

# Jews

If Judasim were simply a religion and nothing else, this article would be irrelevant. The Jewish people, however, form an ethnic group with its history reaching back to the Old Testament; with its language, its customs, traditions, culture, literature, beliefs, superstitions, exclusivity, its overall uniqueness and its peculiarities; its galaxy of religious festivals, ceremonials and practices; its capacity for intense celebration; its ductility, flexibility, changelessness, resilience, malleability, ethnicity; its citizenship of every country and continent; its lunar calendar; its Saturday Sabbath; its dietary laws; its Mosaic Law; its affiliation to its spiritual homeland, the Holy Land of Israel; its devotion to its eternal capital, Jerusalem; its differences.

Jews settled in Queensland in the very first days of the colony and in other parts of Australia. Some were government officials, doctors, scientists, merchants, tradesmen or farmers, and some were convicts. They spread to all parts of this huge State. Though their numbers were, and still are, small, Jewish placenames can be found in many locations in Queensland and Jewish names are on gravestones in remote cemeteries. Apart from those from the British Isles, waves of migrants have come from every European country. The Russian Tsar and Hitler caused many Jews to emigrate from their countries. Others hoped to find their fortunes as in the case of prospectors who came to seek gold. South Africa and the Far East have also been sources of Jewish migration.

About 1859, when the colony attained separation from New South Wales, a number of Jewish families left Sydney to settle here and immediately set up a temporary place of worship in Tank Street, a Jewish religion school and a Jewish cemetery. In 1864 Rev. Joseph E. Myers of Sydney became the minister. In the same year, Jonas Myer Myers, his cousin, took his place. Though not an ordained minister, he very effectively carried out duties in Australia for 58 years, 43 of which were spent in Brisbane. At the same time, he conducted his own business and often served simultaneously as a preacher, teacher and collector. He was also *schochet* (one

who supervises the dietary requirements of a congregation) and *mobel* (he who carries out ritual circumcision). Despite vast distances and primitive means of travel, Jonas Myers went to his far-flung flock whenever necessary, to conduct the above-mentioned rituals or to perform weddings or last rites.

In March 1865 a meeting was called to find a temporary place of worship and it was agreed that a room in Bulcock's Building, Queen Street, be leased for the purpose. At a meeting on 19 March 1865, the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation officially came into being. This was commemorated exactly 100 years later by the erection of a plaque on the site on the portico of the Commonwealth Bank's main office. The congregation also had a burial ground on land that the former Lang Park came to occupy. In 1913 those who were buried there, and their monuments, were relocated to the Jewish section of the Toowong Cemetery.

The congregation's archives, beautifully handwritten in the rich language of yesteryear, have been preserved in the Brisbane Synagogue. In them are described the early struggles, hopes, successes and disappointments of this small congregation. Though its name is the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, in keeping with tradition, a spiritual name was also chosen — *Kehilla Kedosha Sbaarie Emuna* (The Holy Congregation of the Gates of Faith), and both names are to be seen over the portal of the Brisbane Synagogue, erected 21 years after inauguration. During those years, many sites were considered for the erection of a permanent synagogue of a size and style that the growing congregation felt would be suitable for immediate and future needs. Rising land values, the small size of the congregation and the difficult financial situation in the colony constantly frustrated their efforts. Various blocks of land were purchased, but lack of funds prevented the project from going ahead.

In 1875 Rev. A.P. Phillips became the minister with Rev. Myers acting as his assistant. Both ministers, with a group of laymen from the Brisbane congregation, aided members of Toowoomba

Jewry to establish the Toowoomba Hebrew Congregation, and about 30 men assembled there for worship during the High Festivals of 1872. On a plaque in the Brisbane Synagogue, it is recorded that R.B. Lewin, an official of the congregation, 'carried a Sepher Torah on horseback over the ranges for the purpose of installing public worship at Toowoomba'. (A Sepher Torah is a handwritten scroll on which is inscribed the whole of the Five Books of Moses, the Pentateuch.) A synagogue was erected at Toowoomba and consecrated in 1876. The building, with its internal fittings and minister's residence, cost £1800. It was dedicated by the first minister of the Darling Downs Hebrew Congregation, Rev. Samuel Goldstein. This was the first permanent synagogue in Queensland, the Brisbane Synagogue being dedicated exactly 10 years later. During the 1880s, small congregations flourished in Rockhampton and Surat.

On 7 July 1884 the foundation stone of the Brisbane Synagogue was laid. A competition had been held, and the winning design was that of Italian-born architect Andrea Stombuco whose works did much to beautify Brisbane. A year later a distinguished gathering, with many congregants and interstate visitors, attended the consecration of the finished synagogue. It had cost £6450 and is in the Byzantine style of architecture. It was opened free of debt.



*Facade of the Brisbane Synagogue*

A severe depression that lasted from 1891 to 1894 and the floods of 1893 caused membership to drop to 22, and many congregants had to be given assistance.

Men of the congregation served in the Boer War and World Wars I and II, and their names are recorded on Honour Rolls.

In 1896 an outbreak of illness at the Brisbane General Hospital was caused by the unhygienic preparation of meat. The Hospital Board turned to the congregation for the supply of kosher meat (cattle selected, slaughtered and prepared according to the very strict Jewish dietary procedures). For several years, 7000 pounds of kosher meat were purveyed every month.

In 1885 Rev. Phillips had been posted to the Toowoomba Synagogue, so Rev. Myers again took over the senior position. He turned 80 in 1908 and was given great honours by the congregants, but died the following year. His monument at Toowong Cemetery was erected by the congregation. Early in 1914 Rev. Friedlander took office and served until his death in 1926. Rev. Nathan Levine then served until 1936.

After World War I many Jewish migrants who had come from Europe through Asia reached Brisbane. They formed the basis of the South Brisbane Hebrew Congregation, which was formed in 1915.

The rise of Nazi Germany in the thirties, and its persecution of the Jewish people, resulted in many of them settling in Brisbane and becoming valued and active members of Hebrew congregations. The City Hall was filled to capacity when a protest against Nazi oppression was called by the Lord Mayor in 1933.

For a period, I. Meerkin acted as minister until the induction of Rev. J. Wolman in 1937.

World War II cast a shadow over the congregation. Many men left to take up active service, and children were evacuated by government order to country towns to escape possible aerial attack. The entry of the United States into the war brought hundreds of thousands of US servicemen and women here, thousands of whom were Jewish. Some only passed through, others were based in Brisbane for years and attended the synagogue and contributed to the Jewish activities of this city. Especially on Sabbaths and major festivals, homes were crammed with American personnel as well as Australian servicemen. The war's end saw the departure of these visitors and some war brides. Rev. Wolman left to minister in New Zealand, and

Rabbi A. Fabian (the congregation's first ordained rabbi) took up the position of spiritual leader.

A structure containing a hall with catering facilities and a fully equipped religious school was erected at the rear of the Brisbane Synagogue in 1955.

The postwar period has been remarkable for the upsurge in population in the city of the Gold Coast. From a prewar seaside village, the area has become a crowded and busy resort city. Many Jewish retirees from Brisbane, interstate and overseas have settled there, and a temporary synagogue was set up soon after the war. In 1961 a permanent synagogue was dedicated, and this was augmented and beautified in the years that followed. A Liberal Temple was opened on Chevron Island in 1982. Both these congregations, and the entire Gold Coast Jewish community, are a hive of social and religious activity, and much is done to support the spiritual homeland in Israel. In 1987 the city of the Gold Coast was 'twinned' with Netanya, a resort city in Israel, and a park at Surfers Paradise was dedicated to mark the occasion. To serve the Liberal Jewish Community in Brisbane, a temple was dedicated in 1972.

At present there are six Jewish places of worship in Queensland: the Brisbane and South Brisbane Synagogues, the Temple of the Progressive Jewish Congregation and Chabad House in Brisbane; and on the Gold Coast, the Synagogue and the Temple.

Apart from the Hebrew and religious classes attached to the synagogues, two impressive day schools have been built in the past ten years: the Sinai College at Burbank in Brisbane's south and the King Solomon School on the Gold Coast. A Jewish kindergarten has operated for over a decade at Fig Tree Pocket in Brisbane. In the remainder of Queensland, the Jewish population is thinly spread. The most recent census return shows only a handful in some electorates.

Rabbi Fabian stayed 16 years. Since his departure, several ministers have served the Brisbane congregation including Rabbis Gottshall, Tapoohi, Engel and Boaz.

In postwar years, a large new Jewish cemetery was dedicated at Mount Gravatt, and a chapel was added for services. On the cemetery grounds, a spectacular monument to the victims of the Nazi Holocaust was erected by a committee of survivors. This is the venue for an annual Martyrs' Memorial Service and Warsaw Ghetto Commemoration, held on the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. At Burbank a semi-outdoor recreation centre was

established with lawns and trees, swimming pools, tennis courts, a sports field, cottages for the aged, catering facilities, a reception hall and various other features. This is a popular venue for many communal activities.

A particularly active group, mainly of young people, is the Queensland Maccabi, affiliated with the World Maccabi Sports Organisation, headquartered in Israel. A major sports carnival is held annually in one of the Australian capital cities.

Australian athletes participate in the World Maccabi Games every year in Israel, and Queensland Jewry is always represented. The Jewish National Fund produces a monthly periodical, *Shalom*, which carries news and information of interest to the Queensland Jewish community. It has retained its popularity for over 35 years.

Though many Jewish citizens have distinguished themselves in public life in Queensland, special mention should be made of Sir Matthew Nathan, Governor from 1920 to 1927; Henry Spiro, Mayor of Toowoomba from 1870 to 1873; Dr Sir Abraham Fryberg, MBE, University Senator, and formerly Director-General of Health; Sir Zelman Cowen, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Queensland and subsequently Governor-General; Brig. General Alex Roby and Lt Col. Errol Solomon Meyers, who was a co-founder of the Faculty of Medicine. There was also the famous balladier Saul 'Sali' Mendelsohn of Nanango. An early name of Boonah was Blumbergville after a Jewish family who did much to establish that town.

A number of Queensland's Jewish citizens have been invested with the Order of Australia for service to the general community and to the Jewish community.

Postwar years brought hardship to many Queensland Jewish people. The financial depression of the late seventies caused many to lose their livelihoods. The Australia Day floods of 1974 covered much of Brisbane, Ipswich and the Gold Coast, destroying the homes and businesses of many, just as in 1893. Water was within 30 metres of the Brisbane Synagogue, while the Torah Scrolls were rescued by boat from the South Brisbane Synagogue. Many rallied to the tasks of rehabilitation, and large sums of money were contributed to aid victims. The South Brisbane Synagogue, which was founded in 1915, was destroyed by fire in 1966. In three years, a replacement was built and consecrated.

Some of the Queensland Jewish organisations not already referred to follow. The Queensland Association of Jewish Ex-Service Men and Women, arranges an annual Anzac Day Service in the Brisbane Synagogue. QAJEX also holds a Memorial Day Service in the Lutwyche Military Cemetery at the graves of departed Jewish comrades. The B'nai B'rith Lodge carries out charitable acts and extends brotherly love and harmony. The Help-in-Need Society gives urgent aid to those in need. The United Board of Hebrew Education ensures that all children receive a knowledge of their religion and are prepared for their bar mitzvah (boys) or bat mitzvah (girls) on reaching the age of 13. There is a ceremony in which they undertake to accept full responsibility for their acts thereafter.

Links with Israel are maintained through several organisations that focus on cultural ties, women's interests, aid for children, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, general support for the Jewish State and youth affiliation. These include the Jewish National Fund, Women's International Zionist Organisation, Youth Aliyah, Friends of the Hebrew University, Friends of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, United Israel Appeal and Betar. The latter has a clubhouse in Red Hill, which is a hive of youth activity. Each year, some of its leaders attend a training course in Israel and return charged with the skills and enthusiasm necessary to guide this group. All Israel-oriented groups come under the umbrella of the State Zionist Council of Queensland.

All Queensland Jewish organisations and congregations are affiliated with the Queensland Jewish Board of Deputies, which come under the authority of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the Federal body.

The year 1986 was a milestone in the history of the Brisbane Congregation. It was the congregation's 120th anniversary, which called forth the traditional greeting, 'To One Hundred and Twenty', an expression of hope that the recipient will live as long as did Moses. It was also the centenary year of the consecration of the Brisbane Synagogue. For the occasion, the synagogue's plain windows were replaced by stained glass windows, each carrying motifs of Judaism, the festivals, Israel, Biblical history, the Holocaust and the Twelve Tribes. Each was endowed by a family. Other items of great significance were donated, including the Tablets of the Law. His Excellency

the Governor-General occupied the pulpit at the Centenary Service, at which the local Shir Li (My Song) Hebrew Folk Choir rendered various hymns.

In the late 1990s, the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation expended considerable funds and energy on the restoration of its four-times heritage-listed synagogue which, at the time of writing, was 114 years old. While the sacred precinct was constructed at a cost of £6450, today's cost for work far exceeds that figure. The recent replacement of the entire pressed metal ceiling cost \$86 000. This work was essential, however, to maintain the premises in first-class condition and the resulting restoration to its original beauty is very pleasing. Acknowledgment is made to the Federal and State Heritage Funds and to other sources, which together with congregational resources, have made this project possible.

Most of Queensland Jewry is found in the Jewish communities of Brisbane and the Gold Coast. The needs of these folk are catered for by a variety of congregations, schools and organisations.

Jewish folk in Queensland may be found in every industry, profession and trade. Many are engaged in law, medicine, the arts, commerce, manufacturing industries, retailing, the burgeoning electronic communications industry, the universities and distribution activities. Contrary to common perception, very few members of the community are involved with banking and financial institutions.

Looking at Queensland's two Jewish communities today, one feels that both are robust and increasing steadily in numbers. Although Brisbane Jewry loses some of its population to the southern States, its numbers are replenished by those who migrate here from interstate and overseas. In recent years there has been an influx of immigrants from South Africa. The Gold Coast Jewish community gains far more than it loses and may be proportionally the fastest growing Jewish group in Australia.

The Queensland Jewish community maintains very cordial relations with other religions, cultures and ethnic groups and participates actively in multicultural and multi-faith activities.

**Morris S. Ochert**