

NOT MERELY HOUSEWIVES

by
Lysbeth Cohen

(This appeared in a different and abridged form as a chapter entitled "Beginning With Esther" in a book dealing with nineteenth century women and their contributions to life in New South Wales published by the Society of Women Writers (1980) — "Lives Obscurely Great". Based on this chapter it has been recorded as a series of talks for ABC Radio "By the Way" programme for broadcast in March 1981. This paper, dealing with the same subject from an angle appropriate for its audience, was given at the Australian Jewish Historical Society's meeting in December, 1980, at the Great Synagogue in Sydney.)

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This is a tale about women, about Jewish women in New South Wales, particularly about six women born in the nineteenth century whose life's work and contributions to Australian life took place this century.

The story of Esther Abrahams, who came as a convict with the First Fleet, who was protected by Lieutenant George Johnston in charge of the Marines and later Acting Governor of the Colony, and who married him after seven children and twenty-five years together, has been told in great detail by the late George Bergman.

Long before her death Jewish free settlers were establishing themselves in this country. Their womenfolk were wives and mothers, who helped their husbands in business and as pioneers in country areas and provided assistance and often sustenance to the poor, the aged and the infirm. They were the housewives, as are many Jewish women today, and from such family backgrounds sprang six women whose influence on other people, and whose achievements in their own particular field of endeavour, were outstanding.

While the majority of those early New South Wales Jewish settlers stayed in Sydney, some sought their fortunes in country areas. Goulburn was one such centre and the story of that flourishing community has been told by S. B. Glass. In the mid-nineteenth century its Jewish population was the third largest in Australia.

Mirrrie Hill

Operating a store in Goulburn was a Jewish woman, Esther Jane Marks, whose first husband was killed by bushrangers. Her second husband wrote poetry and was nick-named "Gentleman John". The Marks family, parents and five daughters, moved to Sydney and one of those girls, Kate Caroline, married Levien Solomon whose father Phillip Solomon QC had acted as Administrator of Fiji for some time. These were the parents of

musician and composer Mirrie Hill (born in 1892) who at eighty-seven was awarded the OBE, in the 1980 Queen's Birthday Honours.

Mirrie remembers her childhood and spending Shabbat at her grandmother's Darlinghurst home.

"The gong was struck at one o'clock sharp . . . There was always a big roast on the table and vegetables were handed around by the maid. But before that, in the kitchen, the cook would give my brother and me a small hot baked potato each. We loved that."

Afterwards there would be music. Sometimes, when one of her aunts played wrong notes on the piano, Mirrie, aged about four, would run from the room, telling her embarrassed mother "Something's wrong in the middle".² So, from a very early age her ear was attuned and she could never bear dissonance.

After her father's death, Mirrie, her mother and her brother Ronald lived with an aunt and uncle. They used to take her to concerts and this aunt, who had a fine mezzo-soprano voice, gave Mirrie her first music lessons. Later the renowned Josef Kretchmann was her teacher.

Her schooling at Shirley College completed, she won a scholarship to become one of the first students at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music.

She joined the Conservatorium teaching staff and began her career as teacher and composer.

On her marriage to one of her professors, composer Alfred Hill (for some time also Musical Director at the Great Synagogue, Sydney), she



Mirrie Hill and Ruby Rich with Lysbeth Cohen at the launching of "Lives Obscurely Great" on 9th October, 1980.

inherited three step-children and subsequently a great number of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. In addition, the children of her musician friends have always adopted her as an aunt.

Soon after their marriage the Hills bought a steep water-front block of land overlooking Sirius Cove and on it built a house with a large music room facing the harbour. Nearly every Sunday a quartet rehearsed there during the day and presented a concert at night. Overseas artists, too — when the Griller Quartet came to Australia they played one of Alfred Hill's compositions and rehearsed at their home.

During her husband's lifetime she accompanied him all over Australia and to New Zealand, England, Europe and America. There she met Fritz Kreisler after a concert.

"All the time we talked together he kept holding my hand," she said. "I never wanted to wash that hand again."

A bright-eyed little lady who reads without glasses and climbs one hundred steps to the roadway whenever she goes out, she is very modest about her own achievements.

Mirrie Hill's compositions include orchestral and chamber music, works for children, songs for which she wrote both words and music and she has set some of Dame Mary Gilmore's poems to music. She became interested in Aboriginal music when she was asked to compose the background music for a documentary film. Her "Arnhem Land Symphony" is now well-known through its recording by the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra conducted by her great friend Henry Krips. On the same disc is a piece for violin and orchestra, "Avinu Malkinu" based on an ancient Ashkenazi melody. In 1978 she composed a String Quartet in which she used a Hebrew melody as the basis for its third movement.

She has written a book explaining melody for students and a number of poems. She writes poetry and children's stories "for fun".

Recently the Conservatorium of Music has set aside a portion of the library in Macquarie Street to be designated as the Alfred and Mirrie Hill Reading Room.

Ruby Rich

Mirrie Hill's grandparents had their store in Goulburn which was a sizable town, but for those nineteenth century Jewish women who went with their husbands to country areas life was hard. Imagine what it must have been like for a gently nurtured Jewish Englishwoman to live in Walgett in western New South Wales.

There, Ada and Louis Rich operated a store. Not only was there no Jewish community in the district but Mrs Rich was the only white woman for miles. Of her six children, the fourth, Ruby, born in Walgett in 1888, was to become well-known in many parts of the world as a champion of women's rights.

The family moved to Sydney and Ruby began her schooling in Strathfield. Governesses completed her education in those things a well-brought-up young lady of that era needed to know — art, literature,

languages. Ruby also learned the piano for which she showed an early talent and played at a Josef Kretchmann concert in the Sydney Town Hall when she was eleven. In her nineties Ruby Rich spoke of her childhood and girlhood.

"Every Friday night we children would arrange family entertainments. We used to stand in a row, introduce ourselves in rhyme and then put on a little play in costume on a stage in the Conservatory . . . I had very short hair and it was curled with tongs, especially for our dancing classes — and we went to them by four-wheeler."

Friends would also be invited to the Rich home on Friday nights.

Ruby continued her music studies in Berlin with Artur Schnabel and then in Paris. She performed in London for a BBC Empire Broadcast and on her return to Australia was heard on local radio. She organised concerts during the First World War, gave recitals and had opportunities to play professionally — but her father would not permit this. He would not allow his daughters to do anything for money: they had no need to earn their living. Ruby could play in concerts, but only socially or for charity.

Perhaps this was one reason for her increasing interest in the Women's Movement. In Australia women already had the right to vote but discrimination against women in other spheres was rife. Her involvement with Women's Rights began in 1923 after she met a New South Wales Member of Parliament, Millicent Preston-Stanley, who influenced her to take up the cudgels and campaign for equal opportunities for women in employment, for adequate remuneration for women who worked, and for the right to participate in local and national government.

Ruby Rich became one of the best-known feminists in Australia. Through the League of Women Voters, of which she is President of Honour, her active association with Pan-Pacific, South-East Asian, British Commonwealth and International Alliance Women's groups meant her holding at various times a great number of official positions. In 1929 she represented the Australian Federation of Women Voters at The Hague. She was Vice-Chairman of the Australian delegation at the international conference in Berlin. She attended a conference of the International Alliance of Women in 1935 in Istanbul, where Kemal Attaturk performed the official opening ceremony. For over fifty years she spoke on behalf of Australian women at international conferences held in many parts of the world.

As a Jewess she was always particularly interested in the women of Palestine and, later, of Israel. In the 1930s she interrupted her journey home from London to visit Palestine. She visited Arab women of the International Suffrage Alliance. She met Rebecca Sieff and was impressed by the WIZO institutions she saw — their homes for mothers and children, their training schemes for immigrants and their way of helping Arab as well as Jewish women. That was the beginning of Ruby Rich's association with WIZO. At that time, as she left Palestine by train for Istanbul she had visa trouble at the border with Lebanon; fortunately, the Prime Minister of Australia had provided her with a "red seal" letter — and that facilitated matters.

In Palestine she met also Dr. Maurice Schalit whom she eventually married. This gave her a ready-made family and after his son's marriage she also enjoyed grandchildren. Dr. Schalit's interest in establishing a Mental Hygiene Centre in Palestine was allied with her own interest in Racial Hygiene in Australia.

This had begun in 1926 when she was asked to head a committee to educate women in sex matters and the prevention of venereal disease. At first she refused.

"I had a struggle within myself," she said. "I wasn't married, I had no nursing or medical training, I thought it was a man's job. But when I read the literature and realised that gonorrhoea could cause babies to be born blind or deaf I was very moved and I agreed."⁶

Pity for those children, and for the uninformed women who had only the Racial Hygiene Association to turn to for assistance, kept her active. Although the Association members worked quietly and were not aggressive in their activities they encountered a certain amount of opposition from religious groups. This organisation was the precursor of the present Family Planning Association.

As a protagonist of underprivileged women she was concerned by the plight of those who fell foul of the law, served their time in prison and on their release had no home to welcome them nor anyone to care about them. She was therefore very interested in the halfway house idea of Judge Alfred Rainbow. Towards the end of 1980 a halfway house for women was purchased, nine years after the establishment of Rainbow House for men — and this has been named in her honour "Ruby Rich House".

A little bird-like lady of great charm and with a gentle yet persuasive command of oratory, she was always in great demand as a speaker locally as well as internationally. She was awarded the MBE "for community services, particularly as a leader of movements for the advancement of women" and in 1975 the United Nations Peace Medal.

Of equal importance has always been her love of music. In 1937 Bronislaw Huberman came to Australia after visiting Palestine where he met refugee musicians and encouraged them to form an orchestra. He spoke to people here in the musical world and so initiated the Friends of the Orchestra: one of its founders and staunchest supporters was Ruby Rich-Schalit.

"I stood at the birth of the Feminist Club, the Racial Hygiene Movement and the Friends of the IPO," she says with pride.⁷

She first heard the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra perform in Paris in 1960 and later she returned from a visit to Israel extremely excited after hearing musicians play in a memorable performance in the old Roman open-air amphitheatre at Caesarea: the soloist at the concert was Pablo Casals. When the IPO came to Australia on its first tour for the ABC in 1966, it was one of the happiest and most fulfilling moments of this lady's very satisfying and achieving life. She continued her work with her Friends, and had the pleasure of meeting the orchestra on their second tour in 1978.

Even in her nineties her interest in the IPO and women's affairs has not waned. Her mementos of the many facets of her life, her papers and

documents dealing with events, personalities and causes too numerous to record here, and covering many decades, all proved very useful when the National Library in Canberra was arranging a room to show what women have done for national development: Ruby Rich-Schalit was a member of the committee which set up that room.

Despite her wonderfully interesting and productive life on the local and international scene, in her nineties she still regrets the fact that as a girl she could not go to university and still rather envies two of her contemporaries — Gladys Marks and Fanny Cohen.⁸

Fanny Cohen

Fanny Cohen's grandfather, Samuel Cohen, and his new wife, nee Rosetta Menser, arrived in Sydney from England in 1853 after a four months' voyage by sailing ship. They moved to Newcastle where their first three children were born, then to Grafton and finally settled in Ulmarra. Samuel Cohen was the proprietor of a large general store. He also traded in maize and cedar which he shipped to Sydney and Melbourne, using at least



Fanny Cohen by courtesy Fort Street High School and Sydney University.

one sailing vessel, *the Rachel Cohen*,⁹ especially built for him on the Manning River. He was a member of the School Board, a Justice of the Peace and the first Mayor of Ulmarra. He was a Trustee of the Grafton Synagogue and the Cemetery.* A very religious man, he would not transact business on the Sabbath and he arranged for a Sefer Torah to be sent up from Sydney when each of his sons was of Bar Mitzvah age.^{9a}

The eldest of his thirteen children,¹⁰ Algernon, went to England to study medicine (there was no Medical School in Sydney¹¹ at that time), married an English girl, Priscilla, and eventually was one of the first anaesthetists at St. Vincent's Hospital in Sydney. Their only daughter, the third of their four children, was born in Grafton, New South Wales, in 1887. She was named Frances and gained renown as Fanny Cohen, the headmistress of Fort Street Girls' High School for twenty-two years.

The courses she studied at Sydney University were then rather unusual for a girl — mathematics and science. She graduated in 1909 — B.A., B.Sc. with First Class Honours and the University Medal for Geology. In 1913 she added an M.A. to her qualifications after returning from Cambridge as the first Australian woman to be awarded a Travelling Fellowship. She was a friend of Professor Carslaw who asked her to assist with a mathematics textbook.

Her association with Fort Street began as Assistant Mistress of Mathematics in 1912 and after a period at other schools including being headmistress of West Maitland and of St. George Girls' High, she returned to Fort Street in 1930 as headmistress, a position she held until her retirement in 1952. During this time the school celebrated its centenary, having opened in 1850. Situated in what was Governor Macquarie's Military Hospital and is now the Sydney headquarters of the National Trust, Fort Street was one of the few "selective" high schools to which girls were admitted on merit as the result of an examination at the end of primary school, called the Primary Final or Qualifying Certificate. These girls responded to the high educational standard on which Fanny Cohen insisted.

She was conscious of the importance of the school environment and turned her attention to improving facilities — the library was enlarged, the entrance hall made more pleasant and attractive, and the grounds remodelled.

Her former pupils remember her as a tall dignified lady with snow white hair and sparkling brown eyes; with a vital personality and great charm, a good sense of humour and an infectious laugh. They appreciated her interest and encouragement to individual pupils, her kindness and thoughtfulness to others and her clarity of mind when they sought her advice.

At a time when many vocations were closed to girls, either officially or by public tradition, she expressed her "unswerving belief that girls of sufficient ability were capable of reaching the same high academic standard as boys and of entering the professions on an equal footing".¹² She was known as a "champion in the fight for equality of opportunity in the 1940s and 1950s".¹³

This was the period when she was also active outside Fort Street School, as Chairman of the Council of Sydney University Women's College, as a member of the Board of Secondary School Studies and as a member of the Senate of Sydney University — for two terms and a period of twenty years.

For her various services to education she was awarded the King George V Silver Jubilee Medal in 1935, the King George VI Coronation Medal in 1937, the Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Medal in 1953 and in 1962 the O.B.E.

She loved travelling. She went to London after her retirement from Fort Street and for some time she worked at Australia House. An interviewer from the *Courier-Mail* wrote that she liked to buy her clothes in Paris.

Fanny Cohen loved flowers and her Elizabeth Bay apartment was usually filled with them. She enjoyed ballet, opera, theatre, films and contract bridge. But she could not just retire gracefully and devote herself to her friends and her interests. She learnt Braille and then taught it to sighted people who were willing to translate books into Braille. For seventeen years she did this for the Royal Blind Society.

Fanny Cohen died in 1975, aged eighty-eight.

Gladys Marks

While Fanny Cohen was a member of the Sydney University Senate, another Jewish woman, four years her senior, was a valued member of the University French Faculty staff. Gladys Marks had the distinction of being the first woman to hold a lectureship in the Faculty of Arts (in 1921) and the first to act as a professor in any Australian University — and that was in 1929.

She was born in Brisbane in 1883, one of five children. Her paternal grandfather, a schoolmaster, arrived in Tasmania from England in 1837. His son, Benjamin Francis, Gladys' father, was born in Tasmania and he married Jane Matilda Cohen, usually known as "Jenny", an energetic and philanthropic woman who served on a number of charity committees.

Gladys and her sister were educated by governesses and tutors. As well as traditional lessons she learned French, German and music, becoming a talented amateur violinist. Her mother recognised her academic potential and insisted that she should continue her studies at university despite some opposition from her father. In an autobiographic letter now in Sydney University Archives, she wrote about this:

"The family financial situation at the time was pretty bad and men friends told my father I'd become 'a dowdy blue stocking'. He wouldn't consent to my going. I was so unhappy that he gave way and I promised to win the Garton Scholarship for French and German and did so . . . £50 at that time defrayed all expenses."¹⁴

Having gained her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1908, at first she taught French and German in schools. Then she went to Paris to study at the Sorbonne. She joined Sydney University French staff in 1916 as an Acting Lecturer and retired in 1943 due to ill-health.

Her students remember the high standard she expected and the way she

helped them to attain it. She showed her interest in them by writing to individual students during the long vacation to point out to them errors made in examination papers and explain to them how they could improve their work. By her own attitudes and examples she helped them realise the importance of a general cultural outlook.

Gladys Marks bore herself with elegance and dignity, giving the impression of being taller than she actually was. She was kind and generous, helping less fortunate people privately — with advice, gifts, money, whatever was needed. Affectionate and family-minded, she was the person to whom her nieces would tell their problems.

She was a patron of the Arts with a particular interest in music and was associated with both Musica Viva and the ABC Subscribers' committees. The Jewish community remembers especially her support for the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and the Hebrew University. She was a founder and executive committee member of the Business and Professional Women's Club and kept her interest in their activities.

Gladys Marks was in Antwerp in Belgium when the First World War erupted and she wrote an evocative eye-witness account describing the mobilisation and families farewelling their menfolk.¹⁵ She and her American friend were hustled out of Belgium to England and there she helped refugees from Belgium and the families of servicemen. On her return to Australia she was asked to speak at meetings and rallies.



Gladys Marks (by courtesy Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Rosebery).

She enjoyed travelling and went overseas several times for study and conferences. She was almost caught by world war a second time in 1938. In her autobiographical notes she wrote:

"I returned to France and was in Brittany when war seemed imminent in summer of 1938. I hurried to Paris, found our travelling scholar still waiting for money . . . and took him with me to London, arriving there the day before Chamberlain came back waving his 'Peace in Our Time' paper. We returned to Paris. A niece joined me there early in 1939 . . . but by June we were certain that war would come in the summer, so we decided to come home."¹⁶

While she was overseas in 1914 she had been an Australian delegate to the Conference of the International Council of Women. Later she was one of the founders of the Sydney University Women Graduates' Association, of which she was first Honorary Secretary and then President. She was the President of the Australian Federation of University Women from 1931-1934. The "Gladys Marks Room" at Manning House, Sydney University, was named in her honour and after her death in 1970 a Memorial Scholarship was established by the New South Wales Association of University Women Graduates: this provides interest-free loans for mature age women students to enable them to complete their courses at Sydney University.

Zoe Benjamin

Her cousin Zoe Benjamin was also involved with education but at the other end of the scale, becoming well-known for her work with pre-school children.

She was born in Adelaide in 1882, the daughter of Minnie (nee Cohen) and Phillip Benjamin, a journalist, and named Sophia, but was known later always as Zoe. She had two brothers and the family moved to Sydney when she was six years old. She was educated with her cousins by tutors and governesses. Her father encouraged her to read widely, especially history, philosophy and the arts, and these interests she retained throughout her life, giving her the background to inspire her own students later.

She trained as a kindergarten teacher and began introducing daily free-play periods into kindergartens whose programmes had previously been very structured.

A tiny little lady with curly hair, the greater part of her life was spent in the interests of tiny children. For twenty-five years she was associated with the Sydney Kindergarten Teachers' Training College as lecturer and as Vice-Principal. Her subjects included psychology, general history and literature, philosophy, history and principles of education, handwork, games and singing.

"Her love of beauty in music, art and literature and her keen appreciation of all that is fine and noble in many fields of philosophy . . . contributed to . . . her lectures," wrote the College Principal.¹⁷

Ex-pupils remember her lessons as inspiring and giving them a broader cultural vision. They remember also her delicious salmon patties, potato

salad and the currant puddings which she took to their picnics and functions. She took a great interest in her students as individuals and one year she embroidered each a monogrammed handkerchief, sending with it this note:—

“My Dear Girls,

As I cannot be with you, am sending each of you a little token of my thoughts, which bears with it every good wish for the happiness of the coming years. Life will not be all that is easy and pleasant, but if you take with you always the thought of the greatness of your work and that your aim is to ‘go and wake the seeds of good that *sleep* through the world’, courage and faith and optimism will all go with you, and you will do much, tho’ not perhaps all that you would like to do.

Lovingly yours,

Zoe Benjamin.”¹⁸

People remember visiting her home at Hunters Hill — “a tiny little house with everything Zoe-size — small chairs, low doorways, everything very dainty.”¹⁹

Zoe Benjamin founded the Australian Kindergarten Magazine in 1910, continuing as its editor for many years and she initiated the Kindergarten Graduates’ Association. In 1924 she established the Kindergarten Mothers’ Union “to enrich the lives” of inner-city mothers and, as its President, she organised handwork exhibitions, a dramatic society and in 1930 a holiday home at Thirroul (on the south coast of New South Wales) for children from underprivileged areas.

In the wider community she used to give lectures and tutor in Child Study subjects for Adult Education classes. She wrote several books on these topics and her pamphlet “Education for Parenthood” (published in 1944) was described by Professor Tasman Lovell as “almost perfect in both form and matter” with the reader “borne along by an unfailing clarity of exposition”.²⁰ For the ABC she presented talks under the general title of “You and Your Family”: these gave parents expert advice on play needs and behaviour patterns of pre-school children and were published. At the time Zoe Benjamin was associated with Kindergarten of the Air (from 1943) this was a unique programme.

Throughout her life she retained her interest in the arts. She enjoyed attending the theatre — and also gardening and sewing.

After her death in 1962, aged eighty, the Zoe Benjamin Memorial Fund was established and presented to the Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales. Her teachings and her work for pre-school children live on.

Dr. Fanny Reading

Care for children, for women and for those needing help inspired Dr. Fanny Reading to gather together Jewish women in Sydney in 1923. From their resolve to work for “the betterment of mankind everywhere” the present National Council of Jewish Women became established.

At that time organisations to help Jewish people in need had been in existence in Sydney for over ninety years. As early as 1832 a Jewish

Philanthropic Institute was aiding six people who were old or blind. The following year the community founded the Hebrew Benevolent Society which later merged with the Montefiore Old People's Home. The Jewish Maternity Society had its origins in a Dorcas Society in 1844. Others followed.

The National Council of Jewish Women is the only Jewish Women's organisation working all over Australia for both Jewish and non-Jewish causes and has been recognised internationally for many years — and all because of the vision of an extraordinary, yet gentle, woman.

Fanny Reading was born in Minsk, Russia, and came to Australia in the 1890s as a small girl with her mother. Her father had preceded them and settled in Ballarat, then a thriving community dating back to the gold rush. Its story has been told in Norman Rosenthal's "Formula for Survival".²¹ Fanny and her mother arrived in Melbourne knowing no one. She never forgot how lonely, friendless and miserable they felt and she vowed that one day she would do all she could to help newcomers. She did not know then that her name would become famous in many parts of the world.



Zoe Benjamin (by courtesy Sydney Kindergarten Teachers' College).

She won a scholarship to Melbourne University, gained her Diploma of Music in 1914, studied medicine and came to Sydney in 1922.[†] Like most women doctors of that period she treated mainly women and children and she was an Honorary Medical Officer for the Rachel Forster, St. George District and Community Hospitals. This meant that a great part of her professional life was spent in treating people free of charge. Later she was appointed a Life Governor of the Benevolent Society of New South Wales, of Dalwood Children's Homes and of Crown Street Women's Hospital.

She never charged fees to people who could not afford them and she saw the contrast between her poor patients and the comfortable lives of her friends.

When she spoke to the Sydney Jewish women in 1923, she explained with quiet eloquence the need for voluntary work in its broadest sense — as individuals and as members of an Organisation who, in working together, also make friends with other Jewish women in the small isolated community which existed then.

In 1927 she wrote:—

"It occurred to me that there was room for a movement in which our women and girls could meet, discuss and attempt to solve our many problems; also that it was absolutely necessary that our Jewish women and girls begin to realise the supreme need of service to themselves, their race and to the country in which they live. So much could be accomplished and lead to greater usefulness, if our women organised themselves to work together.

To reach the interest and sympathy of every Jewish woman and girl, I fully realised that a more comprehensive and broader programme should be drawn up to embrace the problems, not only of our people, both here and abroad, but of common humanity.

Having read of the wonderful organisations of our American sisters, especially that of the National Council of Jewish Women, and of the remarkable influence they exercised for good on all big problems, I proposed the formation of an organisation on similar lines."²²

NCJW in Australia now has about two thousand members — from all walks of life, business, professional, career women and housewives — who devote some of their spare time to helping others.

As an Organisation they have been involved with meals-on-wheels since the scheme began in Australia. Their volunteers give personal service and/or raise funds for a great variety of causes — old people's homes, hospitals, mentally and physically handicapped people, research, disaster relief, national appeals and aiding refugees. Through its affiliation with the National Council of Women of Australia and the International Council of Women, it participates in United Nations welfare activities. Through its affiliation with the International Council of Jewish Women it is part of a huge Jewish sisterhood.

Assisting refugees had always been dear to Dr. Fanny's heart and when people arrived from Hitler's Europe in the 1930s NCJW members met the ships, took the people by car to the welfare and processing centre at the Maccabean Hall and helped generally as required.

During World War II NCJW members served in a multitude of ways — they manned the Martin Place Kiosk which raised money for the war effort by serving quick, cheap, nourishing meals; they met ships bringing refugees from Europe and Asia; they knitted and knitted and knitted — socks for soldiers, garments for children in bombed Britain; they made bandages and camouflage netting; the list goes on and on.

After the war, when ‘displaced persons’ from the camps in Europe came to Australia, NCJW members once again rallied. One man remembers how anxious they all were at the Reception Centre in Vienna.

“Australia. Who’d ever heard of Australia? We were bewildered and unhappy. Then someone said, ‘Don’t worry. There’s a woman in Sydney



*Dr. Fanny Reading — about 1930 by courtesy
National Council of Jewish Women.*

— her name’s Dr. Fanny Reading. She’ll help you.’ And that proved so true.”²³

Recently, NCJW has been associated with other organisations in assisting refugees from Indo-China.

Dr. Fanny visited Palestine first in 1925 and was both moved and impressed by what she saw. She realised that help there was needed from Jewish people in other countries and talked both then and later to her Council ‘girls’. First, a settlement was supported. Now Council supports in

Israel the Ilan Foundation for Handicapped Children, the Alma settlement for refugees from Libya, a number of scholarships for needy promising students to enable them to continue secondary or tertiary education, and from time to time other projects.

Dr. Fanny took a personal interest in all her 'girls' and they adored her. She was a mother figure, advising countless women on private and family problems. "To me she was a goddess," said one woman associated with her for over 40 years. She encouraged the formation of junior and sub-junior groups and had the pleasure and satisfaction of seeing the daughters and grand-daughters of original members becoming active in NCJW.

In 1953, NCJW established the Wolper Jewish Hospital, of which Dr. Fanny was a Trustee and in which 20 years later she spent her last days.

She was awarded the King George V Silver Jubilee Medal in 1935, the King George VI Coronation Medal in 1937 and in 1961 the M.B.E., all in recognition of her devotion to social welfare of all creeds and classes.

Her dream had always been for a 'Council House' where both members and visitors to the city would be assured of a welcome. She saw her dream come true in Sydney in 1963 and in 1973 attended the Golden Jubilee Dinner there.

The following year Dr. Fanny died, leaving behind her a tradition of service to others.

* * * * *

These six women, born in the 19th century but influencing so many in the 20th, were outstanding in their era. Most Jewish women of that period were wives and mothers, exerting their own special influence on those closest to them.

In the last 40 years Jewish women have made their mark in N.S.W. in many ways — a Member of Parliament; the first woman to practise as a barrister in the State; an adviser in Family Law reform; as educators; prominent in literature, art, music and the professions; and following the tradition of helping others in a great variety of voluntary work.

This paper has been confined to women in N.S.W. In other States of Australia there have been, and are now, many outstanding women — perhaps in the future someone will record them and their achievements.

NOTES

- 1,2,3 Personal interviews with Mirrie Hill.
- 4 Personal interview with Ruby Rich-Schalit.
- 5 Mirrie Hill remembers envying her brother when he went to parties at the Rich's house in Elizabeth Bay: One Friday night he took his little sister with him and she remembers Ruby playing the 'Blue Danube Waltz' and thinking how beautiful it was.
- 6,7 Personal interview with Ruby Rich-Schalit.
- 8 Ruby Rich's brother, Dr. Vivian Rich, married Colleen Cohen who was Fanny Cohen's first cousin.
- 9 In his Memoirs Judge Cohen, their third son, stated that the boat was named after his grandmother.
- 9a Personal communication from Mrs. Colleen Rich.
- 10 The second son, Michael, was my husband's grandfather. The third, John Jacob, became Judge Cohen. Another, Barnett, was the father of Mrs. Colleen Rich. One of the daughters, Miriam, was the grandmother of Mrs. Vanda Phillips.
- 11 Sydney University Medical School was established in 1882.
- 12 Letter from Coral Lee.
- 13 Letter from Bessie Mitchell.
- 14 Autobiographical letter in Sydney University Archives.
- 15 This account was printed in 1915 in 'Jabberwock', a schoolgirls' magazine from Wooroonook, Strathfield; it was published from 1901-1916, 100 cyclostyled copies at sixpence each. Why Gladys Marks' article was in this magazine is a mystery, as this was not one of the schools listed in her autobiographical letter.
- 16 Autobiographical letter (see 14).
- 17 Letter from Harriet Dumolo.
- 18 Letter from Margery Ford.
- 19 Husband of a former pupil (Mr. A. Burns).
- 20 Australian Dictionary of Biography Vol. 7.
- 21 Reviewed in AJHS Journal December 1979.
- 22 NCJW 'The Council Story', from Souvenir Brochure March 1927.
- 23 Personal communication from Miss. Pearl Ginsburg.
- * For a short article on Jews of Grafton, see AJHS Journal Vol. 4, p. 77 et seq. There was never any Synagogue erected at Grafton.
- †Ed — Dr. Fanny Reading herself stated that her primary purpose in embarking on medical studies was to oversee and ensure that her brother, afterwards Dr. A.S. Reading, completed his medical course.

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