

THE EARLY DAYS OF B'NAI B'RITH IN AUSTRALIA

by Gerry Levy

The founders of the first B'nai B'rith lodge in Australia, Lodge Sydney No. 1546, like the pioneers of B'nai B'rith in America one hundred years before, were immigrants. These members of the dissolved lodges in Austria and Germany had lost most of their material possessions and had to face the difficulties of resettlement in a new country. They had brought with them their commitment and devotion to the lofty ideals of B'nai B'rith, which had hitherto played such a prominent role in their communal life.

Already during 1941 a number of them, together with their wives, met in private homes. However these meetings were held under difficult circumstances because wartime regulations perversely designated these early victims of Nazi persecution as "enemy aliens", thus imposing restrictions on their travel even within the metropolitan area. Early in 1944, Ernst Goldschmidt, a past president of an Austrian lodge, organised regular meetings of former B'nai B'rith members at the Tarbut in George Street, Sydney. These meetings attracted some forty Brothers and their wives who enjoyed the traditional B'nai B'rith atmosphere which prevailed. In due course a committee to work towards the establishment of a B'nai B'rith lodge in Sydney was formed under the leadership of Ernst Goldschmidt. This committee consulted with a number of communal leaders and sought their advice and co-operation. One of these who actively supported the creation of B'nai B'rith in this country was Rabbi Dr Israel Porush, chief minister of the Great Synagogue. Dr Porush had seen B'nai B'rith in action whilst studying in Berlin and he believed the movement would greatly enhance the local Jewish community. Dr Porush was to emphasise his belief in the objectives of B'nai B'rith by becoming a foundation member of Sydney Lodge.

It is interesting to note that whilst these meetings and negotiations were taking place in Sydney similar moves had been initiated by a group of former members of B'nai B'rith in Melbourne. This group was led by Franz Lippmann, a past president of a German lodge.

Ernst Goldschmidt proceeded to negotiate with the Supreme Lodge in Washington and his efforts were finally crowned with success when the charter for the first lodge in Australia, Sydney Lodge No. 1546, was granted.

On 17th December, 1944, Ernst Goldschmidt as Delegate of the Supreme Lodge presented the charter signed by Henry Monsky, president of the Supreme Lodge, to Philip Kantor, president of Sydney Lodge.

In 1944, B'nai B'rith had already been established for 100 years. From small beginnings it had grown to be the largest Jewish fraternal service organisation. The institution of the first lodge in this country was of great importance to the international organisation. It marked the culmination of the often frustrating and difficult efforts by the inspired stalwarts to transplant the spirit of their beloved Order to the country of their adoption. Most importantly — the establishment of Sydney Lodge, which was to be followed in 1945 with the chartering of Melbourne Lodge, set the scene for the spread of B'nai B'rith to all mainland capitals as well as New Zealand. It was the beginning of an ongoing story of communal commitment and of bringing Jews together under the motto of benevolence, brotherly/sisterly love and harmony.