family earliest history including the Menora Picture Theatre of the 1950s”

Date: Sunday 24 August 2025

Time: 1.30pm – 2.00pm start

Location: Noranda Chabad Synagogue

**Entry: Members \$5.00 /
Non-Members \$10.00**

Max, more commonly known as Mackie, will talk about his family, immigrating from Israel, British Palestine, in the 1920s, life in Palestine. Family background and family life and early memories of life in Western Australia; how he and his brothers helped their father create the Menora Picture Theatre and Jewish traditions.

2025 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

It's that time of year again!

Sunday 24 August 2025

1.00pm start

at Noranda Chabad Shule

The AGM is a valuable opportunity to reflect on our achievements and plan for the future. We encourage all members and friends to attend and participate in this important gathering.

Please RSVP by Wednesday 20 August to assist with catering, seating arrangements and security. We look forward to seeing you there.

Michelle on

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David Ganon OAM An Early Childhood in Egypt and the Exodus to Australia

In the monthly presentation series of the W.A. Jewish Historical and Genealogical Society, a full room of attendees heard a most interesting talk from David Ganon. With a dry wit, he gave the account of his family who were forced to flee from their country, simply because they were Jewish. But this was a different story, in as much as they were not fleeing from Europe - but from Egypt.

David talked of the happy times of a privileged childhood in the Cairo of the early 1940's. His was a large affluent family living in a spacious apartment with many relations resident in the same building. They were sufficiently affluent to employ two maids and a cook and to spend summer weeks on beachside holidays in Alexandria.

David sketched the interesting characters of several family members, including a grandmother, who was undoubtedly "the boss"! He talked fondly of his father to whom he was very close, who had been born in Egypt, whilst David's mother was from Lebanon. This was an Ashkenazi family who held tight to their culture such as their celebration of a traditional shabbat. David said that the origin of his family was someplace in Tsarist Russia, and no doubt they had left for Egypt to avoid the widespread pogroms of the late 19th Century.

Yiddish was often heard spoken in David's household and both his parents were enthusiastic members of Cairo's Yiddish theatre, his mother being a competent musician who played the mandolin and the banjo and who possessed a fine singing voice. David's family were also very supportive of the Zionist cause.

These comfortable childhood years were shattered by the advent of a "time of troubles" as David put it, when his father received a tip-off that he was to be arrested for his involvement in Zionist organisations. So David's parents with other family members, determined to make a run for it under the cover of darkness.

The family were able to take scarcely any of their prized possessions with them and their escape was not made easy by neither parent having a passport or official documentation. But nonetheless, after some scary moments, they boarded a small cargo ship which took them from Egypt on the first part of their long journey from Cairo to Perth. His "exile from Egypt," as David ironically termed it.

David could not speak too highly of the invaluable assistance the family had received from Maurice Zeffert, which had enabled their migration and initial settlement in Western Australia. His talk of a blissful childhood, interrupted by anti-Semitism evoked memories of childhoods in times long ago amongst the older attendees – including my own childhood..



Michael Anderson



MEET ERIC SILBERT “The Pathfinder”

Article from the Fremantle Shipping News Edition #227

An online magazine all about Freo

13 June 2025 in “Fremantle People”

The name Silbert was synonymous with Fremantle for much of the 20th century. Barney Silbert’s Shoe Store at the corner of High and Market Streets, Fremantle was the most prominent sign of the well-known Fremantle family. Hilary Silbert wrote two articles on her Grandfather Barney Silbert and her Grandmother Minnie Masel. These articles were in our June and July issues of “Perth Jewish Roots”.

*In this article Hilary tells the story of her father –
Eric Silbert - “The Pathfinder”*

Hilary reflects on the life of her father Eric Silbert AM, a World War 2 RAF Pathfinder, a well-known Fremantle and Perth businessman and a great contributor to the life of Fremantle and Perth. It’s a wonderful story, lovingly told.

Eric Abraham Silbert was born in the front room of his parents’ newly constructed Federation style home in Ellen Street, Fremantle on 2 July 1922. He was the second child of Minnie nee Masel and Barney Silbert who had built their new home in 1920, after marrying in 1913. It was the only home Eric had known when he enlisted to serve in World War 2 in 1940.



He loved the house, having a bedroom on the verandah, and being opposite the huge expanse of Fremantle Park. As a very young child he managed to end up amongst a flock of agisted sheep on the Park! He was able to walk to school in minutes with Christian Brothers College, Fremantle being virtually next door.



For secondary school, his parents decided he should board at the newly built CBC in the bushland at Salter Point on the Swan River. Today it is Aquinas College. Barney and Minnie believed Eric might study harder if a boarder. Eric enjoyed school life as a boarder and felt the day boys were hardly there! Again, his boarder’s bedroom was on a verandah and he continued his lifelong love of sport.

Indeed, recently Aquinas honoured Eric at the campus in an alumni program involving a website and large posters around the school grounds.

His boarding school experience was an excellent introduction to his later wartime life in the Air Force. On leaving school, however, he worked at Barney Silbert’s Shoe Store in Fremantle, and gained his driver’s licence and some sartorial splendour.

In Eric’s words “It was a smart young businessman who commenced work in his new three-piece navy suit and felt hat. This was the essential dress of anyone engaged in commercial enterprise...this was the minimum standard of appearance after school uniform. I had a new image with a white two-collar fashion shirt; colours were not even available ... and twenty-two inch cuff bottom trousers really identified me as a young retailer.”

As soon as he was 18, he signed up for the Air Force. The war had broken out the year before, in 1939. He trained in Western Australia, then the Eastern States, with the RAAF – the Royal Australian Air Force – before arriving in the UK as part of the RAF – the Royal Air Force.

He always believed the training and leadership experiences of this period of his life was his tertiary training. He loved the friendships and team building that actually were matters of life and death. The living conditions would have related well to his boarding school experiences.



He was one of the lucky ones: he returned home aged 23, having been a Pathfinder with a crew flying a Lancaster bomber spotting targets for the planes that followed. He ended up with a bunch of medals including the DFC – the Distinguished Flying Cross.

A tribute to a school friend who did not return, was the naming his first born, Kevin. An historic moment Eric was honoured to be a part of before he returned home, was attending the memorial service for Prime Minister John Curtin at Westminster Abbey in London.

One of the anecdotes about Eric on his return to Perth from years with the RAF in the UK and still to be demobbed, involved him and a friend on the street in Perth in uniform when they came by a newspaper boy singing out, 'Here's the news, read all about it!'. Young Eric responded, 'We don't buy the news, son. We are the news!'

Eric's return to his home State saw him also returning to work in Barney Silbert's Shoe Stores which by then had expanded to include two more shops in Fremantle – and to playing several sports. He was an early squash player and returned to rugby where club meetings were held at the store. He had enjoyed playing rugby at school and while in the Air Force.

In terms of community involvement, Eric covered a breadth of organisations: he was involved with Freemasons as the first initiate admitted into Ad Astra Lodge no. 237 in February 1948. This was the newly formed Air Force Lodge and he went on to be Master Mason. He was a foundation member of Fremantle Apex and became President in 1951. Other organisations he participated in were Fremantle Rotary, the Fremantle Branch of the Liberal Party and on the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, Fremantle District.

Unbeknown to Eric, when he returned from active service, he was not aware that his parents no longer lived in the only home he knew. It seems during the War, the Silberts' Ellen Street home became home to the US Navy and Barney and Minnie moved to Nedlands.



Wedding Photo – Eric Silbert & Joan Tate

By the age of 25 Eric had married the girl next door. Not strictly true: her cousins lived in Ellen Street. The bride was Joan Tate, daughter of Rachel and Lionel Tate, sister of John Tate. They married on 11 February 1947, he complete with top hat and tails in 40 degree heat. War restrictions were not over so the bridal veil was borrowed. One month later the newly marrieds attended Eric's DFC Investiture Ceremony at Government House officiated by Lieutenant Governor Sir James Mitchell.



Investiture of DFC by Lieutenant Governor Sir James Mitchell 1947

Like his father Barney, Eric was a people person and was very interested in the store's staff and their families. What was quite quirky was the office the two brothers – Keith and Eric – shared when managing the High and Market Street store. It was up a steep staircase on a mezzanine level. As a child I remember visiting to be fitted for shoes and my father walking me around the corner of Market Street for ice cream from an Italian shop. This was the future Benny's, but back then ice cream only consisted of vanilla in a cone – no fancy options!

Dad's work in Fremantle meant every Friday night, he brought home fresh dhufish wrapped in white paper for Mum to cook beautifully. Yum. He also ate at the Boronia Tea Rooms every day at 1pm!

One thing my Father deeply valued, from every stage of his life, were friendships. Some of his wonderful friends were Bob Higham, Bill Dermer, Hugh Mellor, Syd Ryan, Chilla Porter, Norm Souter, Hugh Scott, Bert England, Bob Walker, Ron Warren, Jim Mazza, Gordon Westlake, Ron Lane and Ross Hutchinson.

His time at Barney Silbert's Shoe Store was a time when many students were employed during high school, university studies, and even when training for the priesthood. Father Brian Gore started at Barney's when he was in the old sub-leaving (year 11) and continued through his seminary studies. Eric and Joan were honoured to be the only non-Catholics at his ordination. They stayed in touch and Eric was one of the people who tried to assist Father Gore when he was arrested whilst serving in the Philippines.

Eric continued to be involved in many community organisations. He was President of the Pathfinders Association, WA. He was a Founder, President and Life Member of Temple David Synagogue. When his children needed a local kindergarten, he and other parents built one and he became the first President of the P&F. When the children went on to primary and high school, he was again President of the P&F. He was invited to be Patron of the Hodgkin's Disease Association; a warden to the War Memorial in King's Park; became a Justice of the Peace; a Government appointee to the Senate of the University of Western Australia 1975-86; awarded an AM, Member of Order of Australia in January 1979; and was also Chair of the Order of Australia 1987/88.



Presentation of AM – Member of Order of Australia
by Prince Charles 1979

A family business arrangement with cousins Cecil and Alec Breckler lead to the 1969 merger of Barney Silbert's Shoe Stores with Betts and Betts and Cecil Brothers. The High and Market Street shop was the most successful in the group.

This change in focus saw him stand for election as a City of Perth councillor. He was told he would never be elected first attempt – but he was!

He represented the West Perth ward from 1973 to 1990 and was Deputy Lord Mayor in 1978/9.

One incident while Eric was a councillor linked him back to his War experience. It involved a visit to Council House by a Dutch delegation. Eric regularly attended these civic occasions. He was talking to a very tall, younger Dutchman who asked him if he had ever been to Holland. Eric replied that his only visit was at the end of the War when he and his fellow Lancaster crew were flying in much needed food.

Eric described how they did not know any Dutch so wrote 'Guten Morgen' on the underbelly of the Lancaster and landed on a school oval. At this point, the visitor became quite emotional and told Eric he was one of the children on the oval that day and now had the chance to thank him.

Joan and Eric had four children and Eric was involved in all they did: he crewed for Kevin on his VJ and catamaran; he was an athletic official for Hilary at Perry Lakes Stadium and both would be regularly dobbed in as a driver for the range of the children's activities.



Young father with first two children Kevin and Hilary

The home Joan and Eric built for the family reflected their strong views of the type of construction suitable to our climate. It was an incredible design ahead of its time: light and bright, facing north, solar hot water, large cellar, indoor plants in the 1960s, gallery kitchen, pantry, flat roof, terraces, beautiful timbers.

It still stands today.

Every weekend Eric played music on the record player with a speaker on an extra long lead outside the house. As a result, we children knew every word of every song of all the musicals of the time!



Daughter Hilary's graduation ceremony with Eric,
member of Senate UWA

The kids made Dad tea on the weekend while he pottered around the house. The rule was to have it topped with boiling water, as we handed it to him. I believe this was a hangover from the War and cold tea.

His experience in the RAF gave him a long-term love affair with all things British: their humour, culture, ceremony and protocol, which he passed on. British TV was a part of our childhood. All in a family with no British background. He was always early for appointments which was in complete contrast to our Mother's habit of always being late.

In 1971, Eric came home after an historic encounter with the Russian Ambassador who was visiting Perth. At the time there was the plea "Let my people go" for Jewish people living in Russia who were discriminated against. In order to deliver the message to Ambassador Nicolai Mesiatsev, Eric devised a plan to print fake theatre programs containing this message and working with university students, deliver the 'program' to the Governor and the Ambassador at His Majesty's Theatre. Mission accomplished.

When he returned home from the theatre my sister Stephanie said to him that he had lived a remarkable life, so he should write about it. Dad replied he couldn't write, so she told him to make a recording. He did, and a friend typed up the manuscript. Thus, his autobiography entitled *Dinkum Mishpochah* was born. The title reflected his Australian and Jewish identity and was only meant as a letter to his children. It is in three sections and the middle third is a detailed account of his experience in the War and as a Pathfinder. It is often quoted in other books on the topic and also gave our family a glimpse of relatives and experiences. Ten years in the making, it was published in 1981.

Eric did not join the RSL or talk about his experiences in the War for decades. I learnt much when hearing an interview with a university student. He told them that anyone who said they weren't scared was lying. He also believed that the greatest pacifists are those who have seen war. What was such a revelation to me was to hear him say that he resolved, if he lived, he would serve the community. I thought he was just being a normal dad, not one that had such a track record with organisations and volunteering.

One amusing part of serving the community was in his role as a Justice of the Peace. By then he lived in a high-rise apartment in Perth and as a JP could be called at any time of the day or night, and often was. 'I wonder what the neighbours thought', crossed his mind one night as he was escorted into the lift by two tall policemen in the middle of the night to deal with yet another matter.

Eric always maintained an affinity with Fremantle. In the 1980s when *The Old Synagogue* complex in Fremantle housed a cafe and the boutique 'Skid Rose', the owner Rory asked Eric to design the replacement stained glass windows. They're still visible today if you walk into *Tonic and Ginger*. Some think they are the original!

In 1992 Eric turned 70. He never wanted a party for any birthday, so he was in for a surprise – a family picnic on Monument Hill. But first plans were made to include a stop at his parents' old home at 55 Ellen Street. The owner warmly welcomed the family. Eric had not been in it since he was eighteen and the owners wanted to hear his stories about that time and share their plans for the home for the future.

One memento of Barney Silbert's Shoe Store at the corner of High and Market Streets, Fremantle remains proudly in my house. When my father saw bookshelves being built either side of a fireplace at my home, he suggested the Barney's ladder, that was used to access the shoes higher up, would be perfect in my high ceiling study. And it was!

I have no doubt my father's World War 2 experience as a RAF Pathfinder, one of those sent ahead in the dark to locate and mark target areas, significantly influenced him for the rest of his life.

For me, he truly was a person who discovered or showed others the way ahead.

Eric Silbert AM died 22 December 2007.

* By **Hilary Silbert**

Hilary is the Granddaughter of Minnie and Barney Silbert and daughter of Eric Silbert

<p>PLEASE HELP JHGS-WA TO GROW Your stories, photographs and articles are needed. Please send them in.</p>
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