

THE AUSTRALIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

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The history of the Australian Jewish Community dates back to 1788 when about 750 convicts and their guards landed in Sydney to start a British penal colony. Amongst this first group there were about 16 Jews. More Jewish prisoners arrived, among them was *Ikey Solomon*, (widely believed to be the model for Dickens' Fagin) and *Teddy "Jew Boy" Davis*, a bushranger. Another convict settler was *John Harris*, who became Australia's first policeman! Prior to the arrival of the convicts, the only occupants of Australia were the Indian tribes, which were mainly Aborigine and Maori Tribes.

Joseph Marcus, a German-born convict with a good knowledge of Judaism, conducted the first services in 1817. By the end of the 1820's Free Jewish settlers started to arrive, one of which was Phillip Joseph Cohen. He began conducting services in his home. The number of Jewish settlers grew, and in 1831 a petition was sent to the governor of the county, and a congregation was formally established. Some of the other early settlers included the Montefiore family, Barnett Levy (who founded the first Theatre in Sydney)

Finally, in 1844, (the Jewish population was then approximately 900) the First synagogue building was consecrated. During the 1850's a gold-rush occurred (which lasted a short time) and a significant number of Jews migrated to Australia from England and Germany to seek their fortune!

Most of the present Jewish population is the result of waves of immigration, which followed the world wars. The British imposed a 25% quota on Jews arriving in Australia. In March, 1947, the ship *Johan de Witt* was the only ship to arrive in Sydney without the "quota", which was lifted by the immigration minister, *Arthur Calwell*.

Today, the Jewish population of Australia approaches 100,000 people, and approximately 40,000 live in Sydney. (The population of Sydney is close to 5,000,000.) As with many other cities, about two-thirds live in the Suburbs. It is interesting to note that more than 50% of the Jewish children in Sydney attend one of the five Jewish Day Schools.

There are 27 synagogues in Sydney, the majority (75%) of which are orthodox, the balance are composed of Lubavich, Sephardic, and Reformed synagogues. There are no conservative synagogues.

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There are also two michvas , eight kosher restaurants, and four kosher caterers. In addition, there are branches of every major Jewish organization Such as NCW, Hadassah, B'nai Brith, etc. There is a very active Holocaust survival group, *The Australian Assn of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and Descendants Inc.* which publishes a monthly magazine called **ZACHOR**.

Recently (published Sept.2000) an Australian survivor of the Holocaust, *Olga Horak*, has authored a chilling book on her experiences titled "*Auschwitz To Australia*". I thoroughly enjoyed reading the book!

The Great Synagogue in Sydney is the only synagogue in the business section of the city. The synagogue is "modern orthodox" which allows congregants to use auto and public transportation to the shul. (There are few places to park, so the vast majority arrives by ferry, train, monorail and bus). They also use electricity on shabbos and the high holy days. In all other aspects, however, the shul is strictly orthodox. This is a most magnificent shul. The magnificent façade was removed many years ago, and the exterior is most ordinary. (We would not have found it had we not had the address!) The interior, however, maintains all its magnificent splendor. Built in 1878, It boasts a membership of approx. 2,000. Of interest to note is that since the shul was built; the present rabbi is only the 5th rabbi in a span of 122 years!

Recently, due to increased concern over anti-Semitism worldwide, (although it is not really an issue in Australia) the Great Synagogue has imposed somewhat draconian security measures. Public tours are only on Tuesday and Thursday at noon. (We arrived at 11:55 a.m., and the doors were locked at 12:05 p.m.!) We had to undergo questioning, check *all* belongings (purses, cameras, etc.) and pass through a metal detector! Admission to services is by ticket only, and must be arranged in advance. The tour, however, was very impressive, and consisted of an interactive film in the synagogue proper, showing the history of the synagogue, and lights automatically turning on and off, etc. It was basically designed for non-Jews. As, according to the tour guide, a large number of tourists are not Jewish.

The Sydney Jewish Museum was a pleasant surprise. It has two permanent exhibitions, one on the culture and history of the Australian Jews, and the second, a history of the Holocaust, an interactive exhibit starting with Hitler's rise to power, continuing through the ghettos and concentration Camps and ending with liberation and the ensuing pursuit of justice.

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The Holocaust section also includes a recreation of a street in the Warsaw Ghetto, and many of the artifacts in the exhibit were donated by Holocaust Survivors who live in Australia. The Volunteer Guides are, in the main, Survivors of the Shoah.

One of the more interesting exhibits are copies of the **New York Times** from the late '30s and early '40s telling the full stories of *crystalnacht* As well as the rise of Hitler and concluding with the freedom of Jews from The concentration camps. I only wish that I had more time to read these!

A group of us had arranged for an early tour with the rabbi, who opened up the museum 15 minutes early, before the regular tours started. I was fortunate enough to take about 10 pictures, until a security guard stopped me. The rabbi is the "head honcho" and this is his full time occupation. He does not have a pulpit. He narrated a fascinating history of the country.

Lastly, a word about anti-Semitism. Although it is not very widespread in Australia, there is an occasional incident, but it has had a negligible impact On Jewish participation in Australian life. Jews have made important contributions to society in the fields of politics, sports, business, and philanthropy, as well as the in the arts, and in academic and professional fields.

In conclusion, we found that Australia, although far away, affords a new insight in the people "down under"