

HIRSCH DE VAHL STONE — A PIONEERING FIGURE

Address delivered by Reuben Havin, a former editor and publisher of The Australian Jewish Herald, at a memorial service for Hirsch de Vahl Stone who was president of the Melbourne Chevra Kadisha from 1936 until his death in 1980.

Recently I visited again the scenes of my childhood in Carlton where I was born. I looked upon the house in Macarthur Place which was my first home, in those somewhat distant days a depressed street but now a fashionable one. I looked at the house in Pitt Street and the two houses in Canning Street where my family subsequently lived until we moved to St. Kilda. One of my earliest recollections is of being led by the hand by my saintly father from Macarthur Place along Canning Street to Stone's Shul in Pitt Street, where it had been transferred from an earlier site in Grattan Street. I must have been three or four years old when I first saw Hirsch Stone. As I grew up he impinged more and more on my consciousness and



Hirsch de Vahl Stone.

on the consciousness of my young friends who also worshipped at Stone's Shul. In this connection I think of the Miller family; my good friend Joe Miller, who has himself been associated with the Chevra Kadisha, is here with us tonight. I think of the Bakeeff, Rabinov and Honig families, the Fonda family, the two Rockman families, of Jacob Rockman — we never dreamt in those days that a grandson of his, Irvin Rockman who is the son of Norman and Susie Rockman, would one day become the Lord Mayor of this City. I think of Kalman and Eric Rogers. Later there were others, all of whom were to assume positions of leadership in the community.

As soon as it was possible for me to recognise him I became aware of his charisma. He occupied the pew on the left-hand side of the Ark, and somehow one's attention was drawn dramatically to his figure. Although he was a man who was reserved throughout his life, those of us who came under his influence never found him reserved. He had that wonderful gift of being able to elicit an appropriate response in young people, and we did respond to his warmth, to his kindness and to his interest. I owe him a great debt for the 20 years that I attended his Synagogue, at a time when the highly developed and refined communal organisation with which we are familiar today simply did not exist. Although not a great many passed through his hands, those that did will always remember him with gratitude.

I think of a small incident which illustrated the man. I was Bar-Mitzvah at this Synagogue on Yom Kippur†, and his father addressed me on the Bimah. Hirsch came over to suggest that instead of standing — because here was I a young boy fasting — I should be allowed to sit down.

The family itself by any criterion was most distinguished. His father, J.E. Stone, had come from England and was noted for the nature of his adherence to *Yiddishkeit* and to Orthodoxy. He was a unique personality in those days, and the influence which he radiated spread to all the worshippers. It was imbibed by his sons that came to the Minyan and in a number of ways was influential in moulding the spirit of the times and setting a climate which made it possible for the subsequent dramatic development of the Melbourne Jewish community.

Hirsch himself went to Melbourne University. I am not quite sure whether in fact he completed a course but he did study there for a period. He entered the family sponge and chamois business — the premises were in Nicholson Street, Fitzroy — and was most successful as the firm's buyer. He continued in that capacity for a great many years.

Around this time he commenced an association with the Judaeen League which was then in its infancy but had become a potent force in the life of the community, especially north of the Yarra. He occupied several positions, including that of chairman of the League. Already the signs of his efficiency and public spirit were evident. He was a significant figure within the organisation.

It was in the next decade of his life, that is, in his 30's, that he first manifested an interest in the Melbourne Chevra Kadisha which was to continue for the rest of his life and which was to write a remarkable chapter in the story of Melbourne Jewry.

I have sometimes asked myself in the years since then, "What was it that

impelled a young man of that kind to be drawn to the very sacred but, from the point of view of Australian standards, rather unusual work involved in a Chevra Kadisha?" I have only been able to conclude that his dedication to Judaism was such that he recognised an area which stood in need of the most serious cultivation and was determined to do something about it. He understood the great sanctity of reverential burial for the dead. He understood the commanding force which this Mitzvah is given in the Torah and in the Talmud. It was his vision which made him recognise that a very special effort was necessary in this country to place the Chevra Kadisha in line with the great tradition of the Chevra Kadishas in Europe which had functioned since the Middle Ages.

And then a whole chapter of his life opened in which he dedicated himself without let day and night to his sacred work. When one computes the extent and range of this activity it would be impossible to pay adequate tribute to his selfless endeavours and to the contribution that he made to Victorian and indeed Australian Jewry.

He was always available under the most difficult and most trying of circumstances. In the terrible moments of bereavement, families found him to be a rock-like support, sympathetic, constantly attentive, discreet and comforting. These are qualities in this particular field which cannot be rated too highly.



Left, exterior of Stone's Shul and right, the first Melbourne Chevra Kadisha building, corner Pitt and Canning Streets, Carlton.

It is most fitting therefore that we have come together here in St. Kilda in this splendid new building of the Society — the first occasion incidentally on which its hall has been used — in order to pay this solemn tribute to Hirsch Stone.

The original Chevra Kadisha building at 131 Canning Street, Carlton, was primarily the result of his work and effort. The acquisition of the cemetery off Brown's Road, Springvale, was again largely the result of his farsightedness. At great cost to himself in a personal and material sense he spared nothing in order to ensure that the proper observance of this particular Mitzvah was carried out.

The early period that I speak of was vastly different from what we know today. Then the community was numerically small; it numbered less than 10,000. Its institutions by today's standards were almost primitive. We did not have, for example, the great Jewish Day Schools that throb and underpin the Victorian Jewish community. We did not have the Yeshivah Day School, we did not have Mt. Scopus, we did not have the kind of Board of Deputies that we have now. We only had the most simple of Zionist organisations, but today, after all these years, the whole scene has been transformed. We have a Jewish community which will bear comparison in its own way with any in the world. The credit for that transformation is due to many people. When the history of the Victorian Jewish community comes to be written properly, the contribution of many individuals will be recorded. And what I want to say tonight is this: That not the least amongst the towering pioneer figures who brought the Victorian Jewish community from its origins in the pre-war period to the kind of structure that we know today was Hirsch Stone who laboured with great excellence in a field which perhaps not many others would have entered.

He made his own unique contribution to the kind of Jewish community that we know today, that we're so proud of today, and which we hope will continue to take its place alongside the great Jewish communities of the world in the common endeavour of preserving and advancing our wonderful heritage with its incomparable values.

†Ed — The celebration of a Barmitzvah on Yom Kippur must be regarded as most unusual.