

OUR VISIT TO THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF SINGAPORE

Robert W. Case

The first beginning traces of the Jewish existence dates back to the *Jewish Synagogue Act* of 1840. It reads, “a piece of land was leased “ *on a Peppercorn rent*”* for the purpose of erecting a Synagogue”. The first Synagogue was erected in 1841 in the Boat Quay area, and although it exists no longer, the street where it was built still bears the name “Synagogue Street”. The trustees at the same time executed a lease for a plot of land in Orchard Road (Today, this street is the most fashionable shopping area in Sidney) for a cemetery.

Sir Manasseh Meyer built the Chesed El Synagogue in 1905, with basically his own funds. Sir Meyer has a fascinating background. He was born in Baghdad in 1846, and was basically educated in Calcutta, where there was a thriving mercantile Jewish community. When he was 15, he moved to Singapore, where he entered St. Joseph’s Catholic Institution for his further education. After his schooling, he returned to Calcutta to apprentice with his uncle, and then moved to Rangoon to start an import-export trade business. He then returned to Singapore in 1873 at age 27 and in a short time, he became the largest importer-exporter trader with India. By 1910 the thriving Jewish Community had grown to over 600 members.

When we attempted to visit this synagogue, we were first frustrated by a cab driver who insisted he knew where it was, but after driving around and around, we decided to find it ourselves. The Synagogue is situated on an elevated hill in a very private part of Singapore, and a 6-foot wall, with heavy iron gates, and with a security guard, surrounds the Synagogue. We finally talked to the guard, told him we were from America, and asked for permission to enter. He politely (but firmly) told us that he did not have a key, that the Synagogue is rarely used, except on Mondays for morning service, and for the high holy days. He did allow us access to the grounds in order that we could study the exterior architecture.

* *Peppercorn Rent* –A nominal rent, in theory one peppercorn, to indicate that the property is leasehold and **not** freehold. In practice, it amounts to a rent-free lease.



Photo by Robert W. Case

October 2002

The Chesed El Synagogue

The main Synagogue in use today is the *Maghain Aboth Synagogue* . This synagogue was built in 1878, thanks to the efforts of Manasseh Meyer. After the original synagogue was built, there were several modifications and changes that had to be made. For example, there were no provisions for a ladies gallery. Mr. Meyer, at his own expense, arranged to erect a gallery for them. Today the synagogue is the focal point of all religious events. In 1998, the Preservation of Monuments Board of Singapore classified it as a national monument.

When we went to visit the Synagogue, it was closed to the public, and like the Chesed El, An armed guard protected the premises. This time, however, was different! After explaining that we had come half way around the world to visit Jewish sites, He first wanted identification, then he let us in to take any pictures we wanted! (*However he followed us around*) The synagogue is very beautiful, in the sephardic style. Of interest to note is that Since we were there on a Thursday, the rear of the synagogue was set with tables, chairs, and place settings, as apparently they have a shabbos dinner before services in the synagogue.



Photo by Robert W. Case

October, 2002

The Maghain Aboth Synagogue



Photo by Robert W. Case

October 2002

Interior of Maghain Aboth Synagogue

Finally, I could not conclude this article without making several statements about Singapore. First, anti-semitism is non-existent. There exists an attitude of religious tolerance for all religions, and in the immediate area of the synagogue, you will find a Catholic Church, a Buddhist temple, a new Hare Krishna Temple, a Methodist church, Indian & Hindu mosques, and many more. There is a speaker's park (similar to Hyde Park in London) where orators are free to express their opinions-however; they cannot speak about religion or politics!

If you go there, you will find an ultra-modern city, with NO GRAFFITI or drugs! (The penalty for graffiti is "caning", and dealing in drugs, DEATH!

Chewing gum is not permitted, and there is a rather substantial fine for this.

The economy is booming! There is only 2.5% unemployment, the politicians are scrupulously honest, and they are spending a lot on the infrastructure on the island. They are just building their 4th and 5th rapid transit subways, and all the double-decker busses are air conditioned and equipped with TV sets. There are a LOT of parks, and are conveniently located throughout the island. The commercial shipping industry is no. 2 in the world, and the airport is ultra-modern. There is a full size Olympic swimming pool as well as a free Internet café with about 30 computers. Not only is it one of the worlds largest, but also one of the safest! The newest equipment screens all your bags, and then they are all individually checked and thoroughly searched.

In conclusion, Cele and I have have virtually traveled the World, and we both agree that this is the most beautiful City we have visited.



Robert W. Case
bobcele@yahoo.com

October 2002

