

FROM COUNTRY TOWN TO CITY COMMUNITY: ROSE AND ISRAEL SAMUEL HOVEV IN AUSTRALIA

Diana Encel

Some time before he died, I took my father to the Chinese Garden in Darling Harbour. We walked slowly; he was already over ninety and frail. I was reading all the labels to him and suddenly he stopped, looking at a large rock. I had just told him where it had come from. 'Cumnock!' he exclaimed. 'I remember Cumnock.' And he started to tell me how he had been there many years ago. It was a story I had heard often, from my childhood years onwards. My father, Israel Samuel Hovev, had immigrated to Australia in 1926, on the *Ville D'Amiens*. He was then a young man, six months older than the century. He left behind him in the Palestine of the time his wife who was anxious to follow as soon as he made a place for her. He had been sponsored here by my mother's aunt, Rose Bornstein, but had arrived in Sydney without English and without money, or at least, almost no money: 'I had twelve and sixpence,' he told us. So he found a job, by word of mouth, picking peas in Oberon. He had been working as a farm labourer on a settlement in Palestine and liked the outdoor life, so pea-picking was no trouble. However, it was a lonely experience for him and one Saturday morning he strolled through the streets of Oberon hoping for company. He spotted a sign over a shop selling menswear with a name that looked, if not familiar, at least foreign enough to encourage him to try his luck. Inside he found Michael Dobrinski, an immigrant originally from Russia (via China), who was to become a lifelong friend and eventually my uncle (though that's another story). He had come to Oberon to sell goods on consignment. Taking advantage of the fact that there was no store stocking the kind of goods he carried, Michael Dobrinski had opened a store himself and became a successful businessman.

Michael persuaded my father that pea-picking held no future for a young man with a wife and some ambition (and indeed the pea

crop ran out in the next few days). He mentioned a man, Martin Lapin, who had a good reputation for helping young immigrants. So, on Michael's recommendation, my father went to Bathurst where Martin Lapin had a shop. Sam, as my father became known, asked for some suggestions and Martin Lapin was most helpful. Sam returned to Sydney where my mother's aunts bought him a suitcase, sent him to Rawson Place where there were warehouses; they told him to buy sufficient clothes to fill the case, take it west and sell the goods. That is how my father became a pedlar, a hawk-er, a door-to-door salesman, a very typical way for Jewish newcomers in Australia (and indeed in the New World) to earn a living.

In those days, and even later, all through the thirties, housewives were used to opening their doors to travelling salesmen, inviting them in to display their wares: a sort of travelling supermarket. Women, more or less confined to their homes, often welcomed the opportunity for a break in their routine. The Rawleigh's man brought flavourings of all kinds; the American Fuller Brush company operated here at the time. Knives, cleaning materials and other goods were all available at the door. My father sold ladies' underwear.

He started with two suitcases full, took the train westward, alighted at some small station and took his wares from door to door. When the suitcases were empty, he returned to Sydney and replenished his stock from wholesalers recommended by his benefactor in Bathurst. I sometimes try to imagine what it must have been like for him, knocking on doors, never knowing what to expect, hoping for a sale, speaking in his poor English, which he picked up slowly from those same housewives. By 1927 he had saved enough to send for his wife to join him in Australia.

In those early years he stayed in hotels near the railway: the Commercial or the Station. Here he met other travellers, mostly men employed by companies, such as Mr Jay who became a personal friend of our family, who sold from catalogues of the large city department store, Marcus Clark's. These men were known as commercial travellers, more secure in their jobs than men like my father who had no wages and who had to depend on their own skills, but had the chance of rising up in the world.

Sam's life changed a little after my mother arrived. Rose (nee Weintraub) was a lively person, more enterprising than her husband. She quite quickly became dissatisfied with the rhythm of his travels: a week away, a few days in Sydney to stock up and then off on the train again. She went with him to the wholesalers and soon began to choose his stock for him. Then she looked at the railway map and worked out a central stop. They decided on Orange.

Orange at that time was a town of some 10 000 people, on the western outskirts of the Great Dividing Range. It has its own extinct volcano, Mount Canoblas, giving it the rich soil that made it just right for growing orchard fruits: mainly cherries and apples.

My father arranged to stay in a boarding house in March Street, Orange, run by the wife of Mr Jay, who had befriended him, My parents settled into a new routine. On Monday morning, my father would take the train west and my mother would go east. She would buy the stock in Sydney and he would sell it in a series of towns along the railway line. They would meet again for the weekend in Orange, a shorter trip for him and more time together. Soon my mother moved from the boarding house into a dwelling behind a shop in Summer Street. She opened the doors and displayed the extra stock she bought in Sydney. Her English was very limited and the women who came into the shop taught her the words for the garments, the sizes and the colours. I often wonder how she bought them in the first place: I think she pointed, with a winning smile on her face, though I suspect that they spoke Yiddish in some of the warehouses where she bought her stock.

It was not long until they were able to afford a car: an old Ford 'Tin Lizzie' with running boards on the side and a hessian bag of water for drinking tied on the front. (My earliest favourite taste is water from that bag.) The car allowed my father to visit towns not on the railway line, frequented by fewer salesmen. It also enabled him to carry more stock than could be accommodated in the two



Rose and Sam Hovev with baby Diana, Orange, 1928

suitcases he had managed on the train. In the meantime, Rose was becoming a successful businesswoman in her own right. They were both becoming well-known personalities in the town.

I was born in 1928, my sister a year or so later. My father continued to travel and it is stories of those years that returned to my mind when he stopped at the rocks from Cumnock. Nyngan, Bourke, Coonabarabran, Cowra, all these and others became familiar words in my vocabulary, though I did not have any idea of what the towns were like. Dad used to describe them in his own terms: a one-horse town, a two-pub town, a Rexona town (from the biggest billboard he encountered as he drove in). He always had a tale to tell on the weekend. Once he was lost on a track alongside the almost dry bed of the Darling River and had to spend the night in the car. On another trip his car turned over and he lay beside it, concussed, for some unmeasured length of time till he came to and managed to right it with the help of a passer-by. He just drove on. Once he didn't come home and we heard from a hospital where he had been rushed with food poisoning. He still tried to make contact with other newcomers wherever he had to stay a night and had some strange encounters. In Kandos, I think, he went to meet someone he had been told was called Cohen, only to find a man whose name was Kow Yin. I wish now that I had taken more notice and written down his tales; too late now.

Orange was kind to our family. The people who had taught my mother to speak English at first treated us as a sort of pet family, unique and special. My father joined one of the active Lodges and they learned to play euchre and other card games; my father became a constant solo player from those times on, later progressing to bridge, both of which games have the same elements as the more simple euchre. He played solo with friends in Orange, a small group who took turns at meeting in one another's homes. There were comments about how different (and welcome) my mother's suppers were from those prepared by the other wives. She made strudel where they made sponges, and her savouries were unlike their sandwiches. My parents played tennis with other shopkeepers. I remember best the weekends when we set out on expeditions in the old Tin Lizzie: picnics where we gathered mushrooms, or picked blackberries, or pieces of fallen timber for the old wood stove. We visited places like Sunny Corner and Lucknow, old mining towns now almost derelict, with our neighbours, the Roberts, who owned the bakery next door.

I don't remember any antisemitic or anti-foreign prejudice ever being spoken about at home. Certainly, I did not experience it when I went to school though my sister's memories are slightly different.

So far as I knew, my sister and I were the only girls in the school whose parents did not speak English at home. That did remain a curiosity among my friends. My parents never lost their foreign accents and always stood out in company, but it made no difference to the way they were treated, at least in my experience.

We became very 'comfortable'. Not only did my parents have the shop at the top end of Summer Street, but sometime in the mid - 1930s they opened a larger shop in the business centre in the lower end of town, opposite Robinson Park. My mother was an equal partner in all their enterprises. We had our own home in Moulder Street, designed by my father. He satisfied his 'agricultural' urges with a very large vegetable garden and a chook run (though it became my job to feed them, and to pop over the back fence to gather manure from the cows grazing there to feed my father's vegetables).

Although we paid visits to Sydney, mainly associated with Jewish holidays, my mother missed the city life and all her compatriots. Even Michael Dobrinski had long left Oberon and was settled in Sydney, now married to my mother's sister. My father, too, missed contact with other Jews. He tried to keep Jewish customs, but it was difficult. The shops were all open on Saturday morning and Friday was 'late night shopping night'. Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashannah were the only days I can remember that they actually stayed home from work.

My brother was born in 1938. He was a fussy baby, crying a lot, hard to feed, not sleeping much. My mother felt that she needed help. So we were joined in Orange by one of the Lapin girls from Bathurst who was a trained nurse. Later she was replaced by a 'mother's help', a girl who became part of our household for many years. Nita had recently arrived from England, coming on one of those large boats that carried passengers in those days. She told us stories about her fellow passengers, her widowed father and her young sister, a team of Australian footballers returning after a tour, and a young man from Poland who was learning to speak English as they sailed. It was not long until the young man arrived in our house, not to visit Nita, but to see the uncle who had sponsored his immigration to Australia. The coincidence made us all feel strange. He was Peter Liebhaver, the son of my father's sister, Chippah.

I should go back a little and tell of my parents' earlier history, briefly. They had both been born in Poland to Orthodox families, my father in Gniewoszow in 1899, my mother in Amshanov (in the province of Skiernewicz) in the early 1900s. My mother's family had moved to Warsaw where she grew up in a poor but cultured background. She talked of going to the opera, standing room only. The house was the meeting place for other young people and it was there



The House that Sam built, Orange, 1938

From l to r: Diana (Hovev) Encel, Sonia Dobrinski with Leon Joshua, Blanche (Phillips) Goldstein, Fanny (Faigele) Phillips, Judith Phillips (Jacks), Rose Hovev with baby Lionel Joshua and Leah (Hovev) Zander

that she was introduced to other young Zionists. Although her older brother emigrated in the early years of the century to America, Rose went in the early 1920s to Palestine.

My father was educated in a Yeshiva, with no secular learning at all. In 1917 he left Poland and escaped to Germany. He survived the remaining war years there, partly in hiding and partly working in the coalmines. After the war he found himself alone, with no papers. However, he was able to obtain an entry permit to Palestine from a British consulate somewhere in Germany. I wish I knew more about that process. His name in Poland had been Liebhaber, which means 'lover'. In Palestine he changed it to Hovev, which has a similar meaning. (You may wonder how his sister's son had the same surname: it was the result of her marriage to a Liebhaber cousin.)

My parents met in Palestine. He was working in Hartuv, a settlement near Jerusalem. She was working in a laundry in Tel Aviv and living with a family related to my father. They met and married in 1926. The late twenties in Palestine were difficult years and the work they were doing held no prospects of improvement. Rose had an aunt settled in Australia and through her they were able to get papers to emigrate yet again, this time to Australia where the economic situation was more promising.



Rose Amshanov shortly before she left Poland for Palestine

My father was not an overtly sentimental man. Nevertheless, he had a strong family feeling, and as the treatment of Jews in Europe became harsher he felt it necessary to get as many of his family as possible to join us in Australia. My mother already had helped two of her sisters to come here: Sonia who came in the mid-1930s and later married Michael Dobrinski; and Fanny and Maurice Oppenheim who arrived with two young daughters in 1937. The Oppenheims settled briefly in Orange. Their surname was changed to Phillips. Maurice Phillips became an important figure in the movement to support the continuing use of Yiddish, a stalwart member of the Folk Centre, which was established during World War II.

Peter was the first member of my father's family to come. He was then in his late teens, already very political. When I was older he fed me Communist literature: a book by J.D. Bernal when I showed an interest in science, Russian folk songs when I was learning to play the piano. Peter did not stay with us long. He returned

to Sydney where he found a training place and then work with the help of my mother's cousin, Eve Bornstein (later Popper), who worked in the Department of Education. When war broke out in 1939, he joined the Australian forces and served in New Guinea during the war. His politics changed in later years and he was no longer the firebrand leftist I first encountered in his later years. Peter died in 2004. In 1938, my father's half-brother, my Uncle Yitzhak (Jack) Liehaber, also arrived in Australia from Poland.

Early in 1939 my family left Orange and moved to Sydney. After a short time we took up residence behind a Ham and Beef shop in Bondi Junction, what would now be called a delicatessen. It was a tall building, several stories high, with the bedrooms on the upper floors, bathroom off a landing, and the only lavatory at the bottom, below the shop level. It was no fun to have to go to the toilet in the middle of the night. My parents had the top floor with a balcony overlooking Oxford Street and I shared with Nita, and probably Leah, but my memory is not perfect. Uncle Jack had the room above the bathroom. His wife Leah (Lonia) arrived on one of the last boats to leave Europe before the war.

Work in the shop was not easy. It began early and ended late, with all the uncertainties associated with a passing sandwich trade. Neither my father nor Uncle Jack enjoyed it. They had to handle bacon and ham; they had not come into contact with these meats before. Worse still was the trade in rabbits. The rabbits were delivered cleaned but uncooked. One or two mornings a week they were boiled up in the wood-fired laundry copper. The smell pervaded the house, right up to the top floor. We held our noses for hours afterwards. I think it was Jack who rose first to get it all done before the rest of us came down for breakfast.

I don't remember how long we were all together behind the shop. Then Lonia became pregnant, Jack found another smallgoods shop, on the corner of Dover Road and Old South Head Road, Rose Bay. Both my father and Uncle Jack gave up the food business in due course, moving into women's dress shops, becoming separately successful. My mother was a major figure in this move as she was always an inspired businesswoman.

The last member of my father's family to arrive in Australia did not come until after the war. This was his niece, Peter's sister, Hannah, and her husband Sigmund Gerichter (later Guerry). All in all, my family's early immigration to Australia has been a good thing for many people.

My parents became significant members of the Jewish community (especially the Zionist movement) in Sydney. Their home was often used for money-raising activities for Zionist causes. Rose was

the founding president of Carmel WIZO in the 1940s.¹ She was encouraged in the task by Ida BenZion, later Ida Wynn.² Ida had married my mother's relative, Sam Wynn (originally Weintraub) and they were both well-known Zionist workers in Melbourne.

Rose was devoted to Carmel WIZO and its members, most of whom were or became close friends. Over the years she held almost every office in the group: president twice, treasurer, hospitality chair and in 1960 she was made a life president.³ She represented Carmel on the State WIZO Council and was a member of the executive of NSW WIZO: as treasurer from 1960 to 1964,⁴ state president from 1964 to 1966⁵ as well as being a delegate to the Australian Federation of WIZO. In 1974, she was made a life member of the Federal Executive.⁶ She was actively involved in the purchase and running of Beth WIZO in Sydney⁷ and was Chair of the House Committee in 1968.⁸ One of her major positions was as Chair of the Committee on Wills and Bequests.⁹ I have lists of the slogans she and her colleagues devised to treat this delicate matter with sensitivity. Her greatest satisfaction came from her involvement with Ahuza, a home for children on Mt Carmel (Haifa).¹⁰ She visited the home on several occasions and a plaque in her honour is on one of the walls there.¹¹ My parents were made life governors of the Home in 1958.¹² When the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies was established, Rose was one of the original Deputies, representing her beloved WIZO.

Rose was also involved in the work of the Jewish National Fund (JNF); in 1947 she was 'Convenor of Emblems'.¹³ At various times, she was WIZO delegate to the State Zionist Council.¹⁴ She and my father were active workers for the United Jewish (later Israel) Appeal and our home was often a venue for money raising parties or visiting speakers.¹⁵

Sam Hovev became a trusted member of the Jewish business community, often acting as a go-between for other businessmen. He was also involved in mediating communal disputes within the com-



Rose Hovev (left) with Ida Wynn, 1946

munity, at least once forming part of a group invited to do so in Melbourne where he was seen as an impartial 'judge'. When he was not at home or at work, he could often be found in the Tarbuth rooms at 333 George Street in Sydney, the scene of several communal meetings and discussions in the 1940s and early 1950s. Sam was an early activist in the State Zionist Council and was on the Executive Council throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.¹⁶ In 1948 he was chair of a sub-committee on the promotion of the teaching and use of Hebrew,¹⁷ a subject dear to his heart, and in 1967 he was chairman of the Aliyah Committee.¹⁸ He was treasurer of the New South Wales State Zionist Council from 1962 to 1968, some of its most successful years.¹⁹ He was similarly active in the JNF, being on various committees and on the Executive Council from the 1950s²⁰ and he was frequently elected as a delegate to the Australian Zionist Conferences.²¹ His JNF activities were not confined to committee meetings: he was chairman of the JNF Bellevue Hill Committee²² and remained a door-to-door collector of Blue Box donations till he could no longer walk distances. Sam was made a Life Member of both the Executive of the JNF of NSW and of the State Zionist Council of NSW. In 1969 they jointly held a dinner in honour of his 70th birthday. A *Nachla* was established in Kerem Maharal, the JNF Project Centre in Israel,²³ in the name of my parents at that time.²⁴ In 1970 they were in Israel and attended the dedication ceremony.

Rose and Sam visited Israel several times, especially after my sister, Leah Zander, settled there in 1956. Their involvement with Zionist activities in Australia never flagged. In addition to their love of Israel, my parents also imbued us with an appreciation of our own good fortune to be living in Australia. My mother often said 'Isn't this a great country!' My mother died in 1982, my father survived till 1993. They were part of the small group of East European Jews who had contributed significantly to the growth of the Zionist movement in New South Wales, moving it from the periphery of communal identification to a central aspect of Jewish life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Much of the information in this article is garnered from cuttings my mother kept. Many of them are undated and even where a date is given it is often partial. Sometimes the source is not identified. I have tried to source as many as I can, consulting the Archives of Australian Judaica held at the University of Sydney, and also back numbers of the Sydney Jewish News. My thanks go to Sister Dr Marianne Dacey who tried valiantly with limited resources to compile and maintain a useful set of records.



Opening of the Nahala at Kerem Maharal, 1970



*Rose and Sam Hovev standing next to the plaque in their honour
at Kerem Maharal*

NOTES

1. Undated cutting from the *Sydney Jewish News (SJN)*, Rose Hovev's Book of Cuttings, personal archive, Diana Encel and *Australian Jewish News (AJN)*, 25 October 1984.
2. *Ivriah Journal*, September 1948.
3. *SJN*, 25 November 1960, September 1961, p6 and *AJN*, September 1971, Book of Cuttings, op. cit.
4. *SJN*, 6 July 1962.
5. *WIZO Journal*, October/November 1964, *SJN* 12 August 1966, and *Australian Jewish Times (AJT)*, 25 October 1984.
6. *AJN*, September 1974, Book of Cuttings, op. cit.
7. Beth WIZO was bought in 1966, *AJT*, 15 April 1966, *AJN* September 1966, Book of Cuttings, op. cit.
8. Annual WIZO Report, 1968.
9. *WIZO Journal*, December 1968 and Annual Reports, various years during the 1970s, Archive of Australian Judaica.
10. *Ahuzat Yeladim* was established in 1935 and was adopted as a major WIZO project, *WIZO Journal*, June 1975.
11. Letter from Josie Lacey, WIZO president at the time, 5 March 1984, held by Diana Encel.

12. *SJN*, 1958, Book of Cuttings, op. cit.
13. Annual Report of JNF, 1947, Archive of Australian Judaica.
14. Minutes of the State Zionist Council (SZC), 1964, Archive of Australian Judaica, Fisher Library, University of Sydney.
15. *SJN*, 15 April 1966, March 1968, Book of Cuttings, op. cit.
16. Minutes of the SZC, held on Microfiche, Archive of Australian Judaica.
17. Minutes of the SZC, Archive of Australian Judaica.
18. *SJN*, 3 November 1967.
19. Minutes of SZC.
20. See, for example, JNF Annual Reports, 1947, 1951-2, Archive of Australian Judaica.
21. Minutes of Zionist conferences, Microfiche, Archive of Australian Judaica.
22. *SJN*, 1958, Book of Cuttings, op. cit.
23. *AJN*, June 1969, Book of Cuttings, op. cit.
24. Invitation to celebration, held by Diana Encel and *AJN*, June 1969, Book of Cuttings, op. cit.