

THREE SCORE YEARS & TEN: REFLECTIONS ON 70 YEARS IN THE ACT JEWISH COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This article was originally delivered as an Australian Jewish Historical Society ACT presentation on 12 December 2021 to mark the 70th anniversary of the ACT Jewish Community and the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Mona and Louis Klein Wing of the National Jewish Memorial Centre in Canberra. It gives a personal reflection on 70 years in the community by Adele Rosalky, President of Australian Jewish Historical Society ACT. The focus of the narrative is Earle Hoffman's work in the community. Earle Hoffman OAM, the author's father, was instrumental in the founding and development of the Community. The talk was followed by the launch of a commemorative booklet, *ACT Jewish Community: 70 Years, Highlights & History* by Adele Rosalky and Sylvia Deutsch OAM, Canberra, ACT Jewish Community Inc., 2021, which presents a much-expanded version of this article.

KEYWORDS: Communities, ACT Jewish Community, National Jewish Memorial Centre, Earle Hoffman OAM, congregations, social history.

Introduction

On 12 December 2021, the ACT (Australian Capital Territory) Jewish Community celebrated the 70th anniversary of the founding of the community and the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Mona and Louis Klein Wing of the National Jewish Memorial Centre. This was combined with the official opening earlier in the day of the new Millie Phillips Wing by His Excellency General the Honourable David Hurley

AC DSC (Retd), Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, an event that had been postponed twice by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

These anniversaries represent something special to me personally, as my life has coincided almost exactly with the beginnings of the ACT Jewish Community. I was born in Canberra at the end of 1949, when the first informal meeting for the formation of the community was held. This then led to the foundation meeting in July 1951 at the home of Dr Ronald and Ruth Mendelsohn to form the ACT Jewish Community.¹ My narrative focusses on Hoffman's work in the community because he was instrumental in the founding and development of the community.

I'll include here a little story that I told at the consecration of my father's grave in 2014. As I trawled through his papers after his death, I found an account he had written of his first visit to Canberra in 1928 when he was seven years old. It is a delightful description of a road trip in the Nash Tourer with his parents and younger brother, opening and shutting gates on nothing more than a dirt track through private property, and camping each evening near running water. Once they arrived in the national capital they pitched a tent at Acton near Lennox Crossing, which is now under Lake Burley Griffin. After having the car serviced in Mort St, they viewed the brand-new Parliament House and looked across the lucerne flats on the flood plain of the Molonglo River to Blundell's Cottage in the distance. Next morning as they left Canberra, my grandfather asked him: 'Well son, what do you think of the place?'. His reply was 'Wouldn't want to live there.' Twenty years later, in 1948, with wife Anne and son David, he returned as a young bureaucrat in the fledgling Bureau of Agricultural Economics, and by his own admission, he enjoyed the next 65 years, working and building a community in Canberra.

There had been Jews in the region surrounding what became the nation's capital of Canberra since the nineteenth century — Queanbeyan, Yass, Cooma, the South Coast and Goulburn and surrounding areas all had Jewish residents. The 1861 census showed 72 Jews in Goulburn, making it the third largest Jewish community in Australia at that time after Sydney and Melbourne. These Jews were mainly store-keepers and hoteliers who had followed the discovery of gold on the Southern Tablelands.²

With federation, there was a dispute between Melbourne and Sydney about the location of Australia's capital, with the Yass-Canberra

site being approved by an Act of the federal parliament and Canberra being named on 12 March 1913. The following year war broke out in Europe and the Middle East, so work on the new city came to a virtual stop. All that Walter Burley Griffin, the winner of the design competition for the new capital, could do before his services were terminated was to establish some infrastructure — water, sewerage and some roads, including parts of National Circuit, where the National Jewish Memorial Centre now stands.³

After the war, in the early twenties, the building of Canberra resumed, employing a work force of over 1000 men, mostly of Scottish and Irish origins. This brought Moisey, known as Mischa, a tailor by trade, and Adele Berstein, with two young sons to Canberra. They later changed their name to Bersten. They went on to have two more children while living in Canberra. They took up residence in Elder St, Braddon, next to the bowling green, opposite where Ainslie School now stands. Adele Bersten recorded (orally on tape) their feeling of complete isolation with no other Jewish families during the years c. 1928–32 while they lived in Canberra. With the onset of the Great Depression, unemployment rose steeply in Canberra, so the Bersten family returned to Sydney.

Jews began to settle in Canberra in the late 1930s. On arrival these pioneers found themselves among a disparate and disconnected collection of Jews without any of the traditional trappings that they and their fellow Jews had known in the places they had come from. Canberra was literally and spiritually a wilderness. They were too few and too isolated to generate organised Jewish life in the city. According to the 1933 census there were only four Jews in the ACT, but in 1947 the number had grown to 26, and in 1954 there were 54. These figures are of those who declared their religion as 'Jewish' or 'Hebrew' in the census papers. However, not all citizens answered the question on 'Religion'. Many Jews have refused to declare their religion either for fear that this information might one day be used against them (such as refugees from Nazi oppression), or because they are non-observant Jews, though ethnically they are still regarded as Jews.

In 1936 Nat Lipman, with his wife Sadie and children Beverley (Bev) and Graeme settled in Canberra and stayed. They lived in Kingston where Nat was a compositor at the Government Printing Office. Among Hoffman's papers I found the *hesped* that he delivered at the consecration service for Nat on 16 May 1965. He wrote: 'Throughout

the twenty and more years before a Jewish community was organised in Canberra, they kept alive those ideals we value so highly, and lived by them and brought up their family by those same ideals. Nat Lipman was an upright and honest man, and we respect and honour his memory.’

Developing a Jewish communal structure

After the end of World War Two, the survivors of the Holocaust were divided into two categories. There were those who concluded that Jews had had enough of persecution as a minority and had lost faith in God and in themselves as Jews, gave up on their distinctive identity and merged into the majority. Yet others, especially those who stemmed from the great centres of Jewish life in Eastern and Central Europe, were determined to live as Jews and salvage the values, traditions and ideals that had been destroyed in their native lands. It was the spirit of this latter group that brought about the remarkable revival of Jewish life – religious, cultural and social – in post-war Australia. It is reflected in the increase in the number of congregations, the creation of a chain of Jewish day schools, the establishment of Talmudic Colleges in Melbourne and Sydney, an upsurge in Jewish youth movements and the strengthening of Jewish institutional life in every direction.

Post-war survivor immigration concentrated on Sydney and Melbourne, but by the late 1940s a small collection of Jews, brought up in the large cities of Australia, had come to work in Canberra. The time had come for the Jews of Canberra to organise themselves, and this occurred with the encouragement of Rabbi Dr Israel Porush, of the Great Synagogue, Sydney, who was also the President of the Association of Jewish Ministers in Australia and New Zealand and was in touch with the small but growing band of Jews in the capital. He travelled to Canberra to assist in the formation of the Jewish congregation. At the end of 1949 an informal meeting was held at the home of Dr Oscar Beran, a migrant from Czechoslovakia working at the Patents Office, where Rabbi Porush conducted the evening service (*Maariv*), probably the first of its kind held in Canberra. It seems he received an enthusiastic response by all present, and it planted the seed of the idea of creating a Jewish congregation in the capital.

As mentioned above, the foundation meeting of the community was held in July 1951 in the home of Dr Ronald and Ruth Mendelsohn in Yarralumla. Dr Mendelsohn was then Assistant Secretary in the Prime Minister’s Department. The motion to form a congregation was

unanimously adopted, and Dr Mendelsohn was elected as the first president. Present at that meeting were Earle and Anne Hoffman (Earle Hoffman became first honorary secretary); Kurt Gottlieb, an engineer at Mt Stromlo Observatory;⁴ Ernie and Nina Horton, who owned successful businesses in Canberra; Nat Lipman who became the first Treasurer; and Irma Starke.⁵ They possessed the spirit of pioneers, and the immediate task was to identify other Jews living in the ACT.

Dr Mendelsohn went out of his way as president of the community and as a public servant to find positions for newcomers. He is quoted as saying that as first president, his principal job was as an employment agent.⁶ The Jewish Welfare Society in Sydney would often contact him, and since employment conditions in Canberra were favourable in those days of growth, and the young men (they were all men) were very well qualified, he was able to place quite a few newcomers in jobs. He would collect them from the trains and place them in migrant hostels. However, some failed to identify with the nascent community and hid their Jewishness in their new homeland, but this did not apply to all.

The first Friday evening service was held on 10 August 1951 after an advertisement had been placed in *The Canberra Times*. Then on 10 October 1951 the first *Yom Kippur* service with a *minyan* was held in the ante room of the original timber Masonic Centre located in Acton. There was no one in Canberra competent to conduct the demanding service on this, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. A *chazan*, S. Waldberg, came from Sydney, and a *sefer torah* was obtained from the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation in Toorak. Apparently, an excellent spirit pervaded the community at that historic *Yom Kippur* service, when all were delighted at being together, and all were eager to go forward.

For some years, the services were confined to the major festivals, yet when a *minyan* was required for a *yahrzeit* to say *kaddish*, it could always be mustered. The perennial problem was the *minyan* for regular services, highlighted by the adjournment of one particular service when Maurice Kuner, the tailor, gave the Indian High Commissioner a fitting. He was gone so long that two others had to be dispatched to bring him back so that the service could continue. This story highlights ongoing problems for small Jewish communities, such as in Canberra.

Services and festivals were held in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the Good Neighbour Council Huts on the slopes above Eastlake where apartments exist today. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, services were held

in various locations including the curved Industry House in Barton (a portent of our new curved wing), and the Priory of St John in Forrest, both now demolished.

The first recorded barmitzvah was that of Graeme Lipman in 1956.⁷ The first communal *Seder* for Passover was held in 1954 in the Congregational Church Hall in Northbourne Avenue. People came from as far as Cooma, Goulburn, and the Snowy Mountains area for the *Seder*, and by 1956 no fewer than 120 people attended, all looking for Jewish company and the traditions that lingered in their memories. Over the next years communal *seders* were held in the Country Women's Association rooms in the city, Turner Infants School, and as Hoffman later served as president of the Telopea Park School Parents and Citizens' Association, where my brother and I attended high school, we had the use of the tuck-shop hall for a couple of years.

From the start, the utmost attention was paid to the Jewish education of the children. The initial *cheder* (Jewish religious school), held in private homes, started with six children and there were always young men and women in the community who gave up their Sunday morning to take a class or to demonstrate a festival. The first teacher was Dr Harry Rosenberg, the father of three young boys, and a scientist at the John Curtin School of Medical Research. His son Michael made and donated the stained-glass memorial to his father, now hanging in the Orthodox synagogue, accompanied by the plaque.

As in most other parts of Australia, the priority before the building of a synagogue was to establish a Jewish burial ground. The community was allocated a section at Woden Cemetery, and this was consecrated by Rabbi Porush in 1958, with the first burial taking place in 1963. An earlier burial took place on 8 September 1942. It was conducted by Kurt Gottlieb for George Hans Frohlich, aged 23 years, a co-worker of Kurt's at Mount Stromlo Observatory. He is buried in the general section. Then, and to this day, volunteer members of the community have performed *tahara*, an act of respect for the dead, preparing, spiritually purifying, and dressing the body in a shroud for burial. Eventually the burial ground was extended, to be divided only by two rows that had been allocated to the Seventh Day Adventists. On 10 October 1979 a second burial site was consecrated at Gungahlin by Rabbi Simon Silas of the Sephardi Synagogue in Sydney, then president of the NSW Association of Jewish Ministers.

The 1950s were important formative years and, in his monograph entitled *The Canberra Jewish Community*, Rabbi Porush described Ron Mendelsohn and Earle Hoffman as ‘the foremost leaders of Canberra Jewry of their generation.’⁸ Dr Mendelsohn served once as president from 1951 to 1955, to be followed by Earle Hoffman from 1955 to 1956, when Hoffman left Canberra to undertake post-graduate study in Iowa, but returned to serve another term from 1959 to 1962, and a third time as president from 1964 to 1967. Their wives, Ruth and Anne, were also both dedicated community workers in the National Council of Jewish Women and in the Ladies Guild. Dr Mendelsohn and Earle Hoffman were recognised in later years for their work professionally and within the Jewish community with an OBE for Dr Mendelsohn and an OAM for Hoffman. Rabbi Porush also refers to other stalwart couples who were prominent in the development of the community: Nina and Ernie Horton, Elizabeth and Norman Stanton, and Kurt and Isley Gottlieb.

From its very conception, the ACT Jewish Community was, and still is, an unusual model. Even though Jews represent less than half of one percent of the Australian population, we have two major streams of identification — Orthodox and Liberal, which today has changed its name to Progressive. Right from the foundation meeting of the Canberra Community, individuals came from both streams. In large cities, congregations are either one or the other, but in Canberra, for the most pragmatic of reasons, that is, critical mass, we have always been two congregations, but one community. For the most part, we reside in harmony. Today we are just starting to see similar models in other small communities, but during the 1950s and 1960s, this ‘religious division’ polarised Australian Jewish congregations, especially in Melbourne. This has relevance to the formative years leading to the building of the National Jewish Memorial Centre, as discussed below, but for the most part these issues were not germane from a Canberra point of view.

From 1958 to 1967 the community had the good fortune to have as its member an ordained rabbi, Dr George Schlesinger, who was a Reader in the Australian National University’s Department of Philosophy. Dr Schlesinger generously volunteered his services whenever needed as a leader, lecturer, and officiant on the Sabbath and festivals, attracting some 30 people to attend Orthodox services and a study circle. His Israeli wife, Shulamit, also volunteered as a Hebrew and *cheder* teacher. Before his departure in 1967 to take up a professorship in North

Carolina, Dr Schlesinger was honoured as ‘the first rabbi of Canberra’, and as a tribute, a *Sefer Torah* (Torah scroll) was presented to the congregation, known as the Schlesinger scroll. The *Torah* belonged to a large consignment of scrolls that had been salvaged from the Nazis in Czechoslovakia, his country of birth (Scroll no. 84).

In 1978, Rabbi Uri Themal, formerly rabbi of the Liberal Temple David in Perth, arrived in Canberra to work at the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. His arrival provided the fledgling Liberal congregation with a volunteer leader and teacher, enabling those community members to hold regular Sabbath services and receive a range of educational programs for adults. Rabbi Themal also volunteered as the community’s Hebrew teacher and headmaster of the *cheder*.

Other than these two serendipitous arrivals, services were lay led for 63 years by well-educated volunteer members of the community until 2014, when the first full-time rabbi was appointed. These included Bill Rieder, Ephraim Frid, Dr Claude Billigheimer and his father, Dr Michael Hasofer, Reverend Eddie Belfer, and in more recent years by Dr Mervyn Doobov, Dr Alan Shroot, Dr David Rosalky, with members of the Lehrer, Solomon and other families leading services for the Liberal/Progressive congregation.

Building a National Jewish Memorial Centre

The first move towards the building of the National Jewish Memorial Centre, the home of the ACT Jewish Community, began in 1925, when the Great Synagogue in Sydney was informed by the federal government that land could be made available for Jewish worship in Canberra under the Church Lands Lease Ordinance (1924–32). As there was less than a handful of Jews in Canberra at that time the Great Synagogue wrote back that they did not feel that they could take on the holding of a block with the obligation to build on that block but expressed the hope that they would be able to take advantage of the favourable conditions, free of rents and taxes, under the ordinance at some future time. Thirty-five years later, a renewed offer came from the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) to the ACT Jewish Community, without specifying a site. By this time, the community numbered about 160 men, women, and children.

The Committee of Management was faced with a yes-no choice and had to decide whether just to think locally or Australian-wide.

Accordingly, it explored both options. Dr Mendelsohn found an existing building on New South Wales Crescent in Barton that was available at quite a reasonable price. It was a large block, but it had other buildings already around it so there would be no scope for expansion as the local community grew, and there would be costs in modifying the building for Jewish purposes. Those in favour of a national viewpoint, led by Earle Hoffman, agreed it would have to be a multipurpose centre rather than a synagogue on its own, and that it would have to be for all Australian Jewry.

The decisive incident occurred when the committee of management met in June 1960 at the home of Norman and Elizabeth Stanton, the owners of Georges Fabrics. In attendance was Rabbi Lazarus Morris Goldman, cantor at Toorak synagogue, and one of the chaplains to the defence forces, who was in Canberra overnight and had been invited to meet the committee of management. The one item that created debate was the response to the NCDC. Rabbi Goldman sat quietly in the background, listening to the different opinions being bandied across the table, and finally he asked whether he could intervene. He pulled a pound note from his pocket saying, 'I would like to buy the first brick in the National Centre.' That evening, the committee of management resolved that they should put to the forthcoming annual general meeting that the community would respond to the NCDC offer and acquire a block of ground. A month later the AGM approved the resolution, which was followed by endorsement from the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ), the roof body of Australian Jewry, which offered its blessing, but no financial assistance.

Regarding the selection of a site Earle Hoffman recalled:

The first site that was suggested to us by the Administration was a large sized urban block behind the USSR Embassy in Kingston, on Light Street. This, mind you, at a time when Khrushchev was in power, when religion in the USSR was being stifled, and in particular the Jewish religion. Obviously, somebody in the administration had the impression that we were asking for a site solely for the local community, or alternatively, he had a peculiar sense of humour and no political sense whatsoever.⁹

The committee of management wrote back politely saying that the site was not suitable, and that the community was thinking of a site for a national centre. The response was immediate and cooperative, resulting in a good site being offered, where the Malaysian and Austrian embassies now stand in Talbot St, Forrest, but it was still of limited size. Hoffman said: 'When we indicated that there were difficulties with that one, the Administration then said, 'Well what site would you like?' and Hoffman indicated the site bounded by Canberra Avenue, National Circuit and Franklin Street.¹⁰ At that time he lived in Deakin and worked in Barton, passing the site every day on his way to work. Instead of the authorities rejecting this request out of hand, the opposite happened; they were delighted to grant the block to the community. It had a watercourse running across it and fill had been added to it over the years, so that it appeared as though it was only suitable for parkland. The bonus was that the community gained the already sealed continuation of Franklin St, which today is still the Centre's driveway.



Signing of Lease for site, January 1962. l. to r.: Norman Stanton (ACTJC Treasurer), Earle Hoffman (ACTJC President), Gordon Freeth (Minister for the Interior), David Smith (Private Secretary to the minister and ACTJC Vice-President). Photographer unknown.

In January 1962 the lease was signed by Earle Hoffman (President) and Norman Stanton (Treasurer). For the Department of the Interior, it was Minister Gordon Freeth, and the witness was his private secretary, David Smith, who was vice-president of the community and who later went on to be official secretary to five governors-general.



Laying of Foundation Stone, 26 February 1962. L. to r. Adele Hoffman, Rabbi Dr George Schlesinger, Anne Hoffman, Earle Hoffman, Rabbi Israel Brodie, Prime Minister Robert Menzies, Bertha Porush, Tamar Yuval (slightly obscured), Ambassador of Israel H.E. Moshe Yuval, Arthur Robb, and Rabbi Dr Israel Porush. Photographer L.J. Dwyer.

The laying of the foundation stone took place on 26 February 1962 on a very, very hot day. Rabbi Israel Brodie, Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, who was making a pastoral visit to Australia, performed the honour, in the presence of the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, and the Israeli Ambassador H.E. Moshe Yuval. The marble stone is today set into the entrance gate of the National Jewish Memorial Centre and the trowel used is on display in the ACT Jewish Community's museum. Both Menzies and the Chief Rabbi praised the vision of the Canberra leaders and their faith in the future of the community. It is interesting to note that in November 1965, Prime Minister Menzies made a personal donation to the Building Fund through Dr Mendelsohn, a cheque that

was never cashed and is also on display in the community's museum.

Several Jewish architects volunteered their services and sent sketches and were willing to work for expenses only, but the committee of management located émigré architect Dr Ernst Fooks, European trained, pre-war Viennese Jewish refugee, born in Czechoslovakia, who had designed a synagogue in Melbourne and won an architectural prize for his own home at 32 Howitt Road, Caulfield. According to Hoffman's account, Dr Fooks' outstanding characteristic was his compliance with the clients' requirements. In 2017, my husband David and I were invited to the opening of an exhibition by the Melbourne School of Design, curated by the Director, Professor Alan Pert, who worked with 26 Melbourne School of Design Masters students to revive knowledge and understanding of Fooks' large body of work. I had supplied a database of drawings and documents of the National Jewish Memorial Centre that were included in the exhibition. Dr Fooks was far more than an architect. He was a prolific traveller, artist, town planner, lecturer, interior designer, furniture designer, writer, and theorist.¹¹

A workable set of plans was produced by Dr Fooks in Melbourne, in close collaboration with the committee of management. It was submitted to the Building Section of the Department of the Interior and the NCDC. The NCDC came back with the suggestion that glazed white or off-white bricks should be used, but this was a difficult request to meet. It was not just that white brick would be an irresistible inducement to graffiti, it was the fact that it would add \$10,000 to the cost of the building. So, Hoffman and Horton and Dr Mendelsohn went to see NCDC Director, Sir John Overall, at his home one weekend and explained the difficulty to him. The NCDC request for white brick was removed and was not raised again.¹² This would not happen today, but in the 1960s Canberra was a small and parochial place.

The religious divide between Orthodox and Liberal impacted on the development of the Centre but not from within Canberra itself. The outcome of these external pressures was that services and practices would be conducted on traditional lines, that is, Orthodox, which was in accordance with the ACT Jewish Community's constitution.¹³ Therefore, there would be a consecrated Orthodox synagogue as part of the Centre and Liberal services would be held in another part of the building. The first offers of financial support for the project came from the Orthodox in Melbourne and Sydney, but they both wanted to

build a *mikvah*. Dr Mendelsohn recalled: 'It was said at the time that the only building we would be able to construct would be a National Jewish Memorial Mikvah!'.¹⁴ Material support came from the much larger Orthodox membership of the community, and this has continued to be the case. Yet, the leaders of the Canberra community adopted the position that the National Jewish Memorial Centre had to be one where all Jews could meet, and every president of the ACT Jewish Community has held to that stance.

According to Hoffman, fund-raising was the major issue for building the centre. The National Council of Jewish Women agreed that the National Centre would be its fundraising project for the 1961–64 triennium, but on its own the community could not raise the funds for what was planned to be a national centre. Efforts were made to obtain funds from congregations and individuals in the different state capitals, and much of this canvassing was carried out by Hoffman, in conjunction with official work for the Australian government as he travelled to inter-state meetings. I personally remember as a teenager visiting with my father some people whose names have appeared in *Financial Review's* Top 100 – perhaps my father wanted me to meet the sons of these wealthy possible benefactors – and I also remember at least one rather swanky fund-raising dinner held at the home of a prominent Sydney family. My father was unabashed about approaching people for donations. Dr Mendelsohn recorded in his oral history interview that 'Earle worked valiantly and successfully — nobody else wanted to tackle it'.¹⁵ By 1970 funds had grown to \$71,500, but the estimate for the building was over \$200,000. Plans had been approved, quotes had been obtained, but the gap was more than could possibly be closed.

In the face of this conundrum, Sydney Jewish leader, Louis Klein entered the picture. Together with his cousin Sidney Sinclair, he was joint managing director of the men's clothing manufacturing firm, Anthony Squires Pty Ltd, and one of the most distinguished leaders of Australian Jewry. He served as president of the North Shore Synagogue, a leader in the New South Wales Board of Deputies, and a president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (1972–74). He also acquired *The Australian Jewish Times* in 1968 and contributed generously to Jewish institutions here and in Israel.¹⁶ His interest in and contribution to the NJMC facilitated its establishment, and the naming of the Centre after him and his wife Mona was a well-deserved tribute. He was

honoured by the Queen with the OBE in 1973. The community widely mourned his untimely death in July 1975.

In his recollections Hoffman described the negotiations in more detail. He and Dr Mendelsohn had met with Klein in November 1970 but came away without a financial commitment. Klein was about to leave overseas on a business trip but promised to talk again on his return. No sooner had he left Australia than the committee of management received an ultimatum from the builder saying that because of inflation and the rise in the cost of steel, he would not be able to hold to the figure quoted for longer than a month. Hoffman rang Klein who was in Jerusalem. He said he would consider the matter further and asked Hoffman to ring him in Rome. At 2am Canberra time, Hoffman spoke to Klein in Rome, and he generously committed himself to guarantee the project. From observing the recent experience financing the community's new wing, you can be sure fund raising and negotiations are done in a very different way today.

A special general meeting was immediately called, and a budget was chalked onto a piece of chipboard with yellow chalk. Hoffman noted that the figures, in retrospect, were laughable, but were the best estimate that could be made at the time. Building started in January 1971 and immediately the builder said the one large tree on the block would have to go. The building committee ended up moving the building rather than the tree, but sadly the tree went eventually. As the building progressed and the costs blew out, other donors were found, including Henry Krongold and Frank Theeman. Izzy Kingsberg, the owner of the Vogue Giftshop in Garema Place in Canberra created and donated the Burning Bush sculpture on the front of the building, and Melbourne artist Trudy Fry created the ceramic water wall in the original foyer, which is now without water. Many other important items were donated at the time.¹⁷

The synagogue was consecrated on 5 September 1971 in readiness for the New Year festival of *Rosh Hashanah*, followed eight days later by *Yom Kippur*, but at that point the community did not yet have a certificate of occupancy. Someone talked fast to convince the authorities to give this permission. The official opening ceremony followed on Sunday 12 December 1971 with Prime Minister William McMahon unveiling the plaque of the Mona and Louis Klein Building, and his wife, Sonia McMahon, unveiling a plaque in the auditorium on the first



Prime Minister, William McMahon, opening the National Jewish Memorial Centre, 12 December 1971. Photographer Kurt Gottlieb.

floor named after Dr Fanny Reading in honour of the National Council of Jewish Women.

For the next 43 years the building served the community well and became a home, a synagogue, a school and a playground as the community undertook the weekly, monthly, and annual religious cycles of the Jewish faith under lay leadership. Some major milestones occurred, including:

- The unbroken publication of the Community's magazine *Hamerkaz* since 1965.
- The election of women presidents: Ruth Holzman (later Goren), Susan Doobov, Dr Anita Shroot, Professor Kim Rubenstein, Yael Cass, Veronica Leydman and now Karen Tatz.
- In 1986 the ceremonial opening of the Ben Gurion Garden by Israeli President Chaim Herzog in the presence of Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke.
- Community events such as food fairs, celebrations, lectures, symposia, and social gatherings.
- Renovations to the original Orthodox synagogue in 2008.

- Many exhibitions, such as ‘The Holocaust Exhibition’ in 1984 and the ‘Anne Frank Exhibition’ in 2015.
- Creation of affiliate organisations and other activities including the formation of the ACT branch of Australian Jewish Historical Society, JewishCare, ACT Zionist Council and outreach including interfaith.

Recent developments, 2014–22

The community functioned as a centre for local Jews, but progress was, in retrospect, underwhelming. Real change started in 2014 when, after 63 years, the need for a full-time rabbi became essential. To finance the initiative, donations were received from generous individual members, and subsequently New South Wales Jewish Communal Appeal (JCA) support was secured. In July 2014, Rabbi Alon Meltzer was appointed as rabbi of the ACT Jewish Community and rabbi to the Orthodox congregation, with additional duties as program coordinator, educator, and pastoral carer. An inauguration ceremony was held on 25 November 2014 for Rabbi Meltzer in the presence of visiting Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogues of the Commonwealth. At that ceremony Rabbi Mirvis turned the first sod in anticipation of the next stage in the development of the National Jewish Memorial Centre. In the three and a half years when Rabbi Meltzer was with the community, through his creative ideas and strategic planning, he brought tangible change and improvements. He also looked outwards and established strong partnerships with Jewish leaders and organisations across Australia.

After Rabbi Meltzer and his family left Canberra in December 2017, Rabbi Shimon Eddi was employed in February 2018 as community rabbi. Rabbi Gary Robuck, formerly senior Rabbi of North Shore Temple Emanuel, was engaged on a visiting basis to provide services for, and to develop, the Progressive congregation. In 2019, the Progressive congregation achieved full affiliation with the Union of Progressive Judaism, the roof body that resources Progressive activities. After Rabbi Eddi’s employment concluded, he continued to offer adult education to members.

In February 2020, amidst bushfires, hail, floods and the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rabbi Elhanan Miller, arrived from Israel as interim rabbi of the Orthodox congregation. Rabbi Miller, a journalist,

researcher and Middle East specialist, was faced with unique challenges imposed by the pandemic to maintain the community's social cohesion during the full lockdown. With the closure of the Centre, Zoom created the opportunity to connect, and many members, young and old, embraced the technology, attending *Kabbalat Shabbat* and *Havdalah* online. Rabbi Eddi continued to deliver adult education classes on Zoom also. In late August 2021, during the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rabbi David and Rabbanit Mili Leitner Cohen arrived from Israel and took on the continuing role of community rabbis.

One of the finest achievements of the past 70 years has been the establishment and dedication of the Australian Jewish War Memorial in the grounds of the Centre.¹⁸ Since the opening of the building in 1971 it was the vision of the founders and members of the Community to honour the memory of fallen Australian Jewish service personnel with a national war memorial worthy of their sacrifice, as referenced in the name: National Jewish Memorial Centre. A lack of finances and a suitable commemorative occasion meant that any plans were stalled, despite the enthusiasm and dedication of both Earle Hoffman and Margaret Beadman OAM over many years. The plinth in the original foyer served as the interim memorial.

A year after Hoffman's death, the Centenary of Anzac Jewish Program was formed in June 2014, coordinated by Peter Allen of the NSW Association of Jewish Service and ex-Service Men and Women. It was a national collaboration, with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the Federation of Australian Jewish Ex-Service Associations, and the Australian Jewish Historical Society. The Australian Jewish War Memorial at the Centre was one of its projects. Commonwealth grant money was obtained from the 'Saluting Their Service Commemorative Grants Program'. The centenary of General Sir John Monash's knighthood on 12 August 2018 provided the appropriate occasion to dedicate the newly designed national memorial.

Over the next four years the project was given impetus and direction by Dr Merrilyn Sernack, with assistance from Peter Allen and the Australian Jewish Historical Society and came to fruition. At a solemn ceremony on Sunday 12 August 2018, the new memorial, embossed with the names of 341 Jewish military personnel who laid down their lives in wars serving in Australian or Empire Forces, was unveiled

and dedicated by the Governor-General Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC and Lady Cosgrove, in the presence of the Chief of the Defence Force General Angus Campbell AO DSC. In his capacity as Patron-in-Chief of the General Sir John Monash Foundation the Governor-General and Lady Cosgrove also unveiled a commissioned portrait of Sir John Monash.



*Dedication of the Australian Jewish War Memorial, 12 August 2018.
Photographer Merrilyn Sernack*

The Australian Jewish War Memorial is being supplemented by a touch screen that displays narratives and images of the men listed on the memorial. The ACT Jewish community is now the proud custodian of a perpetual national war memorial that symbolises the commitment and contribution of the Australian Jewish community to our nation's security and ensures that the sacrifice of our servicemen will never be forgotten.

The community's latest milestone is the building and dedication of the new Millie Phillips extension to the building by the Governor-General the Honourable David Hurley and H.E. Mrs Linda Hurley. During the past few years, the community has expanded, taken on professional management, dedicated a national war memorial and developed a cultural facility to display to the broader community consisting

of a library, museum and art gallery. The community increasingly assumed roles to serve the religious, educational, cultural and social needs of its members and friends, but also external roles with interfaith, political or national organisations and other outreach channels. This expansion placed huge pressure on the original building, which was not designed to cover such diverse activities.

The need to expand the building was recognised early, indeed, by the founders and subsequent presidents. Hoffman, a man of vision, argued long and hard for an expansion project and conjured many a design, but these did not come to fruition initially. Although informal community consultation had taken place earlier, serious organised planning only began in 2010 during the presidency of Professor Kim Rubenstein and her Board member husband Dr Garry Sturgess. It was continued in 2012 with a new Board under President Robert Cussel. The community treasurer, Dr David Rosalky, took on the responsibility of pursuing the building project, which gathered momentum during 2013. Philip Leeson Architects were engaged to develop initial plans, and by November 2013 a revised design emerged.

The challenge the community faced in proceeding with these plans was how to finance and to advance the project. In response, the community sought and received access to the JCA capital appeal for 2016. The community catered for the Jews of the national capital with a wide range of services, thereby ensuring Jewish continuity, but was also well situated physically and professionally to engage with political and diplomatic leadership to offer gateways for leaders of national Jewish organisations to protect Jewish interests. This paradigm was presented to potential donors and the strengths and value of the project were apparent. The Australian Jewish community has many generous philanthropists, and through the tireless efforts of then community president, Yael Cass, as well as Rabbi Alon Meltzer, the community was successful in securing most of the funding required. The first stage, comprising the security perimeter fence, the underground services, and the refurbishment of the existing Orthodox sanctuary, was completed in May 2018. The more challenging new wing with a state-of-the-art security system was completed in May 2020.

In October 2021 this extension was announced the winner of the Master Builders Association ACT competition for a commercial construction for less than \$5 million. The citation read: 'The internal finishes impress, with native hardwood and contrasting grey concrete



The National Jewish Memorial Centre, 22 May 2020. Photographer Adele Rosalky.

blocks used extensively throughout the project. The acoustic panelling added warm colours to the mix to give a calming ambience.’ The National Jewish Memorial Centre has now been transformed from a facility designed in the 1960s and serving the ACT Jewish Community for 50 years, into a national facility of high quality and modern design for the next 50 years and beyond.

Over the years Canberra, as the national capital, has attracted a distinctive population. Its Jewish population reflects that character, which has changed little in 70 years with the same mixture of public servants and academics, now augmented with specialists in the medical and legal professions, the IT industry, technocrats and diplomats. It is not a wealthy community; it is small and somewhat transient. Although a core population has settled there, it still faces critical mass issues. These have an impact on the supply of kosher food, the lack of the availability of a Jewish school, and mikveh facilities. This has resulted in some observant young professionals leaving Canberra.

Young people, my children’s age and younger, are the first generations that did not know their relatives who were the immigrants who came from Eastern Europe or the East. My grandparents who travelled from Mariupol, Ukraine via Harbin, China, came to Australia with a strong religious and work ethic. It is not unique to Jewish communities that it can be hard to motivate young people to support community and to volunteer or contribute like their parents. This seems to be true especially for a perception of history. I have witnessed over these past

five years that I have been president of the ACT branch of the Australian Jewish Historical Society that it takes an effort to encourage a younger generation to actively engage with the recounting of their Jewish past.

So, I have followed the creation and developments of my community, both tangible and intangible, for over 70 years, and given you a personal account. I never thought I would have to live through the building process twice, once with my father Earle Hoffman as the main fund-raiser, and 50 years later with my husband, Dr David Rosalky, as the go-to man, but the results have been significant and very satisfying indeed. I am sorry that the early founders, Earle Hoffman, Dr Ron Mendelsohn, Ernie Horton, Kurt Gottlieb and others are not here today to see how far we have come.

Over the years heroic efforts were made by the few to carry the many in the preservation of Judaism, and despite some shortcomings, the ACT Jewish Community is well equipped to cater for the coming generation of young families to foster Jewish continuity in the nation's capital for the foreseeable future. To borrow from our JCA pitch, it has been and continues to be a community that 'educates, celebrates, advocates, and proudly represents Australian Jewry under one roof'.

Postscript

Since this talk was presented, the ACT Jewish Community has received government and private funding to develop the Canberra Holocaust Museum and Education Centre which is now in the planning stage.

Endnotes

- 1 Rabbi Israel Porush, 'The Canberra Jewish Community (1951–1981)', *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal of Proceedings*, vol. IX, Part 3 (1982), p. 189. The author has drawn on various material in this work, which was the original ground-breaking historical publication documenting the history of the first thirty years of the ACT Jewish Community.
- 2 Stephen J. Tazewell OAM, *Grand Goulburn*, Goulburn, NSW, The Council of the City of Goulburn, 1991, p. 31.
- 3 Earle Hoffman presented many accounts of the establishment of the ACT Jewish Community for AJHS presentations, articles in *Hamerkaz* (the magazine of the ACT Jewish Community), the *Oral History* (see below), and for commemorative occasions. Papers in Earle Hoffman's archive have been cited throughout this talk.

- 4 R. Bhathal, 'Gottlieb, Kurt (1910–1995)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/gottlieb-kurt-18054/text29631>, published online 2019, accessed online 10 March 2022.
- 5 Rabbi Israel Porush, 'The Canberra Jewish Community (1951–1981)', p. 189.
- 6 Adele Rosalky (ed.), *The Jewish Community of Canberra: Recollections in Oral History*, ACT Jewish Community Inc., 2008, p. 15.
- 7 Personal communication to the author by Bev Chalker, sister of Graeme Lipman.
- 8 Porush, 'The Canberra Jewish Community', p. 192.
- 9 Rosalky, *The Jewish Community of Canberra: Oral History*, p. 59.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Exhibition notice for Dr Ernest Fooks retrospective *The House Talks Back*, University of Melbourne, 2017.
- 12 Rosalky, *The Jewish Community of Canberra: Oral History*, p. 78.
- 13 The first ACT Jewish Community Inc. Constitution dated November 1958 stated that 'The powers and functions for which the Association is established to make provision for the conduct of divine service or devotion, public or private, and of ceremonies, rites and religious practices according to the customs of the Jewish faith'. At that time the 'customs' would have been interpreted as Orthodox.
- 14 Rosalky, *The Jewish Community of Canberra*, p. 92.
- 15 Ibid., p. 44.
- 16 Suzanne D. Rutland, 'Klein, Louis (1917–1975)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/klein-louis-10758/text19073>, published first in hardcopy 2000, accessed online 10 March 2022.
- 17 Communal newsletter, *Hamerkaz*, Issue 543, p. 10, December 2018.
- 18 For a full record of this event refer to the publication: *Australian Jewish War Memorial, a record of history in the making*, Canberra, The ACT Jewish Community Inc., 2018.