

"Sydney, January 30, 1885.

MY DEAR MRS. LEVY,—

I send you under this cover a resolution of the Board of Directors of this Bank, and, while thus joining with them in this official expression of our sympathy for you and your family in your sad bereavement, I cannot allow the opportunity to pass without expressing to you my personal attachment to your dear husband. I have known Mr. Levy for a lifetime, and as his colleague on the Board of this Bank, as his banker, and as his friend, our associations have always been of the pleasantest and kindest; and, believing that our regard for each other was a mutual one, I feel your dear husband's loss to me as sincere and heartfelt as if I were a member of his family.

T. A. DIBBS."

" 'Dalwood', Branxton,

February 5, 1885.

I grieve with you over the death of your revered Mr. L. W. Levy. In him I have also lost a dear old friend, one who often gave me a kindly word, and still more substantial help in former days. It must at least be a comfort to you and to all his relations that, in falling asleep for a time, it was at a ripe old age, in the midst of well-deserved honor, and the warm esteem of all who had the pleasure of knowing him.

JOHN WYNDHAM."

## TOWARDS DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION

### THE BOARD OF DEPUTIES

*The two articles, "The 18 Signatories" by S. Stedman, and "The N.S.W. Jewish Board of Deputies" by Dr. G. Bergman, form a unit, the second paper in effect being a supplement to the first in as much as it tells of subsequent events and provides a commentary on some aspects of the problems that arose during the period when the Board of Deputies emerged to become what may loosely be described as the democratically elected Jewish representative body. That there will be some duplication is inevitable but necessary to preserve continuity and to place events in proper perspective.*

## The 18 Signatories

By S. STEDMAN

In 1832 the Jews in Sydney formed the first Jewish congregation in Australia. The President of the Congregation was regarded as the leader and representative of the Jews of Sydney. After the arrival of the Reverend A. B. Davis in 1862, the Minister of the York Street and later The Great Synagogue became the spiritual leader of Sydney's Jewry. Later, with the growth of the Jewish population, other synagogues came into being, but so far as the city and Government authorities were concerned, the Rabbi of the first and then the largest congregation remained the recognised spiritual head, and the President, the responsible Jewish citizen who spoke on behalf and in the name of Sydney Jewry.

Life within Australia, generally, and among the Jewish population in particular, was relatively quiet and uncomplicated. Whatever internal problems arose were resolved or dealt with by half-a-dozen responsible leaders, with occasional recourse to the London Beth-Din.

In these circumstances, no representation, other than the President of the Congregation and the Rabbi seemed necessary. The Rabbi was usually invited to official Government functions, and the President was, as a rule, a man prominent in the commercial life of Sydney who fitted the position of representative of Sydney Jewry quite satisfactorily.

This state of affairs continued until the year 1933. By then, the Jewish population had increased considerably, new synagogues were built and new congregations registered. The members and the management of these organisations began to demand a voice in the conduct of matters affecting Jews and they were increasingly dissatisfied with the fact of being represented by one synagogue.

The combined membership of the new congregations far exceeded membership of the Great Synagogue, and as a result of protests, in 1933 the "N.S.W. Advisory Board" was created consisting of The Great Synagogue, The Central Synagogue, and the Temple Emanuel. In addition, there was associate representation by the congregations of Newtown, Bankstown, and Newcastle.

As a matter of course, the representatives were the Rabbis and the Presidents. No special meetings to elect or appoint representatives were called and no specific instructions were given them on how to vote on certain questions. The Advisory Board could not claim to represent the

Jewish Community as a whole but only those who were members of the various synagogues. A great number of Jews, then, as now, was outside these purely religious associations.

With the advent of Nazism in Germany, and later, the War, the position of Jewry the world over changed radically.

Relief organisation was required, help through Government agencies, intervention on behalf of the suffering victims, all this did not come within the limited scope of the Advisory Board. In Sydney, the Jews began to feel the need of direction, of prompt and decisive action. A roof organisation became an absolute necessity, one that would be empowered by the whole community of Sydney Jewry to speak and act on its behalf.

In March, 1942, an open letter, addressed to the Jews of Sydney, was issued over the signatures of 18 men. These 18 men were from various walks of life, and of different political opinions, but, all were activated by the desire to create "an organic unity in our own midst". The following names appeared under the letter:

V. Cornfield	M. Phillips	S. Stedman
Rabbi B. Frampton	R. A. Rabinovitch	S. Stoliar
M. Isaacs	J. Rothschild	A. Stuchinsky
Julius Karpin	H. Sher	K. Wein
Sam Karpin	M. Simons	R. Wells
M. Maan	S. Sobol	M. Wise

"Since the advent of power of Hitler," the letter stated, "the Jewish people have had a double torment to bear, first as citizens of a country over-run by the ruthless Nazi hordes, and secondly as Jews they have been singled out for the direct forms of human indignities and attacks. It becomes necessary, therefore, for us as free Jews to develop a double line of defence against our enemies, so as to face not only our powerful external foe, but also to combat the enemy who lives within our midst—the Jew-baiter and the anti-semite.

"Separated as we are from the Jews of Europe now writhing painfully beneath Hitler's iron heel, and in danger of being cut off from the free Jews of England and America, it behoves us, the Jews of Sydney and Australia, to use our own mental and spiritual resources in holding aloft the torch of Jewry in a darkened world."

The letter went on to ask

"What then is the instrument by means of which we Jews in Australia may rise to preserve our dignity and keep intact our Jewish home? Undoubtedly the instrument of an organized community. Today we are confronted with the fact that in Sydney, at any rate, there does not exist a Jewish community in the true sense of the word.

We find that the control and administration of our people are concentrated in the hands of a few, a small group of Jews representing actually the smallest section of our people. There can be no doubt that this small band has conferred some benefits, in their own way, upon our people. But, on the other hand, we can point to a

lack of responsibility towards their own Jewish brethren that has manifested itself in the social discrimination towards their fellow Jews, in the failure to face the growing antisemitism in this country, in the failure to provide adequate Jewish instruction for our Jewish children and youth, in the failure to feel wholeheartedly the persecution of the Jewish people in other parts of the world, and in the failure to admit to their councils representatives from among those of the Jews for whom they claim to speak."

The signatories contrasted the existing structure of Jewish leadership in New South Wales with the British and South African Boards of Deputies:

"Unlike the British and South African Boards of Deputies, which rely on mass organisation, which held regular public meetings where every new and acute Jewish problem may be ventilated and discussed, our leaders meet behind closed doors, make their resolutions, and approach the Government in the name of the whole Jewish People."

The 18 Signatories stated clearly in their open letter the type of Jewish representation they had in mind.

"It is now clear that a democratically elected Jewish body, based on universal Jewish franchise, is the only means of awakening our people to the responsibilities and obligations that face them. All Jews, both male and female, over the age of 18 years, who proclaim themselves as Jews, without distinction of origin or language, should be enrolled and registered for the purpose of participating in a regular election of a

#### JEWIS' REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL.

Electoralates should be formed, a period allowed to elapse for electioneering purposes, and the elections themselves be conducted by secret ballot, without fear or favour, in a true democratic spirit.

Undoubtedly many of our present leaders would be elected to the council; but with them would also be representatives of the as yet dumb masses. Fresh blood, new ideas, new workers, would act like a tonic on an apathetic and inert community. In this way, the difference between all Jews would disappear, a difference that Hitler has removed by his unceasing war on Jews of all social ranks, a difference which would redound to the everlasting shame of the Jews to maintain.

A community, organised as above, would permit of real and permanent contacts between the Jewish masses and the leaders; it would lay the basis for a broad programme of education, of a fresh orientation of the attitude of our Jewish youth who are wandering aimlessly with no one to show them the tremendous task of post-war reconstruction. Above all, it would not interfere with existing institutions such as our synagogues or charitable organisations but would give to all Jews direct touch with all problems that affect them in their political, social and cultural aspects."

The Open Letter created a furore in the community. It was a revolt against the established order. The members of the Advisory Board invited representatives of the 18 Signatories to discuss the problem, and on 7th May, 1942, a meeting was arranged and took place at the Great Synagogue. The Signatories sent five delegates: Rabbi B. Frampton, Maurice Isaacs, Julius Karpin, Solomon Stedman and Dr. I. N. Steinberg. The last named, though not

a signatory to the letter, was included in the delegation because of his knowledge and experience of Jewish communities in many lands. The joint Advisory Board and its Public Relations Committee were represented by fifteen persons, among whom were Rabbi I. Porush, and Rabbi L. A. Falk from the Great Synagogue, Mr. Saul Symonds, Chairman of the Advisory Board and President of the Great Synagogue, Rabbi Levi of Temple Emanuel and Mr. Cecil Lubet, President of Temple Emanuel. "It was a lively discussion lasting three hours and centering around the principles upon which the democratic reconstruction of the community should be based."<sup>1</sup>

At the conclusion of the discussion, the delegation of the 18 Signatories submitted the following resolution:

"This meeting decides on the principle of a general democratic election to establish a unified representative body of all Jews in New South Wales, irrespective of membership of existing organisations, and that a commission be appointed to devise ways and means of instituting such elections—such commission consisting of members from the Signatories and the Advisory Board, to make its report within one month".<sup>2</sup>

The Advisory Board declared that it would consider this resolution at the earliest opportunity and would then inform the Signatories of its decision.

During the discussion members of the Advisory Board fully recognised the inadequacy of the existing form of official representation which was criticised as being outdated and outmoded and that something different was required. No opposition to the proposed change was raised, but there seemed to be uncertainty about the system of universal franchise as demanded by the 18 Signatories. It was feared by members of the Advisory Board that leadership and the right to speak on behalf of all Jews including those who had occupied the leadership for so long, could pass into the hands of people who were inexperienced and thus unqualified.

Meantime a lively debate was being conducted in the pages of the Jewish press. In a statement a few days before the meeting already referred to the Advisory Board said:

"Attention is drawn to a circular received by many coreligionists advocating the election of a more democratic organisation to represent the community than the existing Advisory Board."

The statement continued to supply information regarding its constitution to establish that it was "reasonably representative of organised Jewry in its many ramifications, though it may not be as democratic as some would wish". To demonstrate its standing with the general Sydney community, it quoted the fact that it had invited some

thirty Jewish communal leaders to meet it to discuss a proposal by the Lord Mayor that "the Jewish Community join with the other denominations in providing and staffing a temporary shelter for air-raid victims."<sup>3</sup>

The course of future events was reported in *The Australian Jewish Herald* by Maurice Isaacs on behalf of the 18 Signatories:<sup>4</sup>

"Since the month of April a vigorous campaign in Sydney has proceeded with a view to creating a democratic Jewish community. As the campaign aims at upsetting the outmoded system under which the community has been controlled for many years, and in view of the public interest that has been focussed on the movement, it is timely that a brief reportage be presented to indicate what has been the attitude of the Sydney Advisory Board to the campaign.

Shortly after the 'Open Letter' was circulated throughout the State, The Advisory Board invited the Signatories to a special Conference. The Signatories sent five delegates to the meeting and after discussions submitted for the consideration of the Advisory Board the following resolution :

"That this meeting decides on the principle of a general democratic election to establish a unified representative body of all Jews of N.S.W. irrespective of existing membership in other organisations, and that a Committee be appointed to devise ways and means of instituting such elections, such Committee consisting of members from the Signatories and Advisory Board to make its report within one month."

It is relevant to note that this recommendation was submitted on May 7, and that a meeting was called on the special invitation of the Board; therefore, some hope was born in the hearts of the community that the Advisory Board, in all sincerity, desired also to create an organic and dynamic Jewish community on the broadest democratic basis possible.

The Advisory Board, however has procrastinated and delayed. On May 28, a further letter was sent by the Board to the Signatories, containing the text of a resolution passed by the Board, which was as follows : 'The Advisory Board agrees with the principle of establishing a unified representative body of all Jews in N.S.W. on the basis of organised and non-organised Jewry, and will be pleased to appoint three representatives to meet the Signatories to the "Open Letter" to explore its possibilities.' The letter then suggested a further conference to be held on June 9. This conference<sup>5</sup> concluded with the Advisory Board's delegates agreeing to bring before the Signatories a plan for the democratisation of the community within a fortnight.

Nothing further has since been heard from the Board as to any progress in the presentation of such plan. On June 30 three weeks after the last conference the following letter was forwarded by Mr. Saul Symonds, Chairman of the Advisory Board, to the Secretary of the Signatories : 'Further to our conversation in connection with the recent conference held between your representatives and those from the Board, I have to inform you that this matter will be coming up for consideration at a meeting to be held next week, and I will then communicate with you again.'

It appears incredible that so vital a matter to the Jewish community should have been left so long in abeyance by the Board. This attitude becomes all the more reprehensible when it is remembered that the conferences in each case were called by the Advisory

Board to achieve a unified representative body of the Jews in N.S.W. Despite the promise in the letter of June 30 the Board did not honour its promise.

On August 9, the Signatories convened a Mass meeting at the Maccabean Hall. Over 500 Jewish men and women unanimously carried a resolution supporting the creation of a democratic Jewish community and enumerated 12 points as the basis for the election of a Board of Deputies. A copy of the resolution was forwarded to the Advisory Board together with a letter, requesting a meeting for August 20, between the Signatories and the Advisory Board, 'to finalise discussions on the reorganisation of the Jewish community on a democratic basis.' On August 17, Mr. Symonds forwarded the following letter to the Signatories: 'I beg to acknowledge receipt of your letter of August 14, and same was discussed by my executive. I have to inform you that the matter is being considered by the Sub-Committee set up for the purpose. I regret that I am unable to call such a meeting as you request. As soon as a scheme is presented by the Sub-Committee and approved by the Advisory Board, I shall immediately communicate with you to discuss the matter further.'

This brief account of the negotiations between the Signatories and the Board reflect gravely on the Advisory Board. Through procrastination and delay, many a movement to reform in the past has been prematurely destroyed. The Advisory Board, by its attitude towards the very question of reform and recreation of our community, has placed itself under a cloak of suspicion. This suspicion becomes all more acute when attention is drawn to a circular that has been forwarded to every Jewish organisation in Sydney by the Board asking for particulars of membership with a view to widening representation on the Advisory Board. The Board apparently has some plan in mind which it desires to present as a *fait accompli* under cover of negotiations with the Signatories, and urged on by the moral impulse of the necessity for reform, the Board is endeavouring to maintain the old system of communal organisation that properly belongs to one hundred years ago.

The Jewish masses will still remain outside the ambit of active Jewish communal life, in all its spheres, and reform of our community. In spite of obstacles, the initiators of the 'Open Letter' movement possessing the good will of the Jewish people intend to carry on their work until their objective is achieved."

The meeting convened on 9th August, 1942, at the Maccabean Hall by the 18 Signatories proposed to inaugurate a Jewish Democratic League having as its main objective the organisation of a truly democratic Board of Deputies. The Bulletin containing the invitation to the meeting stressed that "the League will have but one objective — the election of Jewish Representatives, by universal franchise. When this objective is attained the League will, naturally, cease to exist." The 12 points unanimously carried by the 500 people present were as follows:

"(1) The Jewish Community of Sydney is to be represented by a Board of Deputies, consisting of 50 persons, elected through equal and direct franchise by all registered Jewish men and women of 18 years of age and over.

(2) The elections are to be instituted and carried out under the supervision of a special Electoral Committee, which shall be formed by a representative conference of all Jewish organisations in Sydney called together by the Advisory Board and/or the 18 Signatories.

(3) The Electoral Committee shall cause to be compiled the Electoral Rolls of all Jewish men and women of Sydney and invite them to register for the Election. This registration to take place within a short period. Every person registered is to pay a fee of one shilling to the funds of the Elections.

(4) At the expiration of the registration period the Electoral Committee shall proclaim the Election Campaign open, such campaign not to exceed a term of from two to three months.

(5) During the Election Campaign every organised group (Synagogues, political parties, cultural organisations) as well as any groups of 25 registered persons is entitled to nominate its list of candidates and announce its programme. Each list shall bear a distinguishing number and be applicable to the whole Jewish population of Sydney considered as one Electorate.

(6) The Election Campaign is to be conducted on a democratic basis, giving the representatives of all lists and programmes the opportunity to address any section of the Jewish electors in order that all phases of Jewish life and problems be brought before the people.

(7) The elections to be held on a Sunday and to be completed in one day. The polling to take place in several localities to meet the convenience of the electors.

(8) At the conclusion of the elections, the votes are to be counted in total and according to the various lists. In accordance with the total number of votes cast, the Electoral Committee fixes the average number of votes required for election of the 50 Deputies. For example, 100 votes if 5,000 votes are cast.

(9) Each list receives as many seats on the Board of Deputies as the necessary average is included in the number of votes for each list. The candidates are declared elected in accordance with the order of their names appearing on the list.

(10) At the constitution of the Board of Deputies and after the election of the Executive, the Electoral Committee, as well as the group of the 18 Signatories are to dissolve themselves. The Advisory Board transfers its functions to the newly elected Board. The Board of Deputies to inform the Government of the new constitution of the Jewish Community.



(11) The Board of Deputies shall in no way interfere in the internal organisation, authority and functions of the existing synagogues.

(12) The plenary meetings of the Board of Deputies to be open to the public and reports published in the Jewish press. Such meetings to be held at least every month.

The Jewish people present here to-night express their approval of the preamble and the 12 points enumerated and pledge themselves to support the campaign for the re-organisation of the Sydney Community on a democratic basis."

The Advisory Board never honoured its promise to the 18 Signatories to communicate with them again and discuss the reconstruction and reorganisation of the Jewish community. However, in March, 1943, the Advisory Board, bypassing the 18 Signatories, called a convention of local organisations to approve the establishment of a Board of Deputies. Forty organisations took part in the Convention at which the following resolution was submitted:

"That this Convention of representatives of Jewish organisations and synagogal bodies recognises the principle of a unified Jewish Community and a single controlling, directing and representing authority as fundamental to the welfare of New South Wales Jewry, and to this end endorses the establishment of a New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies."<sup>6</sup>

An amendment to add to the resolution the words "on the principle of a general democratic franchise of all adult Jews in New South Wales" was defeated and the resolution as originally submitted was carried.<sup>7</sup> A provisional committee was elected to draft a constitution and to set up the machinery for the establishment of the Board of Deputies.

The 18 Signatories were extremely critical of the action of the Advisory Board and called a further public meeting on 20th June, 1943. The invitation was in the form of a bulletin which quoted among other things from a leader entitled "A Community or a Mob" published in the *London Jewish Chronicle* on 27th November, 1942:

"It is now the turn of the masses to lend a hand in the rebuilding of their own house on safe, democratic foundations by showing their capacity for responsibility. Unless a powerful representative body is set up, capable of inspiring the community to rally behind it, centralising the communal efforts and able to speak as the authoritative voice of the community, it will not be only the democratic principle that will die among us. With it will go much, if not all, of the prospect of a serene future for the Jews of England."

The Signatories claimed that there had been no attempt to mobilise the broad masses of the Jewish population, that many of the organisations present at the Convention were not entitled to be there, citing in this regard Wizo-Ivriah, Wizo- Bellevue Hill Group, Young Wizo, the Jewish National Fund, Zionist State Council of New South Wales, Union of Sydney Zionists, Shomrim, Youth Aliyah and Tarbuth. It was argued that all these organisations were affiliated with and directed by the same authority.<sup>8</sup>

The 18 Signatories continued to agitate for the formation of a Board of Deputies based on adult franchise and not on the basis of representation from existing organisations. The *Australian Jewish Forum* echoed their feelings when it wrote:<sup>9</sup>

"The names of these architects who will construct the new edifice of Jewish Communal life in Sydney are well known to all. They are the same names which have, for many years past, appeared in all Jewish organisations, in fact they are the names of that section who seem to regard themselves as Permanent Representatives. These ubiquitous individuals always represent something or somebody somewhere. There are no new people, therefore there will not be any new ideas."

Despite their protests, however, the Board of Deputies was constituted on the basis of organisational representation, and the draft constitution was finally approved in May, 1944. It is noteworthy that at the time the constitution was adopted, a resolution was submitted by Mr. Max Freilich "that after the War the Board of Deputies should be elected by direct and general franchise."<sup>10</sup>

The Constitution of the Board as at present provides for representation partly on an organisational basis and partly on an open franchise system. This presents a limited victory only to the 18 Signatories, as it compromised, in their eyes, the principles of democracy embodied in free and universal franchise. Yet their contribution and accomplishment was a substantial one. By their efforts, Sydney Jewry became not a mere collection of congregations but something of an organised and dynamic community.

Of the 18 Signatories, 8 are still in Sydney, 2 are in Israel, and 8 have gone to their eternal rest. When the history of Sydney will be written, full credit will be given to these men who fought unselfishly for Democracy within Sydney Jewry.