

GODFREY ALEXANDER

Sydney's First Chiropodist

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Long before the Universities of Britain and Europe accepted Jewish students many talented members of that faith entered, improved or pioneered branches of the healing arts not then established at academic level. They were particularly skilled in dentistry and chiropody. Until the mid-nineteenth century these two professions were often practised in conjunction with each other; neither had any form of formal training and neither had yet become established as a true profession.

Highly regarded among the early practitioners was Abraham Durlacher. Fleeing from Baden in Germany in the late eighteenth century he settled in Bath, Somerset, also a spa area, and made a reputation for himself as an operator on the teeth and corns. The Wolff family were established in London in much the same way for three generations, through the best part of the nineteenth century.

A considerable number of these pioneers were to be found at this time in the more liberal countries of western Europe, having made their way from middle and eastern European countries to escape from the traditional forms of persecution. Many were highly skilled in their vocations and quickly became leaders within it. Four generations of the Durlacher family were appointed as surgeon chiropodists to four successive British monarchs. Tobias Koen was similarly honoured in France, being *chirurgien-pedicure* to Napoleon Buonaparte and to two French kings.

During the eighteen-thirties and forties most of the West European countries were involved in economic depressions or revolutions and this gave rise to yet another wave of migration. This time it was the sons or grandsons of European Jews who moved on to other English speaking lands, mainly the United States and Australia.

The earliest American chiropodists were itinerant in their mode of practice and during the eighteen thirties and forties several newspaper advertisements give details of them. The *Pennsylvania Inquirer* ran one for a David Cohen who saw his patients at a room in a boarding house. In 1843 the same newspaper published a classified advertisement that showed Julius Davidson as practising in

rooms in Philadelphia on a permanent basis. Davidson is usually credited as being the first chiropodist in America to do so.

After little more than fifty years of European settlement, Australia did not offer many opportunities for luxury trades, especially those requiring a substantial population. Those who practised any sort of chiropody in those early days would have done so in conjunction with some other trade. Albert Beirens, a Jewish chiropodist from London, advertised in a Melbourne trade directory in 1857, but by the time the next edition was compiled he had moved on. Ten years passed before another attempt was made to start a full time chiropody practice in Melbourne, and this was done by Victor Schobbert, who opened in 62 Collins Street, what became a family business.

Sydney received its first chiropodist by a somewhat indirect route. At about the same time that Napoleon's Empire was being divided up, a ladies' tailor called Israel Alexander was planning to get married. He and his bride, Hannah Lyons, were married in an English provincial town and afterwards moved to London. They had two sons called Amos and Godfrey who were to make themselves a new life in Australia.

When Godfrey was seventeen years old he and his brother, Amos, sailed from England and landed at Port Phillip. Unfortunately the passenger lists are available only from after 1849, which means that it is not possible to trace the name of the ship they arrived on. After landing they went to Portland Bay township and opened the "London Mart", the first draper shop in that district. A few years later these pioneer drapers moved to the larger town of Geelong and began a number of drapery and clothing businesses. Until 1854 their main store stood on Market Square at the south side of Malop Street.

It seems reasonable to suppose that Godfrey became a substantial and respected citizen. Records show that in August, 1849, he was appointed as a trustee of land granted for use as a burial ground for the Jewish community. He subsequently became the Warden in 1854 of the first synagogue to be built in Geelong. Four years previously he had married Miriam Levy at the first marriage ceremony at which a qualified person officiated. This was Asher Hyem Hart, an honorary reader of the Hebrew Congregation in Melbourne. The Alexanders then set up a home in Moorabool Street which is now in the heart of the Geelong business centre.

The year of the Alexander marriage coincided with some events that changed both the political and economic scene in their new homeland. First, the Port Phillip district separated from New South Wales and became the new Colony of Victoria. Next, the biggest gold rush known in history started close enough to Geelong to have a considerable effect on its economy and every day life. This would have contributed enormously to the prosperity of anyone in business, especially a business that supplied goods to the diggers who had money and few places to spend it.

The Alexander family remained in Geelong for the busiest part of the gold rush era but the local directory, compiled in 1858 shows that they had moved.

On 4th January, 1862, the following classified advertisement appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

"Corns extracted without the slightest pain; defective nails and all impurities of the feet thoroughly cured by Mr Alexander, chiropodist, 324 George Street, Sydney."

The Sands Directory for 1863 lists the occupation of chiropodist for the first time; the first and only name to appear was G. Alexander of 324 George Street, Sydney. However, the directory of local residents had shown that the Alexanders had been living at 400 Pitt Street, possibly arriving during the year before the directory was compiled.

It could be interesting to speculate why a respected an apparently prosperous business man should move a great distance and begin a new career at a little known occupation in a strange city. Many possibilities have been considered and investigated. A thorough search of the Crown Law and Insolvency files show beyond all doubt that Alexander had not been in any kind of trouble with the law; nor had he been involved in a civil or insolvency action.

Why, after many years of apparent success in the drapery and clothing trades, did he take up chiropody, something not even remotely connected with his past experience. Be that as it may, it is just possible that there may be a perfectly simple explanation. Perhaps his business success had placed him in a position, financially, to satisfy a personal whim. Before the days of formal training for the chiropody profession it was quite common for newcomers to have no better reason or qualification for entering it. Organized training did not come to Australia for another seventy years. Until then the only practical experience that was available was gained by working as an

assistant to a practitioner. The only theory a beginner could obtain was from a very limited number of books. Only about three written in English would have been on sale at the time Alexander was starting to take an interest in chiropody. Durlacher's very good book "Treatise on Corns and Bunions" was first published in 1845, ran to many editions and reprints and could have been purchased quite easily in Melbourne or Sydney. Most of the surviving copies are to be found in American and English chiro-



George Street, looking north, at the time Alexander commenced his practice. No. 324 was on the right toward the top of the picture. The site is now a large Woolworth store.

pody schools. There was one little book that was both cheap and plentiful. That was a pocket-sized volume called "The Art of Preserving the Feet", written by an anonymous author calling himself "An Experienced Chiropodist". First published in 1818 it ran to many editions and a copy of the fourth edition may be seen at the Mitchell Library in Sydney.

Where and how Alexander gained some knowledge of his newly chosen vocation can only be guessed at. But it is to his credit that he stayed with it for forty years and apparently prospered. The rooms at 324 George Street were not used for chiropody purposes for long. Less than

a year after Alexander's advertisement appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* he moved to premises at 96 Bathurst Street. He was to move his place of work seven more times before his death. When the Alexander family first arrived in Sydney they occupied a home at 400 Pitt Street, then a residential area. At this time there would have been six children under the age of ten. They stayed at this address for the next fifteen years, when in 1885 they moved out to 625 Crown Street.

For his first twenty years as a chiropodist, Godfrey Alexander appeared to have no opposition to contend with. Some time during 1884 a John Dunlop appeared on the

A	CARD.—Mr. P. MILLER, Auctioneer, Estate and Commission Agent, George-street, Parramatta.
A	DOER'S (late with Doerper) Central Hair Dressing Room, 410, George-street, north of King-street.
A	DOER'S Eau Lustrale Hair Tonic Restorative. M. McMAHON, 410, George-street.
A	CARD.—Mrs. LOCKYER Removed to 8, O'Connell-street. Furnished Apartments. Partial Board.
A	ACCOUNTANT.—Mr. CHAPLIN, 15, Bigh-street. Partnership and other Accounts adjusted.
C	CORNS EXTRACTED, without the slightest pain; defective nails, and all imperfections of the feet, thoroughly cured, by Mr. ALEXANDER, chiropodist, 224, George-street, between King and Hunter streets.
D	R. BERNCASTLE, Surgeon and Dentist; at home from 9 to 11, 2 to 3, 6 to 8. 220, Macquarie-street.
D	DEGOTARDI'S "Sydney Printing House." Robbed-lane, opposite Margaret-street. Elegant, cheap, and expeditious printing.
F	ALLERDING, Practical Chronometer, Watch, and Clock Maker, 25, Hunter-street, three doors west of Pitt-street. Every description of marine and pocket chronometers re-sprung, adjusted, and rated.

A modest, almost ethical advertisement that was inserted in the Sydney Morning Herald on January 4th, 1862.

scene and began practice at 19 Hunter Street. From now on it appeared as though Alexander was trying to get premises as close to his old competitor as possible. From 410 George Street where he has moved to the year of Dunlop's arrival, he moved through three lots of rooms in Pitt Street getting closer to Hunter Street. By 1894, an ageing man by now, he succeeded in getting a room in Hunter Street at No. 11.

However, his old competitor stayed only another year or so in Hunter Street, for by 1895 he had retired and moved. Alexander's last move was to No. 15 in 1898, only

two doors from Dunlop's rooms. He was now seventy-eight years old and living at the Esplanade East in Manly. Early in 1900 he moved in with his youngest son, Abraham, at 22 Great Buckingham Street, Redfern. The Chiropody practice of forty years' standing was apparently allowed to lapse as none of the five Alexander sons followed their father's profession.

He died on 9th September, 1900, from the effects of old age. His ten children survived him, but his wife, Miriam, had pre-deceased him in 1880.

On 11th September, 1900, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported in the deaths column:

"9th September, 1900, at his residence at 22 Great Buckingham Street, Mr. Godfrey Alexander, in his 81st year, dearly beloved father of Mr. and Mrs. Louis Alexander of Enmore."

COBLES! BUNIONS!

Mr. ALBERT BEIREN, Chiropodist,

(LATE OF FALK HALL, LONDON.)

to inform the Ladies and Gentry of Melbourne that he can *effectually eradicate* cure *Soft Corns, Bunions, Defective Nails, without the slightest pain, nor any inconvenience* felt afterwards in walking; also, *enlarged toe joints*, whether arising from *bone* or other causes, restoring the *Foot* to its natural perfect form. *This system is* **acknowledged by the Medical Faculty to be entirely effectual.**

9 COLLINS STREET WEST, next Mr. Crute, Jeweller, and opposite P. Langrill and Co., Ironmongers.

Ladies' and Gentlemen waited upon at their own Residences.

From a Melbourne Trade Directory 1857.

A typical advertisement by a chiropodist of the same period.

When he died, Godfrey Alexander showed many signs of prosperity. It is quite feasible that he had other business interests besides chiropody. The fees charged by chiropodists during the latter half of the 19th century were usually one shilling for each foot and stayed at this level for many years.

During the early years he was in practice, he could have experienced hardship as a result of ignorance and prejudice. Very few of Sydney's citizens of that period would have had any knowledge of a chiropodist's duties. Even the so called respectable members of mid-Victorian society would have been reluctant to even admit to go to a non-medical man for any kind of treatment. On the

other hand he could have gained something by not having competition for his first twenty years in Sydney.

Whatever his degree of success, he succeeded in bringing up a family of ten children and was able for most of his time, to live in prosperous, middle class localities.

Alexander was unknown to local historians until 1965 when the writer was asked to write a history of chiropody in Australia. He seems to emerge as a modest, humanitarian man; the wording of his advertisements seems to suggest that, but, like so many unknown pioneers he contributed something in a small way, perhaps, to the comfort and well-being of life in Australia.

REFERENCES

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BOOK REVIEWS

“BACK TO COOMA CELEBRATIONS” by Felix F. Mitchell, Cooma, 1926, reprinted 1967 through the co-operation of the Cooma Municipal Council, Monaro Shire Council, Snowy River Shire Council.

It stands to the credit of the above-named authorities to have reprinted this small booklet which traces one hundred years of the Cooma District history.

This supplements what is of concern to Australian Jewish History, the not very accurate paper by Dr. M. A. Schalit, “A glimpse into early Jewish history in Monaro”, published in Volume II, Part 4 of this Journal, and Mr. Errol Lea-Scarlett’s book, “Queanbeyan, District and People”, reviewed in Volume VI, Part 6 of this Journal.

The booklet is especially valuable, because it not only relates probably accurate biographies of the early settlers, some of whom were Jews, but supplies us with their photographs also.

We are, therefore, able to reproduce the pictures of two of the most prominent Jewish residents of Cooma. Charles Solomon and I. A. Shannon.