

## THE (SYDNEY) GEORGE STREET SYNAGOGUE AUSTRALIA'S FIRST SYNAGOGUE

By G.F.J. Bergman, D. Ec., LL. B.

In several publications it has been stated that Australia's first Synagogue was in Bridge street.<sup>1</sup> This statement, however, is not historically correct. The Bridge Street Synagogue was definitely not Sydney's first Synagogue. It was in George Street that, probably as early as 1831, Australia's first Synagogue was established.

The general community heard for the first time of this Synagogue when, on 26th September 1832, the "Sydney Monitor", reported:-

"The Jews of the Colony assembled at the Jews' Synagogue held, over Mr. Rowell's shop in George Street (which is elegantly fitted up as such), on Monday evening, being the last night of the year, according to the ancient chronology of the tribe of Judah, when prayers were said. On Tuesday morning and again in the evenings, other meetings took place, and worship was again performed"

The late Percy J. Marks, in a lecture delivered to the Royal Australian Historical Society on 26th May 1925, and subsequently published as a pamphlet, entitled "The First Synagogue in Australia"<sup>2</sup>, spoke about the first Jewish references to the George Street, Synagogue. He wrote that "The book of the Laws and Rules of the Sydney Synagogue, published in 1833 refers to a general meeting held at the Synagogue Chambers, George Street, on September 30th, and also to a previous meeting held on November 2nd 1831. There it is stated: "At a general meeting held at the (Beth Tephillah) Sydney Temporary Synagogue Chambers (George Street) . . ." From this reference it appears that the George Street Synagogue was existent as early as 1831.

The 1845 "Report of the York Street (Sydney) Synagogue" mentions the George Street Synagogue in saying that "in 1832 the Jews in the Colony rented a room for a place of worship and named their temporary Synagogue Beth Tephiloh or the House of Prayer".<sup>3</sup>

The "George Street" Synagogue was, in the life of the community, more important than the Bridge Street Synagogue, because it was used for at least 5 years, whilst the Bridge Street Synagogue rented in 1837 and installed in 1838, yet vacated in 1841, served the congregation for 3 years only. The Minutes from 1831 to 1837 were unfortunately lost, perhaps, when the congregation moved in 1841 to rooms in Lower George Street, belonging to Lewis Cohen and Joseph Simmons or during further moves.

The Bridge Street Synagogue Minutes record that in October 1843 Lewis Cohen gave notice that the Synagogue should be immediately removed from his apartment. The Committee then decided that from then onwards services should be held in the already completed Committee Room of the York Street Synagogue. This room must have been fairly large to accomodate the congregation and services that were held there until April 1844, when the York Street Synagogue was opened.

It is interesting to note that the Bridge Street Synagogue is not even mentioned in the 1845 York Street Report. All that this Report said about this Synagogue was that "as the congregation increased, more convenient places for divine services were engaged". By 1845, it was probably thought that the short time the congregation had spent in Bridge Street was not worth mentioning.

Where exactly was the George Street Synagogue situated? We have only the reference in "Hill's Life in Sydney" that it was "over Mr. Rowell's shop". Yet, I have in vain searched for any reference to this shop in George Street. P. J. Marks suggested that the house might have belonged to James Simmons, but did not give any reasons for this assumption.

The 1845 York Street Report was, however, by no means the first account of Australian Jewry. Six years earlier, in 1839, a book was published in Sydney, which confirmed a lengthy statement on the development of the Jewish community and its status and of their Synagogues in George and Bridge Street. This was J. Macle hose's book "Picture of Sydney and Stranger's Guide in New South Wales in 1839".

As this account, which must be regarded as one of the most important documents referring to Australian-Jewish history, has never been published in this Journal, this omission will now be remedied by publishing its entire text:—

### JEWS' SYNAGOGUE

Some few years since, a few persons, members of the Israelitish faith, emigrated to the colony of New South Wales, and settling in the colony, enjoyed, in the spirit of toleration, the same religious privilege as is enjoyed by the members of other sects and persuasions. There are not, perhaps, above 100 Israelites in Sydney, and they are of various grades and classes in Society. About the year 1828, some few endeavoured to form a place, that the children of the ancient faith should meet to pray to the Supreme Power and Deity, in the language in which the Word of God is written, and as it is beautifully expressed in the Holy Scripture:—"In any place where you mention my name, there will I come to thee, and bless thee." No stately edifice was required wherein to worship Jehovah, God of Israel.<sup>4</sup> A room was obtained from a gentleman, then residing in Sydney<sup>5</sup>, and there a few of the members met in devotion and piety.

When the members increased in number, a meeting of the body was called, on which occasion J.B. Montefiore, Esq. acted as chairman. He implored his brethren in faith to organize some plan for the erection of place of worship, but owing to a variety of circumstances, his plan was defeated by a "cabal"<sup>6</sup>, yet he, with the assistance of some few, rented extensive premises in George Street, and fitted it up neatly as a place of worship, which answered all the purposes required. A comitia was formed, and a few gentlemen who were well acquainted with the Judaical belief, volunteered their services to act on all occasions and among others, Mr. George Moss, who acted as Honorary Secretary, which

office he discharged with zeal and integrity, and for the benefit of his brethren in faith. Nearly every resident Israelite in the colony joined in a weekly subscription to defray the general expenses – “the poor man’s copper and the rich man’s gold” were freely given and accepted, and the beneficial result was quickly perceived. The house of prayer was established under the name “Beth Zephillah”.

In the present year (1837), the members increased in numbers, and a more commodious building was required for their religious meeting; and as sufficient funds could not be raised to build, more extensive premises were leased, and by a voluntary subscription from their own body, they have now a well-arranged place of worship, containing about 100 seats, which are rented by the rate-payers; a reading desk and pulpit, for the officiating minister, and an “ark” which contains the decalogue and a manuscript copy, written on vellum, of the Books of Moses, also a ladies gallery, containing about 30 seats, fitted up with neat candelabras, etc. The chief times of attendance for divine worship are the Vigil of the Sabbath (Friday evening), as also the vigils of the days of the festival, the morning of the New Year’s Day (according to the Judaical calendar), the Day of Expiation, the first and last day of the Tabernacle Festival, the Pentecost Day, the first and last of the Passover Festival, and the Anniversary of the Victory of Queen Ester, as also every Sabbath evening.

At present, private persons who are competent to officiate as readers and ministers, voluntarily perform those services, their funds not yet admitting them to obtain a regularly ordained minister from England. Among themselves they have a society, named “The Jews’ Philanthropic Institution”, the fund of which supports about twenty decrepit individuals of their own faith, by allowing them a weekly stipend. Although those of the Hebrew faith have a charitable institution for the members of their own body, yet the wealthy among them subscribe to nearly all the benevolent and charitable institutions in the colony, of other sects and creeds. They also have a Burial Ground, granted to them by Governor Darling, in which they have erected a charnel house, etc., His Excellency, Sir Richard Bourke, in his well-known spirit of religious toleration, offered them a portion of ground for the erection of a synagogue; the situation not being sufficiently central is the chief reason for it not being yet accepted; but we understand that His Excellency has given directions for another site to be looked out in a better situation than the one first offered them.”

The suggestion that the George Street Synagogue might have been just one of the “minyans” which were flourishing in the early years, and that it is not mentioned in the 1845 York Street Report, has to be discarded.

The George Street Synagogue is clearly mentioned in this “Report” which reads:-

“In 1832 . . . all members of the Hebrew faith resident in the Colony, formed themselves into one Society, rented a room for a place of

worship in which service was regularly performed on all necessary occasions . . . formed themselves into a congregation, they also named their temporary Synagogue "Beth Tephiloh" or the House of prayer".

This corresponds exactly with Maclehouse' article which, as already mentioned, said that "the house of prayer was established under the name of Beth Zephillah".

It is further interesting to note that the "Bridge Street Synagogue" is not mentioned at all in the 1845 York Street Report. This "Report" merely said concerning this synagogue — "As the congregation increased, more convenient places for divine worship were engaged".

#### A Note by Rabbi Dr. I. Porush

Dr. Bergman was good enough to let me have a copy of the above article so that I could refer to it and at the same time reply to his letter to the Sydney Morning Herald (24.3.1978) in which he corrected my statement in "The House of Israel" (page 8) that the Bridge Street Synagogue was Sydney's "first *proper* synagogue".

The difference between Dr. Bergman and myself is less in substance than in semantics. We all agree that regular Jewish worship began in Australia in 1828. Accordingly, 1978 marks the sesquicentenary of this historic milestone. We also agree that the organised congregation constituted itself in 1832, and that regular Services were held in a variety of places, including the above-mentioned rooms "over Mr. Rowell's shop" in George Street and the Bridge Street building, till 1844 when the specifically-built, congregationally-owned synagogue "Beth Israel" was opened in York Street.

I called the Bridge Street premises "the first *proper* synagogue" because I felt that the previous place or places of worship lacked the structural appearance and permanence of a synagogue. Percy J. Marks in his paper "The First Synagogue in Australia", referring to the premises in George Street reached nevertheless the conclusion: "The Bridge Street house was not the first place used by the Jews as a place of worship, but it apparently was the earliest one definitely recognised and used as a *permanent* synagogue". He also concludes that "apparently, however, several places were used at different periods", in contradistinction to Dr. Bergman's assumption that the congregation worshipped continuously in George Street for 5 years. As to the Bridge Street building, Maclehouse, quoted by Marks, says: "In the present year (1837) . . . they have *now* (my emphasis) a well-arranged place of worship containing about one hundred seats, which are rented by the rate-payers, a reading desk, and pulpit for the officiating minister, and an Ark which contains the Decalogue and a manuscript copy written on vellum of the Books of Moses; also a ladies' gallery containing about thirty seats, fitted up with neat candelabras, etc." Obviously, "*now*" refers to Bridge Street.

I, therefore, felt justified in calling the Bridge Street Synagogue "the first *proper* synagogue". The fact that this synagogue was occu-

pied only for a little over 2 years does not contradict this description, for it is clear from the minute book of this synagogue that the congregation planned to make it a more permanent place of worship and that it was rather disappointed when because of a change of ownership it was compelled to vacate the premises and to pray again in "rooms", at first "in the upper portion of the residence" of Mr. Abraham Moses and then at a place belonging to a Mr. Lewis Cohen. I suspect that the rented "rooms" were more of the nature of a *shtiebel* than a proper synagogue, and that Bridge Street in contrast resembled a "proper" synagogue.

The name "Beth Tephilah" used for both the George Street and the Bridge Street places of worship is, as I said in my book (page VI.), more a description than a name as traditionally used for synagogues. So long as the synagogue was not congregationally owned this title sufficed. Accordingly, even the Bridge Street synagogue lacked the "permanence" of ownership. But at least we are sure that structurally the place of worship looked like a "real" synagogue.

But, I emphasise, I have an open mind on this semantic issue.

#### NOTES

1. Aust. Jew. Hist. Soc. Journal & Proceedings Vol.II. Part II p.61 ff
2. Dr. Israel Porush "The House of Israel" p.8.
3. Percy J. Marks "The First Synagogue in Australia" Royal Aust. Historical Society Journal & Proceedings Vol. II.p. 224/30.
4. This may refer to the abortive application made to Governor Darling by Abraham Polack, to obtain a small building for the Jews in Sydney as place of worship in 1828.
5. This refers to the services held in 1828 by P.J.Cohen at his residence in George Street.
6. J.B.Montefiore did not get on with his congregation which was composed mostly of convicts and emancipists. By 1836 he had lost interest and Abraham Polack became President.