

doors. Now in their nineties, Shirley's parents can be justly proud of their family and their children's and grandchildren's achievements.

Judy Shapira

JEWES AND AUSTRALIAN POLITICS

*by Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Philip Mendes (eds.), Brighton:
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Religion and politics has become a major focus for public discussion in Australia. From an archbishop as governor general to evangelical Christian political parties, faith-based politics are spreading. As Jews are both members of a culture and of a religion, their presence in the political field is rather more complicated. Jews in politics may not be acting from a basis of faith, or they may be practising religion in a rather more secular way, or be guided by a very specific set of values and beliefs. Even so, Jews have had a fairly low profile in Australian political history. Some have broken from the pack to become Governors General – the King's and Queen's men – while others have inhabited the outer regions of anarchic cyberspace, advocating credos from Mao to Kropotkin. However, in this collection of articles by academics and politicians, the editors (broadly on the Left in relation to Australian Jewry) have taken the middle ground to view the landscape.

Historically Jewry, in Australia has been ethnically diverse, politically progressive, and socially engaged. Its waves have drawn every aspect of the Diaspora to the antipodes, especially after Asian Jews finally made it in after years of trying. In recent years new waves of immigrants, in part from South Africa and Russia, plus a resurgent Jewish educational system fed by right-of-centre governments, have tended to make it more conservative, less socially concerned, more inward focused, and far more Zionist.

In the late 1940s Australian Jewry was probably at its most turbulent period – Australian Jews of British ancestry were torn over Zionist struggles against the British in Palestine; surviving Eastern European Bundists crawled into Australia, holding about them the shreds of their pasts as barely-accepted survivors of the Holocaust; Zionists sought to rally supporters for their struggle, seeing in Australia's rejection of Holocaust survivors a driver to draw immigrants to Eretz Israel. Among the doctors and lawyers, the taxi dri-

vers and stallholders, the bakers and grocers, the years of post-war Australia's Jewish dawn took place.

Its political organisations reflected the diversity of their origins, from the right wing nationalism of the Betar troopers, to the kibbutznik-like socialist fervour of Habonim and other like-minded groups, to the communists in their various party structures. Stalin's castigation of Jews as rootless cosmopolitans found a bizarre reflection in those earlier years – people desperate to put down roots, people with strong nationalist sentiments, people wanting to be Australians of the Mosaic faith, and people with class allegiances.

The Levey/Mendes collection notes this history, distinguishing its variable trajectories in different Australian cities. The editors use this history to set contexts for the contemporary scene. As with much Australian history, the culture wars operate here as well. Many of the authors have well-rehearsed positions on their topics, as with conservative writers such as W.D. Rubinstein who argues the case that Jews, despite their public history, are essentially a community of the soft Right, driven jointly by their economic interests, their hatred of totalitarian regimes and their pro-Israeli position. Sol Encel, writing on the ALP, makes a not dissimilar point, finding in the ALP a safe haven for Jews who were both supporters of human rights, and pro-Israel, and suggesting that Jewish support for the ALP has waned as their economic interests have moved towards the wider middle-class and the ALP itself has become more pro-Palestinian.

The most important (re-)emergent theme, that of antisemitism, marks many of the chapters. The dominant narrative of the post-war Jewish story in Australia argued that Jews were politically assimilated while retaining their cultural distinctiveness, or even, that they were fully culturally assimilated and were marked only by their either present or past religious confession. In that sense the sharp antisemitism of the pre-war period was believed to have faded, and the antipathy to Jews (such the black-balling of Jewish aspirants to the Melbourne Club, or the blocking of Jewish refugees from China after the short window of opportunity was opened in 1946) had dissipated. Only a few minority extremists in the Australian Nazi Party kept the flame flickering, while the banning from Australia of Holocaust-denier David Irving in the 1990s showed that in general Australia was on the side of the Jews.

More recently a different tone has entered the discussion. A tenser orientation is evident, with writers from the Left such as Andrew Markus now positing a generally more antisemitic atmosphere in the country. Two critical events have focussed academic

attention – both part of the academic environment.

The first has been the organised attempt to boycott Israeli universities and academics in retaliation for the claimed oppression by Israel of Palestinian academics and students in Palestine. In Australia the boycott call gained quite widespread support on the academic Left, sufficient to disturb many Jewish academics who had seen themselves as politically progressive, but who suddenly found themselves alienated from their erstwhile colleagues. Mendes and Levey discuss this event. The second was the public uproar over attempts by an Australian Jewish lobby group (as it is described by Chanan Reich) to prevent the award of a peace prize to Palestinian activist Hanan Ashrawi.

The argument being made through the aggregation of chapters suggests that the non-Jewish Left has become increasingly alienated from Israel, as the Palestinian/Israeli struggle has taken on proxy status for the contemporary global antipathy to the American Empire project. In that process, political concerns with the behaviour of the Israeli government have become transformed into wider antipathy to Jews through the mobilisation of antisemitic stereotypes, and the labelling of all Jews who are not anti-Zionist as enemies of freedom and peace. The question of whether being critical of Israel means being antisemitic is omnipresent in wider debates within the global Jewish world, and is also apparent here, with no greater resolution.

Against this broad trend Barbara Bloch and Eva Cox point to the important role played by Jewish feminists both within the feminist movement through engaging with white feminist orthodoxies, and within the Jewish movement by arguing for compassionate engagement with Palestinians. Indeed, many elements of the Left are much more willing to explore and debate the issues involved with the Palestine conflict, especially as Arab activism has contributed to many more strains of thought about the issues, an interaction that Jews cannot avoid.

The collection then is a broad review of approaches, attitudes and research on what being Jewish and political might mean in Australia – though all the authors position themselves somewhere within the Jewish community. The level of writing is variable – from the anecdotal to the analytical, from the theorised to the descriptive, from the attempt to stand outside the space, to deep and emotional engagement. In this, its diversity reflects the complexities of doing politics in Jewish Australia. A chapter or two from outside the Jewish space about the issues might have been a valuable addition.

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