

THE HUMANIST JEW
THE FAMILY OF ELIAS AND REBECCA ELLIS

Compiled by
M. Chapman
Craftsman Press Pty. Ltd. (Hawthorn)

Genealogy has been described as the illumination of history and it is certainly a phenomenon of our times that genealogy has been increasingly used as the tool to illustrate historical studies. Genealogy does indeed have its own fascination and an ever-growing army of enthusiastic researchers have been climbing their family trees in recent years. More and more people are being led to an understanding of their own roots, origins, traditions and to learn more about themselves by looking at the lives of their forebears. There has been a mushrooming of "self-help" genealogical groups and the older learned societies devoted to the pursuit of genealogy have experienced an unprecedented growth in enquiries and expansion of their membership. Amongst this world wide growth an increasing number of Australian Jews, too, have become interested in their families; and the past few years has seen a spate of privately published booklets, newsheets and even full scale books concerning the spread of widely ramified kith and kin from early progenitors. These publications have represented the fruits of much labour and have followed a great deal of painstaking research, sifting of material and extensive collation of scattered lines often world wide. As an obsessive genealogical delver myself, I have found this trend entirely commendable, and I have enjoyed greatly being involved in some of the work. *The Humanist Jew* has been an interesting and valuable addition to the publications of this nature that have been emerging; and I am pleased to have an opportunity of discussing it here. Although the frontispiece announces that the work has been "compiled by Meg Chapman" (and indeed she is deserving of much credit for it) it is apparent that other genealogical enthusiasts have been deeply involved. In fact, several inter-related people have all made major contributions to it and notably Arch Ellis, who has written a preface and whose enterprise has well complemented Meg Chapman's.

The book starts by tracing the lives and fortunes of two early Anglo-Jewish migrants to Australia (Elias Ellis and his wife Rebecca, nee Levey). There follow individual sections on the lives of each of Elias and Rebecca's surviving eleven children (three children apparently died in infancy) and within each section is a survey of the further descendants from each child covering as many generations as have arisen until the present day. At the outset of each biographical sub-section there is listed in genealogical sequence all the further descendants of that branch which makes it clearer to see how the family is constructed. At the end of each biographical sub-section is appended a most useful list of references including frequently full or partial excerpts from such primary sources as birth or death certificates, grants of probate (including wills), newspaper obituary notices etc. Following all the individual biography sections, there is a collection of 169

photographs covering many individual members of the family, groups, buildings and places relevant to their lives. There is a useful index to all the photographs and much explanatory information to each one, but it is a matter of minor irritation that this part is slightly separated from the pictures, necessitating to-ing and fro-ing between text and photographs. Finally, there is an extended (and extensible) family tree chart tabulating all the lines of the family, and that, also, has been referenced and has an indexed list of names to assist the reader. The whole comes over very effectively and the overall impression is of a workmanlike production, carefully planned and with much attention to detail and commendably devoted to clarity of style and layout.

It has to be expected that some data may be inaccurate or some approaches may be at variance with most interpretations of events. Arch Ellis anticipates this to some extent by providing his address and inviting people who discover errors to send them to him for correction in a later edition. My major reservations concern the Introduction — with some parts of which I disagree. I would not quarrel with the opening statement of philosophy suggesting that Elias and Rebecca Ellis and their family is in many ways very typical of the pioneer Australian Jewish families and how they lived and evolved. Further, I would agree that as early Australian society was developing, much of European Jewry was then experiencing a loosening of its bonds. The walls of many a European ghetto were indeed being broken down in the late 18th century (the age of reason and enlightenment) and the erstwhile inhabitants of these claustrophobic and often depressing quarters suddenly found themselves with hitherto unsuspected freedoms. Jews entering Australia have always been on an equal footing to others. The convict transportees were all treated equally badly and all the free-settlers had identical opportunities for advancement, irrespective of their origins. However, the relationships between the Jews and their gentile "host" societies, in England and throughout Europe generally, were very complex. The account given is considerably over simplified and is portrayed in a somewhat romantic light. Perhaps a more pointed criticism can be levelled at the passage treating Levi Barent Cohen whose actual relationship to the Ellis family is probably zero. When I read that Levi Barent Cohen had arrived in London in 1670 I thought it was a misprint for 1770 since this latter year is about correct. He was born in Holland in 1747, which would have made it difficult for him to have come to England in 1670 in any case. However, reading on, I learn that the unborn, at the time, arch-ancestor of a powerful section of a later era of Anglo-Jewry is supposed to have opened the first Ashkenazi Synagogue in London in 1690: so, I suspect that these were no misprints and are simply complete errors of fact. There is a confusing reference to Ashkenazi/Sephardi relationships implying that, although Levi Barent Cohen was Ashkenazi, the patrician Sephardi established Anglo-Jewish families such as the Moccattas, Montefiores, Sebags etc. were only too happy to ally themselves with him. In fact, Ashkenazi/Sephardi relationships were nearly always at best uneasy and often hostile, especially from the Sephardi side. It is true that sufficient wealth could help break down these

barriers, but it was not a smooth or easily undergone process. However, all of this musing and the muddling of Levi Barent Cohen's function in Anglo-Jewry by a century is somewhat irrelevant to the point as there is no evidence that Levi Barent Cohen's family had any connection with the Ellis or Levey families. If several research papers do link the families they have produced no specific genealogical evidence to support their desired conclusion. Rebecca Levey's father was a cousin of Sierlah Levy who married Burnett Cohen; and this latter Cohen stands perhaps very similarly placed as an arch-ancestor of a powerful later era of Australian Jewry as his namesake Cohen did for Anglo-Jewry (as I mentioned). Various of the prolific descendants of Burnett and Sierlah Cohen have made the claim of kinship to Levi Barent Cohen and the Rothschild connection but I have never seen any documentary evidence to support such a claim. The usual argument adduced is an alleged resemblance of photographs of descendants of each side but such 'proofs' should always be viewed with the greatest reservation. I would feel therefore that the story of the Ellis (and Levey) migration to Australia is best told without reference to any kind to Levi Barent Cohen.

The most likely reason for Elias and Rebecca Ellis coming to Australia is because of Rebecca's connections. Two of her brothers, Barnet Levey and Solomon Levey, made a great impact in New South Wales and the stories of their lives have been told on numerous occasions already. Two other sisters and their husbands came to Australia and it is therefore perhaps not so surprising that the Ellis couple should also feel their future lay there. An important aspect of the Ellis family experience, as well as the Levey connection, is the degree with which the families inter-married amongst the non-Jewish community. Frequently, treatment of this subject either adopts a reproving tone that such things should happen, or, gives an undue emphasis on the importance of the Jewish element in later completely assimilated descendants. In *The Humanist Jew* the detailing of such matters seems to me to be fairly objective, avoiding belittling the Jewish origins into insignificance but at the same time realising and accepting that in a young community, with few suitable marriage partners, such situations are inevitable with consequent dilution of the Jewish impact. Naturally, where such matters happen and individuals have strong views opposing such marriages, individual distress will occur; and this point is brought out usefully without destroying the balance of the theme I have been discussing.

I note that a second volume on the Ellis family is planned and it is proposed to trace therein the further story of succeeding generations of the clan. I look forward with anticipation to its appearance which, if it sustains the quality of the current volume, will be well deserving of study.

— Dr. A. P. Joseph

SIR ISAAC ISAACS

by

*Zelman Cowen, Melbourne University Press, 1979***SIR JOHN MONASH**

by

Bernard Callinan, Melbourne University Press, 1981

The subjects of the second and third in the series of the Daniel Mannix Memorial Lectures were Sir Isaac Isaacs and Sir John Monash, delivered respectively under the auspices of the Newman College Students' Club (Melbourne) on 29 June 1978 by Sir Zelman Cowen and on 17 June 1980, by Bernard Callinan. The aim of these lectures, which honour the memory of Archbishop Mannix, is apparently to focus attention on great Australian leaders of the past and to emphasise the need for courage and principle in leadership. The lectures have since been published by the Melbourne University Press in booklet form of about 30 pages each, including two portrait illustrations. Both of the authors have attempted an essay in biography and, as I have indicated, the object has been to distil the fine and outstanding qualities of leadership from the life and work of such eminent Australians. Every student of the broad canvas of our national history would assuredly profit by a careful reading of these two texts. Mature school students ought to be encouraged to assimilate the content of these lectures, for they would both provide an appropriate discipline and mental stimulus to the youthful mind. One would hope, also, that these comments may have a special relevance particularly for the Jewish reader, whether historian, school pupil, or our co-religionists in general. Few, indeed, would not already have acquired some basic familiarity with the facts about the lives of Isaacs and Monash, including the significance of their contributions to the development of Australia as a nation.

Sir Zelman Cowen is naturally the obvious author on Isaacs, seeing that he had previously written a biography which it will be difficult to excel. Although he wrote from a complex of reasons, he had a special interest in a fellow Jew who made for himself a brilliant career in this country. However, as Sir Zelman notes, the memory of Isaacs has grown faint. He was one who, even as a High Court Judge, was readily swayed by patriotic and imperial feelings which, as our author remarks, later also coloured Isaacs' stand on the question of "political Zionism". His earlier career as a lawyer and politician are briefly traced, noticing that Isaacs was prominent in the Constitutional Convention of 1897-98, that he was Commonwealth Attorney General in 1905, a High Court Justice in 1906, and Chief Justice for a few months prior to his appointment as the first Australian born Governor General in 1931 — appointed on the nomination of the Australian Government. His legal learning, intellectual capacity, his dedication and energy, were extraordinary. Yet, as the lecturer rightly observes, Isaacs revealed an "appalling certainty" in all his opinions and convictions which, we are reminded, was particularly true in his strong objections to Zionism. As a member of the Bench he consistently strove to

uphold the central power vested in the Commonwealth under the Constitution.

A good biography never appears to be an exercise in adulation, and it must be recognised that Isaacs suffers from the defects of his greatness. He was an egocentric and dogmatic personality, and in his final comments, whilst conceding that Isaacs ranks as a major national figure, Sir Zelman Cowen adds that he remained remote from the Jewish community and that he raised issues that were "deeply divisive" for his co-religionists.

In his lecture on Monash, the author, Bernard Callinan, points out that Monash came from a family of standing and substance, that he had a number of Rabbis among his forbears, and a grandfather who founded a well known Hebrew publishing firm. He could also have mentioned that the Jewish historian, Graetz, had ties with his family. It is interesting to notice the cultural influence of the mother of the young John Monash which, in some respects, resembled the maternal influence to which Isaacs was subject. At a time when diversions and entertainments were not as many as they are today, we learn that Monash had a passion for knowledge on a wide scale, and that he completed University courses in Engineering, Arts and Law, finally emerging as a successful Civil Engineer. As one would expect, the greater part of this biographical essay concentrates attention on Monash as a military leader in World War I. The author stresses Monash's care in the preparation, and his lucidity in exposition, of operations, winning recognition as an outstanding Commander — perhaps one of the very best Generals of his time.

On his return to Australia at the end of the War, it was Monash who "came nearest to the universal hero figure". Callinan believes that Monash was "socially unassertive", although there were some who regarded him as egotistical. He had hoped that he might have been rewarded by an appointment as State Governor but perhaps the time had not yet come for such a radical step. The last phase of his career finds Monash in charge of the Yallourn brown coal project, as head of the new State Electricity Commission. This assignment was certainly no sinecure and the appointee succeeded in firmly laying the foundation of a Government enterprise that was of critical importance for the future welfare of Victoria.

Today, just 50 years after the death of Sir John Monash, occasional doubts are still sometimes raised about the nature of his military achievements. Many questions should be resolved when Dr. Geoffrey Serle completes the biography of Monash on which he has embarked, noting that he alone will have had the advantage of having the personal papers of his subject at his disposal. But, even if the serious Jewish reader will appreciate historical biography of the present type, he would wish to understand the impact of racial and religious background, including family tradition in the extraordinary careers of men such as Isaacs and Monash. In some instances, although not so much in the case of Monash, explanations may even be sought, negatively, so to speak, in the attempt of the particular subject to react against and to play down his background. Neither of the above publications, however, do more than to contain a passing hint about these aspects of the personalities under consideration. As regards Monash,

there is, in any event, a consensus that he sought active identification with the Jewish community. Perhaps it is not generally known that his coat-of-arms was surmounted by a crest in the form of the lion of Judah, denoting thereby his Jewish origin.

Both of these booklets are printed in an attractive format, they are modestly priced at \$2.80 each, and they provide the reader, in each case, with a penetrating biographical sketch of a notable Australian whose contributions are in danger of being forgotten, not only by the general public, but even by others who should now be induced to make closer studies of their lives as Australians of Jewish origin.

M.Z.F.

BACKYARD OF MARS
Memoirs of the "Reffo" Period in Australia

by
Emery Barcs
Wildcat Press, Sydney (1980)
227 pages. \$14.95

Martin Buber teaches that one generation passes on to the next a memory which has gained in scope for "new destiny and new emotional life were constantly accruing to it". The "memory" recorded in *Backyard of Mars*, confirms this premise. Its title indicates the mental attitude of "Reffos", who, after having fled a hostile and war-threatened Europe, found themselves begrudgingly taken in here, then relegated to various internment camps around Australia.

Emery Barcs, the author, is today a well-known and highly respected journalist and commentator, semi-retired. He was amongst the first Jewish refugees to come from Mussolini's Italy of 1938. Hungarian born, Barcs was working in Italy as a correspondent for a firm of Hungarian newspapers, and was only one of a great number of educated and cultured people, doctors, dentists, academics, businessmen, rabbis, literary figures and artists to come to Australia at that time. Rumour had it then that many Hungarians, Rumanians, Germans, Poles and others had come here with vast wealth, secretly removed from Europe. We were suspicious and resentful of them — they found us prejudiced and insular, apathetic about the rest of the world. One ship bringing European internees via England to Australia during the War, the *Dunera*, contained about 200 Jews, including 10 or 12 qualified rabbis. But behind the bitterness of Barcs' memories there is humour. If one can find things to smile about when recalling the mid-20th century's negative destructive elements of violence, blood shed, discrimination and civil hostility engendered by racial, religious or political differences, then that should be welcomed.

But *Backyard of Mars* is important also because it gives a highly

personalized, subjective account of what happened here more than 40 years ago — the first of its kind. Reading it today one compares the situation with an Australian society now made up of 40 per cent of people either born overseas or who are first generation migrants — and including upwards of 100 different ethnic groups. This statistical and cultural fact of our life shows up the real value of Emery Barcs' book.

Just one example of the wry humour to emerge (in today's light) from the work is the anecdote Barcs recounts from his close association with Desiderius Orban, who had already been a confident, established artist in Europe. Both men had received call-up notices to the same Labour Camp:

"I can't recall what happened at the Drill Hall, but I remember walking up and down in front of a military depot in the Sydney Showground with Dezso (who 'anglicised' his name to Desiderius) Orban. The discovery that we would probably toil for King and Country in the same unit came as a pleasant surprise for both of us. Dezso, though he had seen his 57th birthday, felt not in the least dismayed about becoming a uniformed labourer.

'At last,' he said, 'I have managed to become something in Australia. I won't have any time for painting, so will cease my completely unprofitable efforts, which means that I shall not spend money I don't earn.'

'Besides,' he added, 'for me this thing has come just when I had finally decided that if there are any people in the world who will never be interested in art then they are the Australians. Art has no past, present or future here.'

Sitting in a big hall on one of a dozen wooden benches with other civilians, Dezso and I had just finished eating our cut lunches when I heard our names called from a door at the far end:

'Mr. D. Orban, Mr. E. Barcs,' bellowed a corporal. Dezso yawned, got up, and followed me to the door. The NCO ticked off our names then said with a broad grin: 'You know why I have called you Mister?' And without waiting for an answer, continued, 'Because it will be a long time before anybody calls you Mister again.'

Dezso, who had served as an artillery officer in the Austrian-Hungarian army in World War I, let out a loud brouhaha and I followed his example. The corporal, with the tolerant smile of a man whose irresistible humour had scored another hit, patted us on the back as we crossed the threshold."

This passage holds ironic humour when it is realised that Orban, today approaching his 98th birthday and having held a superb retrospective exhibition 10 years ago at the National Art Gallery of New South Wales, is regarded as a foremost teacher of art. He encourages individual creative work from his students.

If these are the "Reffos" we accepted so reluctantly a generation ago who, when recalling the past may laugh with us, and judge us today with affectionate humour, there is hope for our future.

Louise Rosenberg

MAKING AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY.

THE JEWS, (*Nelson*)

by

Rabbi Raymond Apple

In 105 pages the author of this book succeeds to a significant extent to make non-Jewish people, in at least the larger cities of Australia, as familiar with Jews and their customs as are the citizens of parts of U.S.A. In New York, as one would expect, Jewish people are fully integrated into society, and their language, customs, religious observances and Yiddish are not infrequently well known to the general community, and most are familiar with Jewish terms and observances.

Until the last forty or fifty years, and in some places today in Australia, Jewish customs, achievements and beliefs were generally very little known, or known adversely. A few celebrated figures were recognised as Jews, but on the whole our people were considered "a race apart". Fortunately there has been an improvement in knowledge of our beliefs, achievements, and customs, and our rights. One of the factors in this development has been the direct influence of the Rabbis and communal leaders who have embarked on a positive education programme to place the Jews and their beliefs in proper perspective. There are others, too, such as the efforts of the Australian Jewish Historical Society, Jewish writers generally, communal organisations and civic participation on occasions.

This book by Rabbi Apple is designed to clarify the position of Jewish citizens as an integral part of the general community, the wide ranging contributions they have made at all times to the growth of Australia as part of their unique heritage from the past, and the basic principles of their religious beliefs.

Rabbi Apple leaves the reader in no doubt of the universality of Jewish culture and Jewish contributions to whatever country they inhabit as home, and he traces the parts they played in the Australian scene, from the country's inception in 1788, with the consummate skill we come to expect, and indeed get, from him.

All aspects of Jewish life from its origins in antiquity, its emergence in the Bible, and in the prison colony of N.S.W., to an honoured place in the professions and government, are treated with sympathetic understanding, clarity of expression and authority. It was obviously written to be understood — simple, factual, logical; it is one of a series to rank with others to make up a comprehensive picture of Australian society, and the part played by each component. "The Jews" is a worthy segment depicting the gradual development from a small band of men with a proud largely unknown heritage, to influential communities rich in material and spiritual assets, with developed traditional Jewish institutions, a general adherence to religious beliefs, and an awakening to the need to strengthen communal ties with synagogues and Torah.

The format of the book is attractive, convenient for study and reference.

The index is adequate and the suggested follow-up activities helpful. Pictures are carefully selected and add to the general appearance and effectiveness of the text.

I consider this book is a worthwhile addition to Jewish literature in Australia, worthy of a place in every library and school.

The comprehensive review by Louise Rosenberg (*Great Synagogue*, May, 1981) is such a well balanced analysis of historical events, that I consider it unnecessary to repeat the points so ably expressed by her. The two reviews taken in conjunction should do much to enlighten readers generally, and to remove misconceptions about Jewish beliefs and history.

M. H. Kellerman

AN AUSTRALIAN MINISTRY

by
Rabbi Fabian

An Australian Ministry by Rabbi Dr. Alfred Fabian is a worthy addition to the growing volume of literature on Australian Jewry by Australian authors.

The author, a Rabbi with extensive experience as a minister in three Australian States, and as a European scholar, presented his work in the form of an anthology. His material is carefully selected and classified into eight sections, five of them on Australian institutions, problems and development. In no sense can it be considered a history, but it portrays an historical sense inasmuch as it consists of a collection of sermons, articles and papers analysing, evaluating and criticising current events and social problems that constitute history.

“The Man and his Mission” could well be the title of the splendid review of this book written by Rabbi Apple. (*Jewish Times*, 2 April, 1981.) The reviewer highlights the application of the author’s integrity, profound scholarship, and love of Judaism, keen logical powers of analysis, broad experience, and humane regard for his fellow man, to the diverse problems encountered by Jewry during the past forty years, and to his contribution towards improving our Jewish identity.

Rabbi Fabian displays a real historical sense, a keenness for well researched material and skill in selecting relevant and significant facts. Added to these are his logical approach to problems, his skill in presenting points of view, and his fine choice of language. The result is a series of topics, arranged thematically on vital questions exercising the minds of the community at the time — migration, growth of congregations, Israel, education, conferences and public opinion, and above all the practice of Judaism — the whole a valuable basis for the historical study of the development of the Australian Jewish population and its integration into world Jewry. If he had given us no more than the history of B’nai Berith,

Jewish Chaplains, Jewish Students in Universities, and the growth of the North Shore Synagogue it would have been sufficient. But he has given us much more.

I consider this book would be excellent for basic background material for High School pupils to study for content, debates, lectures and essay construction. Here they would have guidelines on current affairs, Judaism as a way of life, Jewish history, and the incentive to delve more deeply into many facets of Jewish affairs often taken for granted or ignored.

Rabbi Fabian suggests that some of his material may have become dated and irrelevant today, but his insight into current affairs has kept them as significant today as examples for historical treatment as they were twenty or thirty years ago.

There is much to learn from this book, from the study of its logical presentation of ascertainable facts, its emotional appeal to readers and listeners and the diversity of subjects in its contents.

I echo Rabbi Apple's words, 'a book for thinking Australian Jewry to purchase and ponder' and add, "for young people to study".

M. H. Kellerman