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The Early Years of the Central Synagogue.

The story of the birth of the Central Synagogue in Sydney could probably be paralleled in numerous cities of the Jewish New World.

It is the chronicle of the efforts of a few enthusiasts who, by hard work and generous donations, built up a congregation which has become one of Sydney's largest. As usual, the greater part of the toil devolved upon a small group whose names are preserved in the first minute book, on which this brief survey is mainly based, and who deserve more public recognition than they have had hitherto.

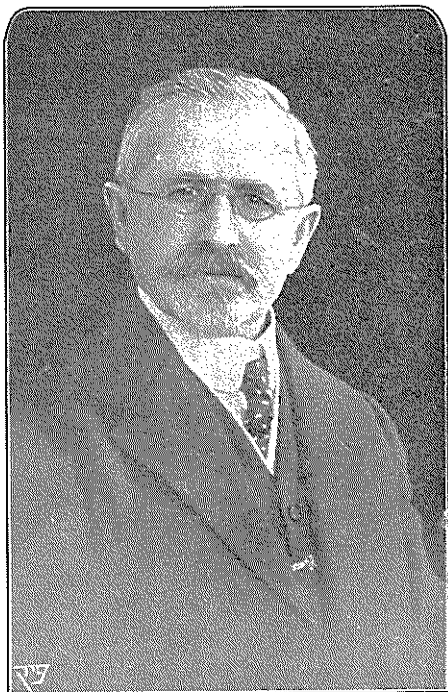
Preliminary work began about the middle of 1912, and on September 28th a meeting was held in the office of Elias Green with the object of going into ways and means of creating a fund for the building of a Synagogue. Those present were Solomon Pechter, Elias Green, Jacob Morris, Joshua Brukarz, Michael Bernard Michelson, Joseph Esserman and Julius Opit. Woolf Ruta Cohen¹ apologised for his absence, but was present at succeeding meetings. It was resolved :—

That we here assembled form ourselves into a Founders' Committee with power to add to the number of fifty and pledge ourselves to contribute the sum of £10 each within one week for the purpose of forming a fund to be called The Founders' Fund to purchase a block of land for building a Synagogue.

The meeting appointed Elias Green honorary treasurer and Michelson and Brukarz as trustees. At a later meeting on 20th October, 1912, a selection committee was appointed with the task of finding a suitable piece of land. A week afterwards, the whole of the original committee and a number of others inspected a block in Forbes Street, Darlinghurst. There must have been something especially attractive about the spot, as further investigations were

ordered and left in the hands of Julius Opit, who was acting as honorary secretary. There is no need to trace the exhaustive inquiries made by various committeemen in the search for land. Some months were to pass before a satisfactory site was obtained.

At the meeting of December 8th, 1912, the question of the relationship of the infant congregation to the Great Synagogue was discussed. It had apparently not been the intention of any of the founders to break away from



ELIAS GREEN.

the Great Synagogue in such a manner as to show their dissatisfaction with it, but there was a feeling that a more central House of Worship should be built for the benefit of those who wished to attend services with more ease and convenience to themselves. A. A. Coppleson² gave expression to this view, and it was explained by Peechter,

who was in the chair, that the founders had no desire to find fault with any existing religious body, but that the aim was purely to establish an orthodox congregation.

Early in 1913 the committee felt that more formality in its proceedings was desirable and commenced the drafting of rules for the congregation, which were presented to a Special Founders' Meeting on March 15th. Michael Louis spoke at this meeting in eulogistic terms of the work already accomplished. So as to give members an early opportunity of commencing operations, he announced that he would, provided four others joined him, guarantee a bank overdraft for £5,000.

At this stage the congregation had no name or land, and held no services. It was merely in the process of formation and fund raising. The meeting proceeded to discuss suitable names, and finally decided on "Beth Jehudah" (House of Judah). The election of office-bearers followed. Those chosen were : President, Solomon Pechter; Treasurer, Elias Green; Honorary Secretary, Julius Opit. The Committee consisted of Brukarz, Michelson, W. R. Cohen, Solomon Levy, Peter Solomon and S. Rosenthal. Michelson and Brukarz were elected trustees.

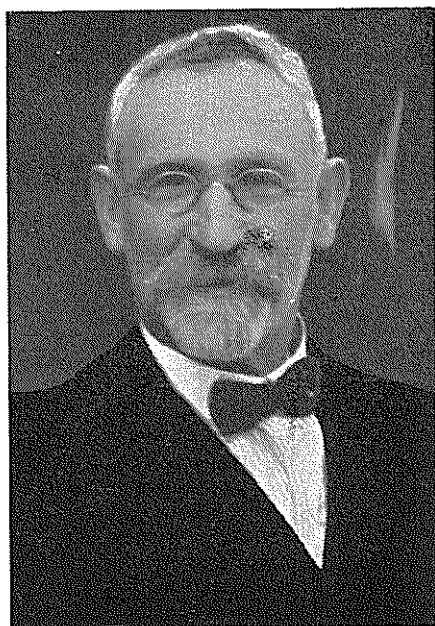
The matter of a site was discussed by the new Committee two days later, and a favourable report was given on a block of land with a house on it at the corner of Dowling and Napier Streets, Surry Hills. The Committee decided to recommend its purchase. A Special General Meeting of Founders approved the plan on March 21st, and the contract was signed a fortnight later at a price of £2,250. Shortly after this, W. R. Cohen and Peter Solomon were added to the number of trustees.

Some members of the Committee were not happy with the name chosen, and discussions soon began again. Finally, at another Special Founders' Meeting, Elias Green moved and Joshua Brukarz seconded that the name of "Orach Chayim—The Central Synagogue, Sydney" be adopted.³ The meeting approved, and further decided that services should be conducted according to the usages, customs and traditions of Judaism in conformity with the Minhag Polin.⁴

A public meeting of members and sympathisers was held on 29th June, 1913, to raise funds. Following upon

this, the Committee approved the holding of services on the approaching High Festivals and the payment of £3/3/- to the Chief Rabbi's Maintenance Fund. It was not possible to hold services in the congregation's own property, but they had at least the satisfaction of receiving a regular rent from the tenant.

In a further search for funds, efforts were made to obtain a share in the assets of the former Mikveh Israel



W. R. COHEN.

(Block by courtesy of "The Hebrew Standard.")

Congregation, but the story of the legal difficulties ultimately overcome need not be told here. Despite its youth, the congregation apparently owned certain ritual articles, among them a Scroll of the Law, although the minutes do not disclose how it was acquired. In November the Committee approved of the Scroll being lent to the Western Suburbs Congregation.⁵

By the beginning of 1914 the Committee found itself

able to think of substantial alterations to the house on its property so as to fit it for a Synagogue, and consultations began with an architect. No progress was made, however, and the congregation had to hire outside premises for its High Festival Services that year. There was, as yet, no minister, so readers had to be secured. Harris Eizenberg and Morris Snyder officiated, the latter by arrangement with the Great Synagogue. This was among the earliest public duties of Mr. Snyder, who for some thirty years faithfully served Sydney Jewry as Schochet until his recent retirement. Little else of note took place this year. Only the preliminary discussions concerning a formal Deed of Trust demand mention. It was eventually executed in 1915, the parties including most of the active workers. Their names should be on record. Solomon Pechter, who was President, had by this time resigned for reasons which appear later, but it was legally necessary for him to sign the Deed, and he did so. The others were Julius Opit, W. R. Cohen, M. B. Michelson, Solomon Levy, Solomon Rosenthal, Samuel Goodman, Moses Schwartz, Harry Solomon and Peter Solomon. Many of their names will be known to the present generation. Only Mr. Samuel Goodman still lives. He was for many years President of the Congregation, and this year (1948) is in office as Vice-President.⁶ The preparation of the Deed was in the hands of the congregation's honorary solicitor, the late P. J. Marks, who gave much time and labour to the congregation.⁷

A fresh Committee was elected on 14th February, 1915, but owing to the lack of nominations the posts of President and Vice-President had to be left vacant and authority given to the Committee to co-opt them later. Elias Green was unopposed as honorary treasurer. Several speakers expressed cordial appreciation of the conspicuous services rendered to the movement by the retiring President and Honorary Secretary, Solomon Pechter and Julius Opit, whose private affairs precluded their acceptance of nomination for the ensuing term.

Discussions on the establishment of an active congregation, the holding of regular services and the appointment of a Minister were begun by the Committee in June, but it seems clear that unofficial approaches had been made earlier to the Rev. I. A. Bernstein, who attended the Com-

mittee meeting on 17th June by invitation and expressed views concerning congregational matters. At the next meeting it was resolved that efforts should be made to secure his services as Minister of the congregation. At the same time the vacant Presidency and Vice-Presidency were filled by the appointment of W. R. Cohen and Julius Opit respectively.

The first act of the newly appointed officers was to arrange for the High Holy Day Services which were conducted by Bernstein and Harris Eizenberg in Leigh House in Castlereagh Street. Negotiations with the Rev. I. A. Bernstein were completed by early September, and on 3rd October a special meeting heard details of them from the Honorary Organiser, Walter D. Benjamin. The meeting unanimously resolved :—

That the engagement of the Rev. Isaac Amber Bernstein as Minister and Secretary of the Central Synagogue, Sydney, for a period of 12 calendar months as from the first day of October last be approved.

The induction took place in November, Rabbi F. L. Cohen, of the Great Synagogue, officiating.

The war and general economic conditions had been adversely affecting the financial position for some time past, and concern was expressed at several meetings at the rate of expenditure. The city office of the congregation was given up and other small economies effected, but the contribution to the Chief Rabbi's Fund was maintained and the congregation kept under his jurisdiction. For some months in 1915 and 1916 the main business of the Committee dealt with finance, and is of little permanent interest. In the middle of 1916 discussions on the future of the Minister began, and it was eventually decided that his term of office should cease as from 1st October.

Fresh arrangements were soon made for the regular conduct of services, which had for some time been held on each Sabbath and Festival. The congregation now approved expansion into educational fields by active support of the Talmud Torah, which Mr. Samuel Goodman had planned to establish. About the same time Mr. Goodman returned to his old post as Honorary Secretary, which he held until the appointment of a paid secretary in the middle of 1918.

Such matters as a new set of rules, arrangements for services while the congregation was without a minister and the bank overdraft occupied the Committee late in 1916 and early in the following year. At a special meeting of seatholders in July, 1917, new rules were adopted superseding those appended to the Deed of Trust. A resolution was carried expressing the satisfaction of the members at the work done by the Committee in altering and fitting up the congregation's house for use as a Synagogue. Further alterations were made later in order to provide a gallery for the ladies. Elections were held in August. Peter Solomon became President and M. Zarkin Vice-President, while Elias Green retained the treasurership. Shortly afterwards, the Honorary Secretary, Samuel Goodman, was appointed a trustee in place of Julius Opit, who had resigned, and at this Committee meeting plans were made for the approaching Holy Day Services.

The Central Synagogue had always had happy relations with the other congregations of Sydney, and had both given and received various benefits as a result. Some of the ritual articles used in the services had come from other less active bodies, and in October, 1917, the Committee made arrangements for what was in effect the purchase of two Scrolls of the Law from the former Baron de Hirsch Congregation which had been on loan for some time. There are many instances in the minutes of assistance both by means of accommodation and the loan of paraphernalia to other congregations, and further cases were to occur in the next few years.

The search for a minister still went on, but no suitable applicant was found. Another constant theme for discussion at meetings was the building of a Synagogue on the site or further alteration to the house, but eventually matters took another turn, so that no attempt need be made here to trace the various proposals that were made.

Zarkin resigned his position in January, 1918, but no appointment was made to the vacancy until the annual elections in July, when Samuel Goodman and Julius Opit were elected President and Vice-President respectively. Elias Green retired from his executive post and served as a member of the Committee, being succeeded as Treasurer by Benjamin Farbstein, who himself resigned

after a few months, when his place was taken by Michael Louis.

The congregation continued to function smoothly during the rest of 1918 and for the following year. The transfer of Mr. Goodman to the presidency rendered necessary a change in the secretaryship, and David Greenwald was appointed on a small salary. Little except routine and financial matters claimed the attention of the new Committee until in April, 1919, the question of erecting a New South Wales Jewish War Memorial was discussed. The President was appointed delegate to the committee set up to make plans. The continuity of representation on this important communal body was ensured by the re-election of Mr. Goodman as President at the annual meeting of the congregation in August.

The Vice-President and Treasurer were A. Nimenski and M. Zarkin respectively. The meeting appears to have been somewhat stormy, so that the vote of thanks it accorded the President was no doubt more than a mere formality.

The question of building arose again at the end of 1919, and a Building Committee was appointed. It undertook a search for a more suitable piece of land, but soon reported that none was to be found. In view of this, negotiations were begun with an architect and plans prepared for altering the house on the congregation's own property. The scheme, however, was not carried into effect. A somewhat uneventful year closed in August, 1920, with the re-election of the President and the choice of Mr. A. I. Ellitt as Vice-President and Michael Louis as Treasurer.

Although there had been little of importance done at Committee meetings for some time past, the congregation had progressed considerably. The year 1921 was to be one of great change and important developments. In October, 1920, the Committee began to take an interest in the impending visit to Sydney of the Chief Rabbi, the Very Rev. Dr. J. H. Hertz, and Messrs. Goodman and W. R. Cohen were appointed the congregation's delegates to the Committee deputed to make the necessary arrangements. At the same meeting the Committee approved plans for assisting the War Memorial in its drive for funds.

The Building Committee had apparently not ceased to function. At the Committee meeting of 6th December, 1920, a report was presented on a block of land at the corner of Grosvenor and Grafton Streets, Bondi Junction, which was considered suitable for the congregational needs. It appears that the Building Committee was strongly in favour of buying the block, and that their recommendation persuaded the full Committee to call immediately a special general meeting. Various difficulties arose. The general meeting, as the result of the resignation of the entire Committee and of some legal complications, found itself compelled to elect officers afresh. The same executive was chosen, though the committeemen differed slightly from those elected in August.⁸ There was a contest over a vacancy as trustee, and Elias Green was chosen. The building was not discussed until 6th January, 1921.

Opinions differed. Some members whose views would carry weight preferred to build on the site which the congregation already owned. Others of equal weight favoured the move to Bondi Junction. Finally the matter was put to the vote. By 23 votes to 17 it was resolved to build a new Synagogue at Bondi Junction and to sell the old land and building. Three days later the Committee approved the exercise of its option for the new site, and appointed Messrs. Goodman, W. R. Cohen and M. Schwartz as a Building Committee. It was realised at this meeting that the erection of a Synagogue at Bondi Junction was a matter of great interest to the small Bondi-Waverley congregation which was then functioning, and it was decided to inform them of the plans. Almost at once arrangements were made to demolish the cottage on the new land, and at the end of February the Committee decided to ask the Chief Rabbi to lay the foundation stone of the new building.

Rabbi Cohen, of the Great Synagogue, was asked to assist. Questions of catering, speeches, the trowel and other matters on the day the stone was laid were left in the hands of a sub-committee consisting of A. M. Lowenthal, Morris Symonds and Michael Louis, who were to act in conjunction with the Building Committee.

Events moved fast. By 7th March the President was able to report to the Committee that he had been asked by the Bondi-Waverley congregation to meet them, with

a view to amalgamation. He explained that this small community had a little money on hand, and that they rented a hall for services on Friday evening, but could not worship together on Saturday because they had no Sepher Torah. The Committee agreed to amalgamation if the other congregation would comply with certain conditions, the most important of them concerning the name of the joint body, which was to be "The Eastern Suburbs Central Synagogue." This represented something of a compromise, for it retained the old name but added words to it which would suit both the new situation of the Synagogue and the territory covered by the smaller body.

The offer was accepted, and the name retained until recent years, when the words "Eastern Suburbs" were dropped from the title.

At the same meeting Rabbi Cohen's letter of acceptance of the invitation was read, but no reply had yet come from the Chief Rabbi. Eventually he agreed in time to allow of all necessary arrangements being made for the ceremony on Sunday, 10th April.

The function began with the reading by Rabbi Cohen of verses from the 118th Psalm, after which the President of the Congregation gave a brief historical summary of the movement. A silver trowel was presented to the Chief Rabbi by Morris Symonds. With it he declared the foundation stone well and truly laid. A second stone was then laid by Messrs. Goodman, Cohen, Schwartz and Louis.

The Chief Rabbi's address centred around the theme that the building of this Synagogue was the building of an altar to the Creator, and that the letters of the Hebrew word for altar (*Mizbeach*) were the initial letters of four Hebrew words meaning respectively Reconciliation, Memory, Blessing and Life. On each of these four he addressed the gathering.⁹ Judge Cohen proposed a vote of thanks to the Chief Rabbi. Those present then moved to the Coronation Hall nearby for refreshments, and an appeal for funds realised over £2,000.

This was the only occasion during his visit to Australia on which the Chief Rabbi laid the foundation stone of a new Synagogue. In his description of his tour of the Empire, he makes one brief reference to this event,

which he describes as a privilege for himself and as a rare event in the small Jewish population of Australia.¹⁰

The story of the Central Synagogue since then has been one of continuous growth, but even up to the laying of the foundation stone an immense amount of valuable work had gone into the movement, and the results justified the hopes of the early founders whose names it has been the effort of this short chronicle to preserve.¹¹

D. J. B.

NOTES.

1. An obituary notice of W. R. Cohen appears in this *Journal*, Vol. II., p. 409.
 2. An obituary notice of A. A. Coppleson appears in this *Journal*, Vol. II., Part IX.
 3. The Hebrew words mean "Way of Life."
 4. The ritual of the Polish Jews.
 5. For some further details of this congregation, see this *Journal*, Vol. II., p. 390 ff.
 6. The Society is indebted to Mr. Goodman for his help, and to that of Miss Sarah Finklestein, the present Secretary of the Synagogue, in making this paper possible.
 7. An obituary notice of P. J. Marks appears in this *Journal*, Vol. I., p. 203.
 8. In this brief paper the names of various executive officers have been given, but the large number of those who served as committeemen makes it impossible to include their names.
 9. A fuller account of the address is in the *Hebrew Standard*, Sydney, 15th April, 1921.
 10. Dr. J. H. Hertz : *The First Tour to the Jewish Communities of the British Overseas Dominions* (Oxford, 1924), p. 26.
 11. It is felt that an explanation is necessary as to the use of the prefix "Mr." This has invariably been omitted except where the gentleman referred to is still living, or in some few cases where the plural is required. No attempt has been made to supply biographical details of any of the persons mentioned, except to the extent of a reference to obituary notices which have appeared in this *Journal*.
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