

Australian Jewish Historical Society

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PART I.



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Part I.

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Benjamin Leopold Farjeon, Novelist, 1838-1903*

By M. H. KELLERMAN, B.Ec.

(Read before the Society, 16th December, 1957)

Our interest in Benjamin Farjeon springs from two sources—firstly, from his Jewish parentage and, secondly, from his sojourn in Australia and New Zealand.

He was a writer, but not a Jewish writer in the sense that he wrote about Jewish subjects; nor an Australian writer in the sense that he was an Australian, or that he chose mainly Australian subjects. He included Australian topics, and there is no doubt that many of his impressions and much of his subject matter in his later works were obtained during the years he lived in the south. A feature of his work is the remarkable manner in which his writings reflect his own life and personal experiences, and the extent to which he projected himself into his characters.

Even if there had not been a wealth of information available to us from the pen of his daughter, Eleanor Farjeon, we should have been able to trace much of the life and thoughts of Benjamin from his almost autobiographical stories and novels. Eleanor produced *Adventure in the Fifties—Our Father*—an interesting account of a part of her father's life—for Blackwood's Magazine, and *A Nursery in the Nineties*—a more ambitious project dealing with Benjamin and other members of his family.

These two books throw a great deal of light on the character of Benjamin, and help to explain the pattern of his behaviour. As the pattern unfolds we become enthralled and later amazed at the writer's skill in portraying his innermost thoughts and life situations, and at the singleness of purpose with which he pursues his lifelong ambition

* A photograph of Farjeon appears in the *Journal*, Vol. 2, p. 270.

—to be a writer. That he achieved his ambition is borne out by this summary of his life.

Benjamin Farjeon was born in 1838 in London of Jewish parents. Early in life he migrated to Australia and went to New Zealand, where he edited a newspaper in Dunedin, before returning to London. In 1870 he published *Grif, A Story of Australian Life*, which was immediately successful. His novels, realistic and sentimental, frequently dealt with mysteries and the detection of crime. Among the more notable books were *London's Heart*, 1873, *The Duchess of Rosemary Lane*, 1876, *The House of White Shadows*, 1884, *Toilers of Babylon*, 1888, *Aaron, the Jew*, 1894, and *The Mesmerists*, 1900. He died in 1903.

Those are the broad lines—let me fill in the details of the picture to give it life. Just as Farjeon's work reflects his life, so does his life reflect his work, and give meaning to it.

Farjeon was named Benjamin, and as Benjamin Farjeon he began his life, and carried it on for over thirty years. Leopold was added for effect after he became an author, and it is as Benjamin Leopold Farjeon that he is best known. This Leopold in his name reveals a characteristic that might throw some light on certain features of his work later, and help us to arrive at a true evaluation.

He was born to a family living in dire poverty, and he was brought up in poverty, in Whitechapel. His parents were very orthodox, and the atmosphere of the home reflected the extreme orthodoxy practised. We can appreciate the situation in the home—the family very poor, but following to the letter every religious observance, and making sure that there is no violation of Sabbath, Festival or custom.

There was no fire, no paper torn on the Sabbath; there were new crockery and utensils for Pesach; there was a prayer and a blessing for every occasion, and you can be sure the father saw that everybody in the house performed his duties to the letter. The father was Jacob, a remarkable linguist, a good singer with a clear tenor voice. He was extremely orthodox and inclined to romance. He came from somewhere in the east, but on account of his vivid imagination it is difficult to trace the family tree with certainty. From his statements there seem to be four branches or four possibilities. He claimed descent from an old, influential Spanish family; he laid claims to his family's having a heraldic device and motto traceable to Old Provence; he

claimed relationship to a French artistic family, remnants of which remain as crayon manufacturers; and, lastly, he spoke of relatives in Tunis and U.S.A., well-established merchants and jewellers.

His stories became traditional in the family, and no doubt some of his skill and romanticism were passed on to Benjamin, who was a born story-teller who enjoyed his own stories.

His mother was Dinah Levy, from the Levy family that had settled in England at Deal. Dinah had twenty-five sisters, all living, and according to all accounts was a wonderful family woman, loving everybody and loved by all. At all events she inspired Ben, who loved her and her memory passionately all his life. There is no doubt that she, too, coloured the characters and nature of some of his books.

One other member of his father's family had a strong influence on him—a brother who had been disowned because he had broken from tradition in his marriage.

In such an orthodox family such things were never mentioned openly, and consequently the uncle's name was taboo; as may be expected, the mystery and doubt surrounding him focussed the attention of the children on him with greater intensity, and to a boy like Ben, with his quick imagination and romantic soul, here was a subject for a story or a picture ready-made. He clothed his uncle with a glamour, and attributed motives and qualities, he did not possess. They were real enough, however, to influence Ben at a critical stage of his life.

He had three brothers and one sister. The brothers, Israel, Morris, and Solomon, migrated in due course and became businessmen. The sister, Esther, remained in England, and seems to have inherited the romantic story-telling trait of her father, and the other romantic quality of her maternal grandmother. She had an unquenchable imagination, was strangely fascinating, and somewhat eccentric. Her nieces and nephews loved her because she told them stories in a highly dramatic way, and as she had a beautiful voice the songs she sang were greatly enjoyed, and the children always clamoured for more. She was always very poor, but was helped by Benjamin all his life. These two, so much alike in many ways, through their father, were always close friends.

She was like her grandmother, in that she had three children before she was twenty, and fifteen after she was

twenty—and spent her life launching them into the world.

The importance of this to us is that Benjamin lived very near to this poverty of his sister and her family, and could study the effect of it on the members of the family closely and intimately.

At nine years of age he went to work as a printer's devil for the publisher of a Christian journal. He worked twelve hours a day for four shillings a week, and as he was interested and highly intelligent, he became a skilled compositor.

Reading was a passion with him, and so he could never resist a book. But as the family was very poor, it is understandable that the reading matter supplied by the family would not be very extensive.

This story, told by himself to his own children, shows how he was able to feed his appetite for reading. On his way to work each day he had to pass a second-hand bookshop. He stopped to admire the treasures, and to his delight one book was open, revealing two pages of print. He read these and hurried on. The book was *Undine*, by Fouque. (Undine is the name for the class of Water-Nymphs in the cabbalistic system of Paracelsus. An undine possessed no soul, but acquired one, and at the same time took on the conditions of humanity by bearing a child to a mortal. Fouque's book, written in 1811, was based on this legend.) Ben read two pages of this story. The next day the page was turned, and so he read two more pages.

This happened for a few more days, and then the owner of the shop came out to meet him. He was fascinated with the lad who displayed such an interest, and invited him to come inside whenever he liked to read the books on the shelves. That shop became his library, and there he was introduced to the world of books. With his savings he bought books of his own, and from the remnants of his library, still existing, we can form an opinion of his tastes in those early days. Among his first books were *Legends*, by Husaeus (the German fairy world was always dear to him); *Faust*; *Peter Schlemihl*; *The Devil on Two Sticks*; Works by Washington Irving; Shelley's Poems. A local schoolmaster, a Mr. Hands, took an interest in him and taught him English and arithmetic. It was quickly discovered that he had a good head for figures, and he progressed rapidly in arithmetic. An assured future awaited him in commerce as a clerk or book-keeper, but he was more interested in writing. His main education was from avid

indiscriminate reading. He always liked writing and as a young child he made up stories and poems. By the age of thirteen, he had read and re-read *The Cartons*. This had a profound effect on him. He took to day-dreaming and analysing and criticising his surroundings. He found his life and house too narrow and too small for himself—he wanted to expand and carve a future for himself, in a wide world peopled with creatures of his own making, and in which he would be the centre of activity, a man of affluence and influence. He said on one occasion, "I should be content to die if I had written such a book."

His mind was made up—he had an ambition—he would become an author. As soon as he had crystallised his thoughts he went home and started his book.

Unfortunately, no trace of it remains, but his family did find two scraps of poetry written when he was thirteen. There is no clue to the meaning of the first, or to the incidents that inspired it.

For so it was, and so 'twill be
while earth remains, or air, or sea.

The second piece is part of an epic, and reflects his day dreaming, and inner hopes and aspirations.

A poet in his chamber sat with melancholy brow,
His book was spread before him, he took no heed I trow,
For though his eye was constant fixed, his thoughts were far away,
Tracing through dim futurity the bright and coming day,
The day when through his genius grand his name should mighty be,
When titled lords and jewelled dames to him should bend the knee.

His room in the poverty-stricken house had disappeared and in its place gleamed golden visions of a future in which he was the successful centre.

The thirteen-year-old boy's dreams were almost prophetic !

Ben's nature, his sensitiveness and intelligence, coupled with the fact that he lived in an orthodox Jewish home, led directly to his migrating to Australia. He was always a boy of opinions of his own, and he had the ability and the urge to probe into causes and reasons. Consequently, very early in life he was not prepared to accept blindly the religious observances laid down by his father. He saw when the law was violated and reacted violently. How did his father get to know, for example, the contents of a letter delivered on Saturday morning, so soon after its arrival ? It was contrary to what was laid down, and this kind of hypocrisy offended him beyond measure.

He was very honourable, and he could not pretend that getting round a difficulty for worldly gain was anything but a sham, or that a compromise was justified, even if there were loopholes in the law. The doubts that entered his mind as soon as he was old enough to think and to observe began the rift with his father that grew into open enmity, and the final break with him and what he stood for. At sixteen he disowned his father and his beliefs. He could not accept the family Faith, though he retained filial affection for the whole family except his father. His mother was in a difficult position, but as she continued to be adored by him and remained his inspiration for many years, she must have been an angel in the house, smoothing over many a difficult situation with her tact, her understanding and her love. It was her influence, no doubt, that caused him in New Zealand to associate himself with Jewish affairs through his partner, Vogel, and later to write so glowingly of Jews in *Aaron, the Jew*.

The gold rush fever in Australia infected England at this time, and Benjamin decided to leave home. His romantic adventuring became a reality, and it was found that his adventurous spirit could find scope in the wild life of Australia.

Adventure was more to him than gold, so he borrowed the money and sailed on the ship, *The Ocean Wave*, for Melbourne, steerage. It is significant that the money was borrowed from that uncle whose name was never mentioned in the house—an uncle who understood his problems and who gave him advice and practical assistance. There is no doubt that this uncle over the years, unknowingly perhaps, influenced Ben's outlook and actions. The example was there and it was very easy to rationalise.

On the boat, Ben started a weekly newspaper. He was to be sole editor, contributor, and compositor. He planned to write everything—leading articles, news items, jokes, a serial, and advertisements. By the end of the first week he had produced two copies of *The Ocean Record*—one for the steerage, and one for the saloon. He approached the captain for permission to publish the paper and to distribute it, and was so favourably received that he was transferred to the comparative comfort of the saloon for the rest of the voyage. Twelve copies were produced in all, and they were pronounced a huge success.

He landed in Melbourne with insufficient money to get to the goldfields, and so he took a job in a brickyard at 12/-

Benjamin Leopold Farjeon, 1838-1903

7

AARON THE JEW

A Novel

By

B. L. FARJEON

AUTHOR OF

"Great Porter Square," "Grif," "Blade o' Grass,"
"The Last Tenant," etc., etc

London, 1894

HUTCHINSON & CO

34, PATERNOSTER ROW

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a day. The work was very heavy, but he persevered, proving that he could hold his own with the rest of the labourers. He was transferred to the office, where his skill with figures made him an immediate success.

By the end of a month he had saved enough for the expenses to get him to the fields—but he had made himself so valuable that the owner offered him double his wages to remain. He refused the offer and set off. For a few years he followed the various gold rushes—pegged out his claim, and started a newspaper. He was not interested in gold. He wanted to be a writer, and adventure was in his blood. He was living the incidents and meeting the people that later were to be portrayed in his books.

He had many adventures; he had some hard times, and some good times; and he kept on. The events of this period of his life are revealed in his Australian novels, among them *Grif*, *The Silver Flagon*, *The Sacred Nugget*. From material in possession of the family, his daughter was able to write:

A strange life for a boy, born and bred in the poor streets of London, with no experience and no physique, but with the spirit of a bantam cock. Plunging into the rough, coarse, dangerous fellowship of the camps, and keeping himself decent; liked by everybody, kow-towing to nobody; learning to trek, ride, and shoot, to dig his claim as often as was required to maintain his right; washing gold and finding little; learning to make damper and smoke his pipe; to bluff with a straight face at poker; to light a fire with three sticks; and writing, writing, writing wherever he went.

From his own writing, and from opinions expressed by his contemporaries, a clear picture of this young man emerges. He was still pursuing his early ambition, and becoming more proficient with experience. No love affairs came to light, and it appears that he had a respect for women that was maintained throughout his life. He did not swear, he drank but little, and at all times stood up for his own opinions.

This was the stage of his life at the age of twenty-three. He was in Melbourne when the tales of the fabulous finds at Taupeka in New Zealand were inflaming the people, causing a general exodus. All ships were crammed full and it was almost impossible to get a berth. Ben worked it so that he became special correspondent of the *Argus*—and had his articles published in that paper as he sent them over.

He settled in Dunedin, working for Julius Vogel, proprietor and editor of the *Otago Daily Times*. Ben was the manager, sub-editor, contributor, and frequently compositor.

(A brief account of his life in Dunedin has been published in the *Journal* of this Society, and in Rabbi L. M. Goldman's book, *The History of the Jews in New Zealand*.)

He won fame and affection in Dunedin, and it seemed that at last he had found a place to settle down and enjoy the fruits of his labours. He was too generous to produce enmities, too honourable not to be respected, too magnetic not to be liked.

He wrote plays for the theatres and had five produced. He was interested in all social events and other activities, including the entertainment of actors and artists who visited Dunedin. It was during this period that he met Joe Jefferson, the great American actor who was on tour for health reasons with one of his sons. They became friends, as they had much in common; both were light-hearted and mercurial, loving the impulse and fun of life. As the *Otago Times* prospered, so did Ben. He bought land and became a partner with Vogel in the newspaper.

Throughout his life his supreme god was Charles Dickens. He read every book and article written by him, and prayed that he could emulate his style, and perhaps be associated with him. Now was his chance—he planned to publish a Christmas Story after the style of Dickens and dedicate it to Boz. So in 1865 he started *Shadows on the Snows*, dedicated to Dickens, and did it with such speed that, instead of writing it first, he set it up for printing direct from his mind. He wanted it produced in the periodical, *All the Year Round*, and sent it off to Dickens full of hope and confidence, for his opinion. Dickens did reply to him, and as a result he impulsively threw up everything he was doing, sold his interests, and returned to England to write.

This impulsiveness was characteristic of his nature, and even in later life it had not left him—although at this stage it served to endear him to his family. His daughter recalled one incident that reveals this impetuosity, and perhaps a degree of irresponsibility.

One morning my father came home from Billingsgate Market with 120 pairs of soles (she wrote in *Adventure in the Fifties*).

"But why did you buy them?" cried my mother in dismay.

"They were so cheap!" exclaimed my father joyously.

It was typical of Ben to throw up everything and start all over again; it meant nothing to him to leave an assured future for a doubtful one, so at thirty years of age he returned to London because his god had said he could write and had encouraged him. He had had a wealth of experience during the fourteen years he had been away and had collected plenty of copy, and above all he had the ambition and the will to write stories and books.

But we can judge the extent of the encouragement given by Dickens from the actual letter he sent. It had been carefully preserved, and after Ben's death it was found among his most valuable papers. It was still in its envelope, with C.D. engraved on the flap, and with a six-penny stamp on the front, postmarked "London W.C. My 29 66," "Private" in Dickens' own hand was written across the corner.

This is the letter :

GOD'S HILL PLACE,
HIGHAM by ROCHESTER, KENT.
Tues., 29th May, 1866.

Dear Sir,

I am concerned to find that I have by an accident left your letter of last January's date unanswered.

Your dedication, as an interesting and acceptable mark of remembrance from the other side of the world, gave me great pleasure. And I read the little book with much satisfaction.

But I am bound to lay before you the consideration that I cannot on such evidence (especially when you describe yourself as having written it "hurriedly") form any reasonably reliable opinion of your power of writing an acceptable colonial story for *All the Year Round*.

As to my reproducing this story, such a proceeding is as wide of the design and course of that journal as anything can possibly be.

If you write and offer for *All the Year Round* any original communication, I will read it myself, very heartily desiring to accept it, if I can deem it suitable to those pages. Do not, I beg, suppose that I intend to discourage you when I say no more. I simply mean to be honest with you and to discharge a duty that I owe to you and to myself.

Accept my thanks, and believe me,

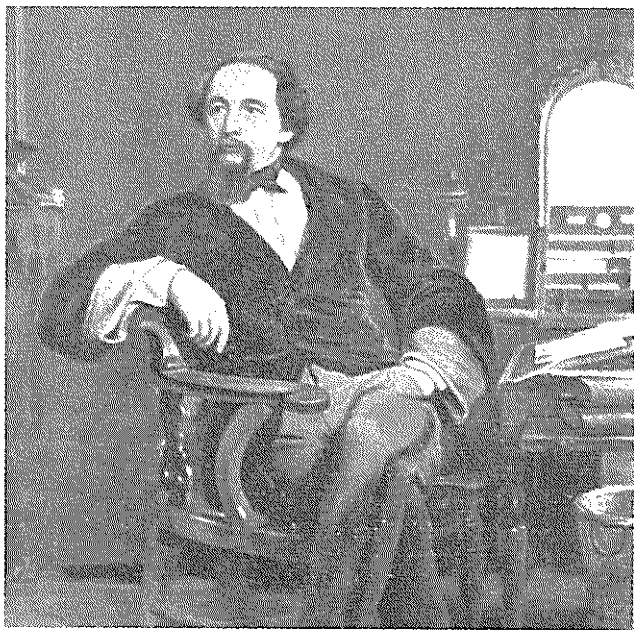
Dear Sir,
Faithfully yours,
CHARLES DICKENS.

A less impulsive man would have thought long and hard before giving up what he had. He would have been excused if he had thought the contents somewhat discouraging.

Yet had Ben not obeyed that impulse to go to London to meet his idol and to follow in his steps, Jefferson's

daughter, Margaret, would not have been able to say in 1872 about his new book, *Blade of Grass*—"A lovely story; and what a strange name the author has, Benjamin Farjeon." Nor would the reviewers have been able to say that the mantle of the late Charles Dickens had fallen on Benjamin Farjeon.

Farjeon and Dickens did meet—once. Mrs. George Augustus Sala gives an account of the meeting in her book, *Famous People I Have Met*.



CHARLES DICKENS, 1858, by W. P. Frith, R.A.
(From "Charles Dickens," by Una Pope-Hennessy, reproduced therein by
courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.)

Charles Dickens was in his box at a theatre one night, and was speaking in terms of admiration of the story (*Grif*) to Andrew Halliday, when the latter glancing down into the stalls, exclaimed, "Why there is Farjeon just below us." A few minutes later Mr. Farjeon was being introduced to Dickens by Halliday.

But the acquaintance was not of long duration, however, because Dickens died soon after.

Farjeon had written *Grif, A Story of Colonial Life* in 1866, but he rewrote it in 1870 as *Grif, A Story of Australian Life*. It was immediately successful, and his future as a writer was assured. A Mr. G. Grey, from Belgrave Mansions, wrote what could have been a typical opinion of the new star.

I have delayed thanking you for the copy of *Grif* in a new form, in the hope that I might have found time to go and see you, but as I have not been able to do so, I must no longer put off writing to you. I am very much obliged to you for sending me your book, which I shall value alike for the sake of the giver, and for its own merits, and I hope most sincerely that you will at once take that place in the literary world in this country, to which your abilities entitle you.

In October, 1871, *Sketches by Boz* was replaced by Farjeon's *Blade O' Grass* in serial form in Tinsley's Magazine, with which Charles Dickens, Jun., was associated.

Thus began a connection between Farjeon and Dickens which lasted for many years—the ambition to work with his idol was not fulfilled, but Ben did work with his idol's family.

His work was popular, as shown by this note to the author.

Blade O' Grass raced away. Out of the first 20,000. I don't think I shall have any copies left by Wednesday next. In fact I have serious thoughts of ordering the printers to go to press with a second edition tomorrow or Monday.

Signed, C. DICKENS, JUNIOR.

By 1875 Ben was an established writer, serious, sincere, industrious, and a bachelor. His dreams were coming true. Then he heard from his old friend, Jefferson, who had moved to London with his family. He invited Ben to dine at his home at 29 Hyde Park Place.

My Dear Farjeon (he wrote),

I am living at the above address. My family are with me and we will all be delighted to see you. Won't you come and take a family dinner with us on Sunday?

The thirty-seven-year-old Benjamin went, and met nineteen-year-old Margaret, "whose eyes were like wet violets fresh with dew." The story of their courtship and marriage, including letters and honeymoon, is charmingly told in *Nursery in the Nineties*, which tells something, too, of their five children. It was a true love match, and they were ideally happy all their lives.

It appears that great excitement prevailed throughout the family during the period of courtship, and a great many letters were written. All evidence points to a church wedding, but details are lacking. It was certainly not a

Jewish wedding. We learn from letters, "The date is fixed now, June the Sixth, 1877," and that other arrangements had to be planned carefully; ". . . the dresses will be made in Bond Street, the wedding breakfast will come, of course, from Gunters."

This letter, postmarked "London W.C. Jn 6, 77," is significant.

My darling wife,

The Cathedral bells have just struck twelve and it is 6th June. May it be the harbinger of many happy years! Ever yours, BEN.

Years later, his daughter, Elinor, writing of her father's early childhood, referred to "observances of which I am obliged to speak in ignorance"; this indicates the family was brought up in a Christian atmosphere.

For the next 28 years he wrote, and lived the life of a gentleman, loved by his family and loving them and humanity, generally. Perhaps we can assess the quality of the author and the principles of the man by reference to some of his books dealing with Australia.

This is taken from *At the Sign of the Silver Flagon*, an Australian story in three parts. It reveals his ability to describe details in vivid prose, and how his own sensitive nature reacts to such situations. Here is a description of a township, Silver Creek.

It is December, and the sun marks the record of 106° in the shade. We are at the golden end of the world, in Australia, at Silver Creek, twelve months ago a wilderness, now a busy and thriving township.

Within this brief space, an infant in the history of Cities has grown into what promises to become a strong and healthy man. Unknown, unthought of but a year ago, the name of Silver Creek is already a household word in a new and flourishing colony, and holds an important place in the journals of commerce.

He goes on to describe the people.

Not all inhabitants are Englishmen.

Other nations thirsting to have their fingers in the golden pie, have sent their representatives across the seas, and through the bush, and Americans, Germans, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Italians, Mongols, and Africans form a Tower of Babel community. As, however, they have all been drawn thither by one magnet,—fashioned of bright gold—they do not emulate the Tower of Babel folk, but hob-nob amicably with one another, and make common cause of it with the ubiquitous Englishman.

The Chinese of the time must have made a deep impression on him. He wrote:—

The goldfields' commissioner, or the warden, as he was usually called, and his staff, and the resident magistrate, and a few of the lesser luminaries, dwelt there in snug habitations with their Chinese

cooks, who were rare masters at crust and paste,—but which is but natural, as they are proverbially light-fingered. There these children of the sun and moon chattered and cooked, and smoked opium in their little wooden pipes, of which they were as tenderly solicitous as though they had been children of their blood; and went elsewhere, to the vilest and dirtiest nest of thoroughfares the imagination can conjure up, and which was known as the Chinese camp, to gamble away their hard earnings.

In this camp, of course, was the Joss House, with its absurd and senseless mummeries; and there, also, were certain dens, which every night were filled with Chinamen smoking themselves into helpless idiocy. The provision stores in the Chinese camp were stocked with curiosities in the eating way which made fastidious persons shudder, such as preserved slugs and snails (delicious delicacies to the Chinese palate), and bottles crammed with what seemed to be pieces of preserved monkey, while thousands of shreds of shrivelled meat hung from the calico roofs, which were black with smoke. These shreds weighed about an ounce each, and looked like the dried and twisted skins and tails of rats.

He goes on to describe the horrid noises, the greed of the children, and all the other factors calculated to create what he describes in his own words, "hideous bedlam." You can imagine the effect of such descriptions on British readers of the time, and you can judge what they reveal about himself.

He can describe people and tender scenes, too, and we feel his love scenes mirror his own life. The sentiments and expression reveal his skill with words and in plot construction.

The story follows the usual pattern—married, lived happily, until stark tragedy took her from him. The characterisation is good, friendship and virtue triumph in the end, and we feel we have seen a faithful picture of the goldfields, and glimpsed a part of the soul of Benjamin Farjeon.

Grif (A Story of Australian Life, 1870), a story set in Melbourne, describes the seamy side of life. *Grif*, the main character, is a product of the times, and the women are what one would expect. Throughout the story we are given insight into the author's character, and his thoughts on current problems, and perhaps into the motivation of his own actions. The story starts with a description, which not only sets the tone and mood, but reveals Ben's power of imagery and skill as a painter of word-pictures.

In one of the most thickly populated parts of Melbourne City, where poverty and vice struggle for breathing space, and where narrow lanes and filthy thoroughfares jostle each other savagely, there stood, surrounded by a hundred miserable hovels, a gloomy house, which might have been likened to a sullen tyrant, frowning

down a crowd of abject, poverty-stricken slaves. From its appearance it might have been built a century ago; decay and rottenness were apparent from roof to base; but in reality it was barely a dozen years old. It had lived a wicked and depraved life, had this house, which might account for its premature decay.

It looked like a hoary old sinner, and in every wrinkle of its weatherboard casing was hidden a story which would make respectability shudder.

Into this atmosphere come Grif and the other characters.

It's an exciting book—Milly, the main female character, dies, there are robberies, murder and violence. But in the end virtue triumphs.

In *In Australian Wilds*, a book of short stories, Ben gives full rein to his adventurous spirit by telling a series of adventures during the gold days. They are full of murder and robbery, but told with a clarity and understanding that reveal his sympathy and personal experiences. Characterisation and word pictures are particularly vivid. *The Matchbox* reminds me of Lawson's style, but without the least trace of humour.

His philosophical outlook is revealed more directly in *Toilers of Babylon* than in his other novels. The theme is set down in these four lines:

For life the prologue is to death
And love its sweetest flower;
And death is as the spring of life,
And love its richest dower.

The copy in the Mitchell Library is interesting because it bears his personal signature. "Edward Righton, with kind regards, B. L. Farjeon."

The sentiments expressed by the father of Nansie just before he died are worth quoting. "Life is a breath," he said. "A dream, and its end should be welcomed with joy, for it opens the door to a higher, holier life. Happy is the mortal who can approach that threshold with a consciousness that he has done no wrong to his fellow creature." And then he said that "there should be no vain thirstings and yearnings for knowledge that was wisely hidden from us, but that every human being should strive to keep shining within him three stars, faith, duty, and love."

If it needs more to show his strong emotions and love of family life we can find evidence in *Christmas Angel*, written in a pure Dickens' style, with its pathos, sentimentality and sadness. It was dedicated to his wife:

"To Margaret

My beloved wife, I dedicate this story. The inspiration of which sprang from the deepest sorrow of our life."

(The death of their sixteen-months-old-child.)

Throughout his life he abhorred poverty and fought it with every weapon at his command, and it is natural that he should have some innate leanings towards socialism. He had experienced poverty and knew how it marred life and character. In one of his most powerful books, *Blade O' Grass*, he tackled this problem.

The story concerns twin baby girls born in a slum. The mother dies at their birth and the children are adopted by persons, not knowing that the other child exists. One is brought up in poverty, the other in luxury. The influence of Dickens is very apparent, as the names and situations indicate. Farjeon's views on charity are worth reading. A whole chapter is devoted to this subject, and it is entitled, "Mr. Merrywhistle Relieves Himself on the Subject of Indiscriminate Charity."

It could have been taken from Dickens. What about this scene? Mr. Merrywhistle is invited home by Mr. Jimmy Virtue for a meal. The children, who habitually had their meals in the corner on what was left, being invited to sit at the table much to their surprise, were about to start when Jimmy said, "Stop a minute, youngsters, grace before meat. Repeat after me ———." At the table were also Robert Truefitt, Tom Beadle, and Blade O' Grass, and to make it more like Dickens, Jimmy called potatoes, "Taters," and the girl called violets, "Wilets." The story ends in true Dickens style, with bells pealing, and the heavenly message, "Man help the poor."

Having forsaken his father's faith, Ben turned more completely as time went on to that of his wife, and we find Christmas and what it means constantly referred to throughout his works. The subject seems to have provided him with an outlet for his love of humanity, to convince himself that he had done the right thing, and to show his deep regard for his master, Dickens.

He never wavered in his love for his mother, and he expresses this with supreme devotion in his book, *Bread and Cheese and Kisses*, in which he reveals his religious beliefs and the way of life which he had adopted. He starts the book with these words.

Introduction which serves in part as a Dedication to the Memory of my Mother.

With a sense of infinite thankfulness upon me, I sit down to commence my Christmas Story. This thankfulness is born of overflowing gratitude. I am grateful that I am spared to write it, and grateful because of the belief that the Blade O' Grass I put forth a year ago was, out of the goodness of many sympathising hearts, not allowed to wither and die.

During this introduction he says:

Not that life should be a holiday: work is its wholesomest food. But some little more of general kindness towards one another, of generous feeling between class and class; as well as between person and person; some little less consideration of self; some more general recognition by the high of the human and divine equality which the low bear to them; some little more consideration from the poor for the rich; some little more practical pity from the rich for the poor; some little less of the hypocrisy of life too commonly practised and too commonly toadied to; some better meaning in the saying of prayers, and therefore more true devotion in the bending of knees; some hearty honest practising of doing unto others even as ye would others should do unto you;—may well be wished for.

These sentiments awakened memories of his mother, because that memory was the most sacred and tenderest he had. "Bread and Cheese and Kisses" uttered by her had a sacred and beautiful meaning—contentment, cheerfulness, the exercise of sweet words and gentle thought—it means Home.

"I wish you, dear readers and friends, no better lot than this: May bread and cheese and kisses often be your fare, and may it leave as sweet a taste in your mouth as it has left in mine."

The story that follows is a saga that describes the fulfilment of the life and destiny of the twins, Blade O' Grass, and Ruth, and their children, Virtue and Goodness again triumphing over evil.

Although he made so few references to Jews, in fact, he seems to have avoided the subject, he did devote a whole book to a Jew and his life. *Aaron, the Jew* is a most sympathetic and inspiring treatment of our people. Aaron is made to stand out as a truly wonderful character in every way, a model to all mankind. In his religious life he is sincere, devoted and consistent; at all times he is a good friend and loyal citizen; he is courageous in adversity, open handed in prosperity. The Jew is depicted not as a humble inferior being, but as a normal, proud human being, actuated by the highest principles as a matter of course.

The question of intermarriage and race, revolving round the adoption of a non-Jewish child, is handled with

skill and understanding; and we are led to believe that deep in Farjeon's mind some of his father's teachings, and the traditions of his ancestry lingered, and at last on one occasion clamoured for expression.

No writer has created a better Jewish character than Aaron, or portrayed Jewish life more vividly and favourably.

A list of his works in the Mitchell Library shows he was far from idle; other books and writings are in existence also, making in all a fairly large reference library of his works.

The Mitchell list is:

At the Sign of the Silver Flagon, 1876.

Basil and Annette, 1890.

Blade O' Grass.

Bread and Cheese and Kisses, 187?

Christmas Angel (Malka), 1885.

Christmas Day in the Bush.

Golden Grain, 187?

The Golden Land, 1890.

Great Porter Square—A Mystery.

Grif—A Story of Colonial Life, 1866.

Grif—A Story of Australian Life, 1870.

An Island Pearl, 1875.

The King of No Land, 187.

The Last Tenant.

The March of Fate, 1893.

Master Fink's Apprentice, 1887.

Miser Fairbrother.

Mystery of M. Felix, 1890.

Mystery of Roaring Meg, 1878.

The Nine of Hearts.

Peril of Richard Pardon, 1890.

The Sacred Nugget—An Australian Story.

Shadows on the Snow, 1865.

Stories, 187? (date uncertain).

Toilers of Babylon, 1888.

While Golden Sleep Doth Reign: Good Words Christmas Story.

Aaron, the Jew, 1894, is not in the Mitchell Library, but copies are available in Sydney.

According to Harold Ribalow, the American critic who devoted a paragraph to Farjeon in his article on Jewish literature in England in *The Jewish People Past and*

Present (New York, 1952, Vol. 3, page 236), there are other books of Jewish interest by Farjeon. His paragraph reads:—

Benjamin L. Farjeon, one of the most prolific novelists of his time, wrote more than 40 novels, some of them dealing with Jews. *Solomon Isaacs* (1877) tells the story of a devout Jewish old-clothes man, *Aaron the Jew* (1894) is a perfect example of the weakness of "apologetic" Jewish literature; the Jew in it is so unbelievably nice that one dislikes him. Of course, there is no relation to art in this attempt to portray a wonderfully good Jew. In *Fair Jewess* (1894), Farjeon again writes about noble Jews. In *Miriam Rozella* (1897) and *Pride of Race* (1900), Farjeon includes many Jewish characters.

From the titles noted above, it will be seen that the Mitchell Library list is not complete.

The story of Benjamin Farjeon has been told, mainly through his books, by himself. It shows how the small boy from Whitechapel without education, acquired education and culture, and how well he used them. If he embellished his bare facts to create effect, it was done in the name of art, and to satisfy that trait in his character that urged him to add "Leopold" to his name, and to change his birthday from December to May, because May falls at a better time of the year.

Perhaps it was unfortunate that a man with his drive, intelligence, and singleness of purpose should have had to follow Dickens in the same profession and have the same motives, otherwise, he might have won more recognition and rated more than a few lines in an encyclopædia.

His family, which developed into a writing family, made an attempt to establish a Gallery Trust in Sydney for Benjamin in the 1930's, but no suitable arrangement has yet been made. There the matter rests for the present. The correspondence—confidential—is in the care of the Mitchell Library.

From Russia to Brisbane, 1913

By S. STEDMAN

(Read before the Society, 16th December, 1958)

The ranks of the pioneers of Russian-Jewish immigration to Australia are growing thinner every year, and before their numbers are still further depleted it is desirable that some aspects of that period and of the immigrants themselves should be put on record and the memory of them preserved for future generations of Australian Jews.

This future generation which is now replacing the passing builders of organised Jewish life in Australia may find some interest in tracing the beginnings. This new generation should know what were the aims, desires and aspirations of the immigrants who, finding themselves strangers in a strange land, began to recreate the various Jewish institutions which formed part of their daily lives in the old homes.

Certainly not everything that was considered valuable or significant by the old immigrants will appear in the same light to the young, native Australian Jews. They have grown up under different social, political and religious conditions, their surroundings bear no resemblance to those in which the older generation grew up in Russia or Poland. They will, no doubt, revalue many old values, re-estimate old traditions and customs. All this is a matter for them to decide; our duty is to preserve for them the knowledge of the past even as our fathers had preserved it for us.

To know the past of one's communal life is a great help in building the future.

Jewish history in Australia is quite recent. Though Jews came here with the First Fleet, Jewish organised life, apart from the Synagogue and other religious institutions, did not begin to function properly until about 1910-1918, when immigrants from Eastern Europe began to arrive in substantial numbers.* Amongst these people were men of learning and of deep Jewish knowledge. They felt lost in the barren field of Jewish life in Melbourne and in Sydney, and due to these men's efforts the Kadimah, Yiddish schools and a Yiddish press came into existence. Through the efforts of those people a link was forged that bound Aus-

* This statement was vigorously debated during the discussion on the paper. Most speakers took the view that it was not accurate.—Ed.

tralian Jews to their brethren in other lands, and this link grew stronger as their numbers increased. With the growth of immigration, Jewish social organisations became more diversified, for these immigrants brought with them customs, habits and manners, representing a great variety of environmental influences as well as political and religious beliefs.

The Jews who came to Brisbane, and it is of them that I wish to write, differed in many respects from those who arrived in Melbourne and Sydney. The latter came, for the greater part, from European Russia or from Poland, while the immigrants to Brisbane were mostly from Manchuria and Siberia. The East European Jews were used to reading a Yiddish newspaper or book, to belonging to a Jewish organisation either social or political, and their language was, in most cases, Yiddish. The Brisbane Jews or the immigrants who settled in Brisbane consisted of three separate groups or elements.

The Siberian Jew knew very little of Judaism except the fundamental fact that he was a Jew, knew no Yiddish and had never read a Yiddish book unless it was in Russian translation. In Siberia they had lived amongst the Russians, had attended Russian schools and were brought up on Russian literature. Jewish life to them, as it was to the Australian Jews, centred around the Synagogue. Judaism was a simple proposition of observing the holy days and being a Jew.

The second element consisted of a conglomeration of Jews from every part of Russia, who came to Manchuria in search of freedom from the repressions imposed upon them by the Russian Government. Though Manchuria was to all intents and purposes a Russian province, the territory was Chinese and the Tsar could not impose the strict anti-Jewish laws which existed in Russia proper.

The city of Harbin, which contained the largest Jewish community in Manchuria, up to about 1913 still enjoyed a certain amount of prosperity left over from the years of war. The Russo-Japanese War gave Harbin an opportunity to grow and to become rich. As the nearest city to the battlefields, money flowed into Harbin from the army and officers who came there on leave, and the inhabitants took full advantage of the situation to accumulate wealth. Soon after the war, this flow of easy money ceased, and by 1913 people began to feel the reaction.

In a way, too, Harbin was a dead-end. No Jew could travel to Vladivostok, and the only exit was back to Russia and the Pale of Settlement. It was thus that people's minds turned to emigration. Australia was the nearest country, the border was close at hand and the crossing of the border presented no great difficulties.

Apart from this, the Australian Government needed immigrants, and by arrangement with the shipping companies paid part of the fares. To travel from Dairen to Brisbane cost £8/10/-, and thus people came to Brisbane. The choice of Brisbane as their final goal was quite accidental. It happened to be the first city they came to, and as their knowledge of Australia was very limited, and as no one expected them in any Australian city, they remained in Brisbane.

The third group of immigrants to Brisbane consisted of political exiles. These people escaped from Siberian prisons or places of detention, and after crossing the border into Manchuria, came to Australia.

It should be mentioned that the Australian Government of those days provided the immigrant with food and accommodation for a period of seven days at the Immigration Bureau at Petrie's Bight, and those who wished to go to the country were provided with free tickets to their destination. No visas were required to enter Australia, though as a formality an official who understood no Russian met every boat and demanded to be shown a passport. One of our company, an ex-soldier of the Russian Imperial Army who "resigned" rather in a hurry, displayed a coloured theatre programme, which fully satisfied the Australian official.

The Jewish population of Brisbane to-day is about 1,500, so by subtracting the natural increase for over 40 years and the number of new arrivals who settled there since the end of the last war, one may arrive at the approximate number of Jewish inhabitants in 1913.* They were organised, as in all other Australian cities, as a religious community, with the Synagogue as the focal point. Outside of that there was little else. No organisations to help the immigrants were in existence. From the moment one landed in Brisbane, he was "on his own."

* The number of Jews in Queensland at the census of 1911 was 700; at the census of 1921 it was 1,003 (*Journal*, vol. 4, p. 28). The Jewish Year Book for 1915 gives Brisbane's population as 500.—Ed.

True it is that the immigrants helped one another, but self-help was the accepted condition of life in the new country.

Things have changed a great deal since those days!

Of course, there were more non-Jewish immigrants than Jewish, and they, too, felt the need of some common ground where they could meet their own kind. Thus in order to unite the scattered newcomers, a Russian Club was formed and, as most of the Jews were Russian-speaking, quite a number of them joined the Club. That was in 1913.

There were, certainly, those to whom everything Russian was anathema; those who had personally suffered at the hands of Russians and those who did not feel at home in the company of Russians. Relations between the Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants were very friendly, and Jews were elected to the Club's executive. Under the influence of the political exiles, the Club began to publish a weekly newspaper, *The Worker's Life* (Rabochaya Zjizn). It was a paper with a socialistic programme, and proved very useful to those who could not read English. The paper also served as a medium to explain Australia to the Russians, and to make them understand local politics and social questions. The Editor was a Jew, Boris Taranov-Skvirsky. Skvirsky was his real name, Taranov the name he used when escaping from Yakutsk in Siberia.

Years later, after the establishment of the Far Eastern Republic in Siberia, Skvirsky was its representative in Washington. On the absorption of the Republic by the Bolsheviks, Skvirsky was the Soviet representative in Teheran. Skvirsky vanished like numberless other honest idealists who fought for freedom and who refused to submit to the demands of the brutal ruler.

The majority of Jews remained outside the Club and completely unorganised. Some began to think that a Jewish association of some sort was necessary in order to bring these people together and to give them a common interest and aim. Thus about 15 men met one day in a private home and decided to establish what later became known as the Jewish Workers' Association. The name of the organisation somewhat restricted the membership, because those who were in business on their own would not join, but their numbers were small.

The name, Jewish Workers' Association, was adopted not only because it was euphonious, but because most of the Jewish immigrants at that time were manual labourers. Here it should be explained how great and profound was

the influence of the political group of Jews upon the rest of the community. The petty traders of Russia and the Luft-mentschen of all countries seemed quite content to do a labourer's job for the then existing wage of 8/- per day. They worked in the freezing rooms of Meat Works, joined gangs of workers recruited in Brisbane for the seasonal slaughtering period in Darwin. No labour was too hard. Even men like Skvirsky worked as a porter in the Queensland Railways.

To engage in some small business appeared equal to a betrayal of the principles of Socialism, with which they became acquainted for the first time in the Jewish Workers' Association. There, too, they began to understand the true relationship between capital and labour, and learned of the aims and objects of Socialism. It was in the small but closely-knit Jewish organisation that these Jews acquired a new dignity and a feeling of solidarity with workers throughout the world. As workers, the Jews joined Australian trade unions and felt safer because of the protection by their fellow-unionists. The feeling of being outsiders in a strange land began to disappear as they met and worked with fellow-men of this country. In fact, they learned that which the Jewish Socialist Party, the Bund, taught Jews in Poland and Lithuania.

The word Socialist, in Russia, commanded respect and admiration. To be a Socialist meant self-renunciation and a devotion to an Ideal; it also meant arrest, incarceration, exile and even death. In Brisbane the people could pursue at least some of the Socialist ideals without risk yet be spiritually allied to that band of fearless fighters for freedom and justice who were not afraid to announce their opposition to the Tsar himself!

So it was that some of these Jews became, probably for the first time in their lives, conscious idealists, and this devotion to the great ideal—the liberation of humanity from oppression, fear and want—remained with some of them to this day.

The next step in the task of the Jewish Workers' Association was the establishment of the library. Money was collected from the members, who gave freely, and books were ordered from America and from Poland. Yiddish newspapers arrived from America, and the *Forverts* made its first appearance in Brisbane. Books in Yiddish and in Russian were soon obtainable from the library, and again, for the first time in the history of Bris-

bane, such books were in circulation. Yiddish literature came to the small community, and the attitude towards these books was one of reverence. Those who saw Hebrew print only in prayer books regarded these books as Sephorim and not as story books. The demand for reading matter was great, and even those who did not belong to the Association availed themselves of the books.



HYMAN PORTRATE

The next enterprise was the production of a Yiddish play. An English Jew, Hyman Portrate, who had some experience on the amateur stage in London, conceived the idea of producing Goldfaden's *Di Kishefmachern*, *The Witch*. The Jewish Workers' Association provided the actors. It was very crude material from which the cast had to be built. Siberian Jews had to be taught to speak Yiddish as well as act. The prompter stumbled over every Hebrew word and the producer knew nothing about stagecraft. Yet the desire and enthusiasm were there and the play was produced. Never before had Brisbane Jews seen a play in Yiddish in their city. Those who had lived there for many years, but who originally came from England or

Russia, felt deeply touched, nostalgic feeling re-awakened in their hearts; the longing for the almost forgotten past brought back to them by the Yiddish language. The play was a great success financially and spiritually, and thus in 1914 the first Yiddish play was produced in Brisbane.

During the Christmas holidays, hundreds of Russians came to Brisbane from the country, where they worked on railway construction or on sugar plantations. They congregated in the Russian Club, listened to lectures, engaged in discussions, but felt hungry for some Russian entertainment. The Jewish Workers Association decided to produce a play in Russian. It selected Chirikov's drama, *Evrei, The Jews*. The choice was intended to serve a threefold purpose: to provide the entertainment the people longed for, to raise funds for the library, and to show the Russians what a Pogrom looked like. *The Jews* is not a great play, but it was written by a non-Jew who was stirred to his depths by the injustice and brutality perpetrated against the Jews in Russia. Chirikov apparently felt that his play may atone, if only in a slight degree, for the bestial conduct of his fellow-Russians. For the production of this play there was no difficulty in finding suitable actors. The whole cast was Jewish, the audience for the most part Russian. The play was produced in the Alliance Hall in South Brisbane, and the impression left upon the people was deep and lasting. The propaganda value of the play could not be properly estimated, but it was great, no doubt. Sergei Alimov, who years later was proclaimed the People's Poet by the Soviet Government (Narodni Poet), wrote a glowing review, making, of course, due allowance for the inexperience of the actors. So this, too, was an historical event, because it was for the first time in the history of Queensland, if not of Australia, that a play was produced in the Russian language.

This branch of the Association's activities continued with the production of Sholem Asch's *With the Stream*, and a comedy by Sholem Aleichem. For the Russian section of the community the Workers' Association produced a propaganda play, Osip Dimov's *The Eternal Wanderer* (Vechni Strannik).

That this propaganda bore fruit there were many proofs. The theme of the play was discussed and debated by the Russians, and they began to realise how little they really knew about the Jews in Russia.

The newspaper, too, was not neglected. Translations of Yiddish short stories were printed there regularly. Some of them were taken from the library books such as Abrohm Reisin, but most of them were translated for that purpose, and Russians who knew nothing of Yiddish literature began to read and appreciate its quality.

The membership of the Association did not increase, because there was no influx of immigrants during the years of war. The strength of the small group lay in the enthusiasm of the members who had taken upon themselves a Herculean task and had accomplished it with credit to themselves.

Those Jews who sought spiritual satisfaction in religion attended the Synagogue, but felt themselves there as poor relations. The service was strange, the sermons incomprehensible. They felt restrained, unable to "let themselves go" as they did in their old home Shul. These Jews felt upset and unsatisfied, and the only way out of their difficulty, as they saw it, was to build their own House of Worship where they could pray in a manner suitable to their needs.

The settlement of the Russian Jews was, at that time, located in Deshon Street, South Brisbane. Why that particular locality was chosen no one knew. There was nothing to recommend it and it, no doubt, happened quite by accident. Probably a Jew bought a house there because it was cheap, and the next Jew settled there because he wanted to have a Jewish neighbour. In 1914, Deshon Street was locally known as Little Jerusalem. In that street one could hear Yiddish and Russian spoken loudly, and one could smell the titilating aroma of Jewish cooking. These seemingly unimportant details have in all probability brought relief to the lonely and often bewildered immigrants, who were torn from their natural surroundings and who tried to adapt themselves to the new environment.

The erection of a Synagogue became a reality when a wooden structure was built in Deshon Street, and the small community of Brisbane was split in two. Later the building was enlarged to contain a hall for meetings and a school. On the whole it was probably a great mistake, but the newcomers felt a desire to be *Balabatim far Zieh* and the two communities lead a peaceful and friendly, but separate, existence to this day.

The action showed the vitality of the Eastern Jew, his desire and ability to create a life he wants, free from

interference by anybody. The same thing happened in America when the Eastern European Jews broke away from the dominating German Jews. They refused to surrender their individuality and insisted on leading the mode of life they considered best for themselves and for their children. Had the new arrivals been content to accept the existing conditions in Australia there would not have been a Kadimah in Melbourne or a Folk Centre in Sydney, no Yiddish schools or a Yiddish press.

During the war of 1914-18, the Russians as Allies enjoyed certain privileges. Some Jews joined the Army, others continued working, but with the coming of the Russian Revolution a radical change took place within the community and in its relations with the outside world.

New hopes were born in the hearts of men, hopes of returning to Russia, to one's old homes and families. Men believed sincerely that a new Russia would arise from the ashes of the old order, a free Russia purged of all evil; a Russia where the Jew could live free from discrimination and oppression; a Russia where in the company of his fellow-men he would be able to work and create the State men envisaged.

It was a period of unbounded enthusiasm and of emotionalism. Political exiles began to prepare actively for their return to Russia. They demanded of the Kerensky Government to be repatriated at the Government expense.

While these negotiations were going on, the Russian Consul in Melbourne was forced to resign and a Melbourne Jew, Thomas, was appointed Consul. Soon afterwards he, too, was replaced by a Committee headed by Boris Skvirsky. Thus a member of the Jewish Workers' Association became the representative of the new Russia in Australia. Then came the Bolshevik seizure of power, and the Russian Club was thrown into confusion. Members of the Club argued and debated. Disunity appeared in the ranks of the Russians, and the Club itself became a place of discord. Meanwhile, a ship was chartered, and all those who could prove their political affiliations and wished to return were provided with free tickets. Close on 500 persons, men and women, left Australia, their hearts filled with high hopes. The Jewish Workers' Association lost some of its active members and mentors. The immigrant community in Brisbane felt orphaned. The moving spirit had departed, yet some people felt a deep relief. It seemed as though a barrier had been removed and now they could please them-

slvs as to what thy did. It seemed as though they were released from a social obligation and could now give free rein to their desires and ambitions.

With the conclusion of a separate Peace between Russia and Germany, the Australian Government's attitude towards the Russians changed radically. The Russians were no longer Allies and were required to register with the local police. Attacks in newspapers began to appear, frequently hinting at "German Gold." They even questioned the sources from which the inhabitants of Deshon Street drew their money to buy "expensive" toys for their children. An attack was made on the Russian Club, and some windows were smashed. The Russian newspaper was closed by the Government and the type confiscated. Under the then existing War Precautions Act, some Russians were arrested and deported without trial.

The membership of the Jewish Workers' Association dwindled still further by the departure of people from Brisbane and, due to the smallness of the community, there was no one left to take their place.

A few devoted men tried to carry on, but the task proved hopeless. Those Jews who remained in Brisbane did not require an organisation of that type, yet they were unable to create something different or better. So organised life reverted to the Synagogue, until years later other Jewish movements came to take their place side by side with it.

There was nothing to replace the unique Jewish Workers' Association, but by then, unfortunately or otherwise, there were no Jewish workers left in Brisbane.

The Association fulfilled a necessary function and seemed to outlive its usefulness to the new community. So came to an end a chapter of Jewish history in Australia, a chapter now nigh forgotten. The only reminder of the time and activities of that group are some books to be found in the homes of Brisbane Jews with the stamp upon their pages bearing the legend:

"The Jewish Workers' Association, Brisbane."

Origins of the Semitic Studies Department, Melbourne University

By RAYMOND APPLE, B.A., LL.B.

(Read before the Victorian Branch of the Society,
18th February, 1958)

The University of Melbourne was founded in July, 1854, and opened on 13th April, 1855, with chairs in Classics, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, and History and Law. Hugh Childers and Redmond Barry, the rival claimants for the honour of having founded the University,¹ were both men of ideals, and their supporters boasted that the new University would make Melbourne "the glory of the South and the civilizer of the East".²

In their plan the establishment of teaching facilities in Hebrew was one of the ultimate aims they set themselves. But two chief obstacles stood in the way.³

First, as Geoffrey Blainey states in *The University of Melbourne: A Centenary Portrait*:

The university council was torn between ideals and reality. Its ideal of a university was a home of liberal education where the powers and gifts of mind and soul were developed; but it had to face the fact that a materialistic colony wanted its university to inculcate the knowledge and skills of the useful professions. The university acknowledged the popular clamour by establishing its flimsy courses in law and engineering though it awarded no degrees in these courses and appointed no professors. It asked the government, furthermore, to finance chairs of agriculture, modern languages and medicine, even toying with the idea of creating a chair of Hebrew and Oriental Literature in order to facilitate commerce between Australia and Asia and to train legal interpreters for the 40,000 Chinamen on the goldfields. The government refused to grant the money for these professorships.⁴

The desire to facilitate commerce between Australia and Asia by means of a chair of Hebrew and Oriental Literature is ascribed to Redmond Barry.⁵ But what we know of the wide cultural interests of Barry⁶ makes it sound rather out of character for him to use this materialistic argument. We can only conclude that Barry, feeling sure the Government would not accept the proposal for cultural reasons alone, tried to cast his argument in a slightly more acceptable mould. In addition, attitudes towards the Chinamen on the goldfields were such that the Government would be more likely to wish to dispose of the Chinese altogether, rather than show any interest in providing them with interpreters.

The second obstacle in the way of founding a Hebrew chair was a problem of far-reaching public policy. Hebrew had been taught at Oxford and Cambridge since 1540, but though the founders of the Melbourne University hoped to foster piety and morality amongst the students, they were wary of attempting this through the teaching of Semitics, Bible and theology. There was no State Church, and the place of religion in education gave rise to frequent political controversy.⁷ To avoid suspicion of sectarianism and so as not to alienate the support of some of the denominations, the University provided that its professors could not be in holy orders nor lecture on religious topics inside or outside the University. This policy of extreme secularism was reflected in the lower stages of the education system when, in 1872, State education was set up on a free-compulsory-and-secular basis and became more secular than in most other parts of the British Empire.⁸

The residential colleges, when established in the University grounds in 1872 (Trinity), 1881 (Ormond), 1888 (Queen's) and 1918 (Newman) were governed by the Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and Roman Catholic Churches respectively. Each had a theological hall or was associated with a separate theological college, and the Old Testament was a major study in each.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, religion was no longer such a live political issue in Victoria, and in some circles it was felt that the time was ripe to reopen the question of providing courses in Semitics at the University itself. Thus, in November, 1913, the Synod of the Anglican Archdiocese voted in favour of establishing a department of Semitic Languages.

As reported in Diocesan Synod proceedings for 1913 (kindly copied for me by the Registrar of the Diocese):

The Rev. Frank Lynch moved (on behalf of Dr. Leeper):—"That this Synod strongly commends to wealthy Victorians, as a worthy object of their liberality, the endowment in our national university of Professorships of Semitic languages and Hellenistic Greek, as being likely to increase generally in the community the interest in Biblical studies and to furnish greater facilities for prosecuting them in a thorough and systematic manner."

The Rev. M. J. R. Bennett seconded the motion, and emphasised the value to religion of these studies. Hebrew and Chaldee were necessary for the study of the Old Testament. Arabic was required for the criticism of the Q'uran. The Assyrian and Babylonian language revealed the history of times contemporary with the Old Testament. A mastery of Comparative Religion would be necessary for the coming clergyman, and the study of these languages would

tremendously help. Hellenistic Greek was necessary for the student of Greek as well as the Christian student.⁹

The Rev. C. G. Brazier felt the question was more one for the theological colleges than for the University itself, but an amendment which he moved gained no seconder, and the motion was carried.

The proposal was supported by Moses Moses in an editorial in the *Jewish Herald*.¹⁰

The endowment by the Jews of Victoria of a chair of Hebrew in the University of Melbourne—or, failing that, substantial assistance on their part in establishing such a professorship—would be an altogether honourable testimony both of their public spirit as citizens and of the sincerity of their attachment to the spiritual treasures handed down by their ancestors and revered by the whole civilized world as a mighty factor in the development and progress of humanity.

Nothing concrete was achieved at this stage: one of several reasons may be that a University course in Hebrew had to be preceded logically by the introduction of Hebrew as a subject for the Public Examinations. As retailed by Rabbi J. Danglow in the *Journal* of this Society,¹¹ in 1921 S. J. Slutzkin offered the University £1,000 if Hebrew were adopted as a subject for these examinations. Sir John Monash was then Vice-Chancellor, and he wrote to Rabbi Danglow informing him of the Council's approval. However, the matter had to be referred to the Schools Board and the Faculty of Arts for detailed consideration, and it was not until 1924 that the first examinations could be arranged. In subsequent years small numbers of Jewish students, trained mainly in the classes of the United Jewish Education Board and the St. Kilda Hebrew School, sat for the Hebrew examinations in Intermediate, Leaving and Leaving Honours (as Matriculation was then known), with the examiners usually being the local Jewish ministers.

The proposals to establish a full department at the University itself were not forgotten, however, and interest was renewed as the Jewish and general community became aware of the ability of Dr. Maurice David Goldman, who had reached Australia as a refugee from Germany in 1938.

Goldman was born at Kolo, Poland, in January, 1898. After a brief period as a medical student at Warsaw, he entered Berlin University to study Semitic Languages and gained his Doctorate of Philosophy at the age of 24. From 1932 until 1938, he was lecturer in Hebrew and Aramaic at the Jewish Teachers' Seminary, Berlin, and from 1935 to 1938 also lectured in Islam, Arab history and Ethiopic at

the Rabbinical Academy of Berlin. He published in Germany a Hebrew translation and commentary on the Ethiopic Book of Jubilees, and also a five-volume outline of Hebrew, entitled *Hebraisch*.¹²



A. H. SICREE

Dr. Goldman taught at the Temple Beth Israel, the Caulfield Jewish School and the Bialik Hebrew School, but although he had a fine insight into the child mind, his real sphere was the higher academic one, and he went to see Professor A. R. Chisholm, who was then Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University. Professor Chisholm has stated that "Half an hour's conversation made it clear to me that it would be a disaster for the University to miss the chance of getting a scholar of Goldman's eminence".¹³ Goldman was given a post in the Censorship Office, and in 1942 was appointed Guest Lecturer in Hebrew and Arabic at the University. Dr. Goldman's courses were not degree

subjects: students attended only for interest's sake and could gain no credit in them towards the requirements of their degrees. However, even though the number of students was, therefore, small, these courses brought Semitic culture to the notice of University, Jewish and other circles.

At a discussion in 1942 at the home of Mr. Benzion Patkin, suggestions were made that the Jewish community should be approached to establish a chair and department of Semitic Studies, and eighteen months later, on 23rd September, 1943, Arthur S. Rose convened a meeting at his home of prominent academic figures and members of the Jewish community. Mr. Alec Masel was in the chair, and a committee, which included Professor Chisholm, Dr. Greta Hort, and the Rev. A. Fraser, Chaplain to the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, was elected to further the proposal.¹⁴ Professor Chisholm explained:

From the academic point of view it is impossible to study languages seriously without studying Mediterranean civilization, and this must inevitably include the Semitic civilizations. Western culture owes an incalculable debt to the Semitic world, to both the Hebraic and Arabic branches. Anyone with culture in the English-speaking world has been brought up, either consciously or unconsciously, on the Old Testament, and thus cannot have a detached interest in the Semitic world.

Professor Chisholm stated that it was not sufficient to provide lectures for interest's sake alone: students had to be given the incentive to take courses in Semitics through their being given credit in the Arts course, and he added:

The University is a poor institution, and it is an expensive matter to endow a new department. But if its endowment were guaranteed it would only be a question of whether it would be acceptable to the University. I feel fairly confident that it would have a good reception in the Arts Faculty. A good deal depends on the attitude of the Dean and I am very glad that I, as a Professor of Language, happen to be Dean.

Commending the scheme, the *Jewish Herald* felt that the department would prove a great stimulus to Jewish education, and suggested that its establishment be made the occasion for overhauling the Jewish educational system in order to equip students adequately to take Hebrew at the University.¹⁵ The convener of the project, Arthur Rose, wrote in support of the *Jewish Herald's* editorial,¹⁶ and henceforth the movement did coincide with and in part spurred on a number of moves for educational reform,¹⁷ which were led, among others, by Mr. B. Patkin, then chairman of the Education Committee of the Victorian

Jewish Advisory Board (now the Victorian Jewish Board of Deputies). The existing facilities for education were publicised, new centres were opened by the United Jewish Education Board and other bodies, a teachers' course was commenced, and even a short-lived teachers' union was founded by a group of strictly orthodox rabbis and teachers.

In October, 1944, it was announced that an anonymous donor had endowed a Chair of Semitic Studies at the University.¹⁸ The anonymous donor was Abraham Hyam Sicree, of the A.B.Y. Manufacturing Co., and the means by which the endowment was made are described by Professor Chisholm in these words:

One day a rather shy Jewish businessman, Mr. Abraham Sicree, called at my room in the Old Arts building and asked me if I thought the Council would accept the offer of a chair to be subsidised by him for five years. I was overwhelmed, but when I assured him that I would move heaven and earth to have the offer accepted, he was overcome with gratitude! Such is the modesty of really generous men.¹⁹

The movement had received some support from the general press and public, and leading non-Jewish figures like Professor Chisholm, Dr. Hort and some Church and academic figures had been untiring in their efforts. In a letter in which Professor Chisholm elaborates for me some points relative to the movement, he writes:

One salient point that emerged at the "Chair" meetings was that there *could* be a danger of the Chair's being used for putting the Arab point of view, to the detriment of Israel. In answer to this I pointed out that the field where we would have to seek a professor would almost inevitably be a Jewish one, even if the curriculum was to include Arabic (Dr. Goldman's name was not mentioned, of course, as I knew that the University would insist on *making* an appointment: it never creates a chair for an individual, however brilliant). By making these remarks I lost, as I anticipated, the support of some of my Lebanese and Syrian friends, but I knew that our main hopes had to be centred in the Jewish community, which was much more active, numerous and enthusiastic.

The cause of the Semitics Department became Professor Chisholm's own cause. It formed his topic when he addressed the first official luncheon of the Y.M.H.A.,²⁰ he wrote about it regularly in the Jewish press, and he pleaded for the support of the department in many circles. Applications for the post of professor were called for from all over the world, and while these were receiving consideration, in March, 1945, Sir Charles Lowe, as Chancellor of the University, made public in a Conferring of Degrees

address that the hitherto unknown donor of the chair was Abraham Sicree, who wished the chair to be known as the Lazarus and Abraham Sicree Chair.²¹

On 10th May, 1945, the University announced the appointment of Dr. Goldman as the Lazarus and Abraham Sicree Professor. Making the announcement public, *The Argus* stated:²²

Semitic languages provide a logical background for the study of Indo-European languages. Philological studies in Melbourne have been based almost exclusively on European languages, without any outside standard of comparison such as will now be provided by the study of Semitic languages which stand near enough to the European tongues to give the comparison a clear meaning. This widening of the linguistic schools in the Faculty of Arts gives the University an opportunity of moving towards a real School of Linguistics such as those that have made London and Paris famous.

On 1st July, 1945, Professor Goldman took up duties, and later that month courses in Hebrew Part I and Arabic Part I were announced for 1946, subject to formal ratification by the University Council.²³ In October, Professor Goldman went abroad for about three months to visit Israel and study latest developments in teaching methods, as well as to establish links with overseas schools of Semitics.²⁴

As finally developed, the curriculum of the department was as follows:

For students in Pass courses, there were Hebrew Parts I, II and III, and Arabic Parts I, II and III. In Hebrew Part I, the course comprised Biblical prose, texts, Hebrew accidence and syntax, modern Hebrew prose, simple conversation and essays, as well as Biblical history to the Babylonian captivity (or an outline of Biblical literature) and lectures in archaeology. Students of Hebrew Part II would take Biblical poetry, post-exilic Hebrew, Mishnah, contemporary Hebrew literature, and Jewish history from the destruction of the first Temple to the end of the Gaonate. Additional subjects for Part III were mediaeval Hebrew literature, the Gaonate and Spanish epochs, and essays in Hebrew.

The Honours courses provided supplementary lectures in Aramaic Parts I and II, on Mediaeval, Enlightenment and Renaissance literature in Part III, and modern literature and history from 1942 in Part IV. In their third year, Honours students would also take Syriac, and in their fourth year Ethiopic and Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages.²⁵

Professor Goldman was one of 20 new professors appointed in the post-war decade; of these, eight were in the Faculty of Arts, redressing the long neglect of the humanities.²⁶ What Redmond Barry had hardly dared to express had materialised: a channel had been established for intellectual contact with non-European cultures.

It is not part of my task here to pursue the subject further than this point, nor to evaluate the work of the Semitic Studies department in subsequent years. After the expiration of the five years for which the chair had been endowed by Abraham Sicree,²⁷ the Professorial Board recommended, and the University Council agreed, that the department should continue as an integral part of the Faculty of Arts and as a responsibility of the University.²⁸ On 15th September, 1957, Professor Goldman died, and his death evoked many expressions of deep regret and many fine obituary tributes from within Australia and far outside it. At present, Mr. N. Milne is Acting Head of the department, and applications have been called for the position of Professor.

(Since this paper was delivered, Rev. Dr. John Bowman, formerly of Leeds, has been appointed to the Chair and is expected to arrive in August, 1959.—ED.)

NOTES

1. See G. Blainey & N. Olver, *The University of Melbourne: A Centenary Portrait*, Melb., 1956; G. Blainey, *A Centenary History of the University of Melbourne*, Melb., 1957; also E. Scott, *History of the University of Melbourne*, Melb., 1934.
2. Cited Blainey & Olver, p. 1.
3. In addition, it was felt that a University course in Hebrew could achieve little unless adequate facilities were available to gain an elementary knowledge of the language.
4. Blainey & Olver, pp. 5-6.
5. Blainey, *Centenary History*, p. 22.
6. He was a member of the Supreme Court of Victoria and a founder of the Public Library of Victoria.
7. See the standard works on Victorian history.
8. Blainey & Olver, pp. 11-13.
9. I have slightly condensed this report.
10. *The Jewish Herald*, 7th November, 1913, p. 400.
11. Vol. IV, No. 4, pp. 173-4.
12. See *Melbourne University Gazette*, vol. XIII, No. 3 (November, 1957), pp. 43-4; *B'nai B'rith Bulletin*, Sydney, December, 1957; *Babel* (Mod. Lang. Teachers' Assoc. of Vic.), No. 6, November, 1957; *The Australian Jewish News*, 20th September, 1957, p. 36; *The Australian Jewish Herald*, 20th September, 1957, p. 4; etc.
13. *Babel*, *op cit.*, p. i.
14. *The Australian Jewish Herald*, 29th July, 1943, p. 2.
15. *Ibid.*, 20th October, 1943, p. 4.
16. *Ibid.*, 29th October, 1943, p. 3.
17. See issues of the Jewish Press of 1943 and subsequent years.
18. *The Australian Jewish News*, 29th March, 1945, p. 7.
19. *Babel*, *op cit.*
20. *The Australian Jewish Herald*, 27th October, 1944, p. 2.
21. *Ibid.*, 29th March, 1945, p. 4; *The Australian Jewish News*, same date, p. 7.

22. 11th May, 1945, p. 3.
23. *The Australian Jewish Herald*, 20th July, 1945, p. 2.
24. *Ibid*, 28th September, 1945, p. 3.
25. I have not summarised the courses in Arabic. For full details see Handbook of the Faculty of Arts.
26. Blainey, *Centenary History*, p. 187.
27. Abraham Sicree died in September, 1952. See obituary in the *Journal of this Society*, vol. 3, p. 375.
28. *Melbourne University Gazette*, *op cit*.

Obituaries

GERALD DE VAHL DAVIS

The sudden death on 22nd November, 1958, of Gerald de Vahl Davis was a shock to the Jewish community of N.S.W., whose lay leader he had been and who held him in the highest regard.

Born in Melbourne on 8th April, 1897, he was the son of Abraham de Vahl Davis, from whom he received an intense Jewish education and a love of his people, coupled with a certain pride in being able to trace descent from Saul Vahl, famous in the history of the Jews of Poland in the sixteenth century.

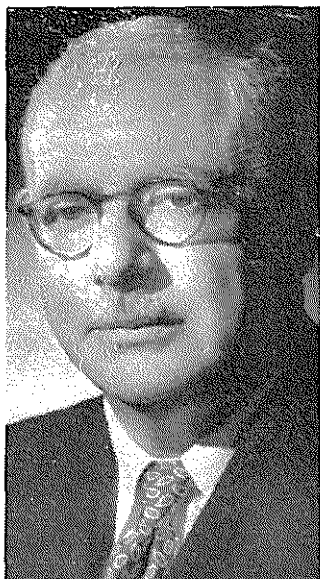
He was educated at Sydney Grammar School and the University of Sydney, where he graduated Bachelor of Agricultural Science in 1921. Davis commenced his University course in 1915, but enlisted the following year and served as a Sergeant in the 6th Australian Light Horse in Egypt and Palestine. He was wounded in 1918, and actually commenced his University work again in April, 1919, whilst still in a military hospital. In World War II he served in the Mobile Signals, with the rank of Captain.

He was the founder of the Australian Institute of Agricultural Science, giving devoted service to it ever since its establishment but particularly during his terms as President of the N.S.W. Branch in 1937 and of the Federal body in 1947.

A tribute to him by Dr. Eric Edwards in the March, 1959 issue of the Institute's Journal merits quotation in full:

"My close association with Davis during this period engendered a very high regard for his mental agility and the clear-cut incisive qualities of his mind. In later years it was my privilege to serve on many other Committees with Gerald Davis, particularly during the four years the

Institute Office of Management was located in Sydney, and it was always a revelation and an inspiration to see him at work. He was easily the best committee man I have known. His knowledge of procedure was flawless. His thinking was direct and clear, and I have never known anyone who could frame a resolution with such clarity and speed or who could simplify a mass of confused ideas with such unerring skill and dexterity."



GERALD de VAHL DAVIS
(Block by courtesy "Australian Jewish Times.")

Apart from his religious activities, which included the Vice-Presidency and Directorship of Jewish Education of the Central Synagogue and the Presidency of the Temple Emanuel (of which he was one of the founders) in 1946, he was prominent in Jewish public affairs for over 40 years. He was a member of the N.S.W. Jewish Advisory Board before the formation of the Board of Deputies, of which, as a Deputy of Temple Emanuel, he had been a foundation member and first Chairman of the Public Relations Com-

mittee. He served in that latter office for two years until, in January, 1948, he was elected Hon. Treasurer, retaining the position in the elections in June, 1950, and from then until his election as Vice-President in January, 1953. He became President in April, 1955, and held the office until he was granted leave of absence in October, 1956, due to ill-health. He finally resigned, to the regret of the Board, on 12th April, 1957. From the formation of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, he had been a councillor and had held important executive office in that body.

He also was Chairman of Mutual Farms Pty. Ltd., an organisation for settling Jewish migrants on the land in N.S.W., and he was a former Acting President of the Jewish Welfare Society. He also served on the Council of the N.S.W. Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women and helped to establish the Rehabilitation Trust Fund, of which he was a member of the Board of Governors up to the time of his death.

His technical knowledge went with a keen business sense, and he enjoyed the greatest consideration in both commercial and official circles. Mrs. Davis has been informed that he had been advised a few days before his death of the French Government's intention to make him a Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur in gratitude for his services to commercial relations between Australia and France.

Davis also gave long service to the Woollahra Council, of which he was an alderman for twelve years, including two terms as Deputy Mayor. He showed great interest in the work of the U.N. Association, particularly in connection with the Food and Agricultural Organisation.

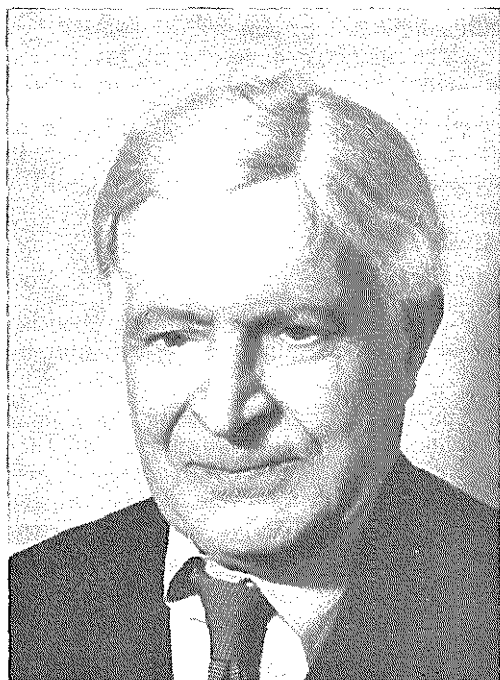
His life was one of devoted service, his disposition happy and kindly, and his leadership effective. As one of the advisors on communal affairs even after his retirement, he retained a high place in the esteem and affection of those who served with him in the community and in organisations which benefited from his experience.

Mrs. Davis and his son, Dr. Grahame de Vahl Davis, survive him. The Society expresses its sympathy to them and joins with New South Wales Jewry in deploring his loss.

DR. M. A. SCHALIT

The death occurred in Sydney, on 13th May, 1959, of Dr. Moishe Aaron Schalit, at the age of 84.

Dr. Schalit was born in Russia and, with his family, subsequently migrated to Palestine, where they became one of the founder families of Rishon-le-Zion. Subsequently



Dr. M. A. SCHALIT
(From the frontispiece to "Travelled Roads.")

he went to Geneva, where he studied medicine. On a visit to Vienna he heard Dr. Herzl, who was then campaigning for a Jewish State.

After travelling through the Continent, Dr. Schalit came to Australia in 1901 and settled in Melbourne, where he became highly esteemed. He acted as physician to many

families who came to regard him as a friend and guide. At the same time, he was active in the life of the community. A staunch Zionist all his life, he was connected with much Zionist endeavour.

Later he settled in the Monaro district and eventually in Sydney, where he continued his tradition of service to the Jewish people. He was a Hebrew scholar and always interested in cultural pursuits.

In celebration of his eightieth birthday in 1954, Dr. Schalit published an autobiography entitled *Travelled Roads*, in which he gave a record of his experiences in Russia, Palestine, Switzerland, France and Australia.

As a medical practitioner, he specialised in psychiatry and was one of the first in Melbourne to be associated with the furthering of Mental Hygiene and Child Guidance Movements.

In N.S.W. he helped to pioneer the work of the Pre-Marital Bureau through the Racial Hygiene Movement.

Dr. Schalit is survived by his widow, Mrs. Ruby Rich-Schalit, a well-known communal worker, and a son and daughter.

He was particularly active among the Friends of the Hebrew University and as a supporter of the cultural activities in Temple Emanuel. This Society, which owes him a debt for his work on the Jewish aspects of the Monaro District (*Journal*, Vol. 2, p. 161), expresses its sympathy to his family.

He was a Foundation Member and continued as a member of this Society up to the time of his death.

**Benefactions have been received in memory
of the following:**

ERNEST SAMUEL MARKS, C.B.E.

ADOLPH AND AMELIA ALEXANDER.

GERALD AND ISABELLE BENJAMIN.

ERNEST R. BARUCH.

SIMON JOSEPH GUSS.

SIR SAMUEL AND LADY COHEN.

HYAM SHOLOM AND KATHLEEN HIMMELFERB.

HERMAN AND RACHEL AHRONSON.

WILLIAM L. AND GLADYS N. COHEN.

ELIAS AND LEBA GREEN.

SIR BENJAMIN BENJAMIN AND LADY BENJAMIN.

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—(From the Rules of the Society.)