

FROM THE PRESIDENT . . .

As the President of the Australian Jewish Historical Society, I am very conscious of the responsibility of my Office towards all our membership as well as to the Jewish community. It will be obvious from the Secretary's Report that the Society, whose workers are still small in number, have been busy and progressive. It is, however, essential to pause from time to time to assess the Society's influence and to create and stimulate fresh interest. The impression must be avoided that our major work lies in antiquarian studies. The image and appeal of all our work has to be kept sufficiently broad so as to attract a membership that is representative of new and old Australians, of the youth, and of people from all walks of life. There must always be a view of the wider horizon by which a sense of historical perspective can be maintained. We should be amongst the first to understand that historical awareness and a knowledge of the past extends appreciation of existing conditions and may even suggest the lines of future change. As an eminent historian, Lecky, observed: "A key to the past forms an admirable discipline for the judgement of the present. He who has learned the true character and tendencies of many succeeding ages is not likely to go very far wrong in estimating his own." In this regard, the membership of this Society is generally conscious of the real significance of its objectives, but it is still doubtful whether an impact has been made upon the Jewish community. There remains an urgent need for the protection and restoration of the historical heritage, such as it is, without which our background and traditions as Australian Jews must be weakened.

Australian Governments today display an increasing interest in the National Estate and environment. Historical societies have to respond to these trends and give a lead and guidance to the community. Our own Society, therefore, has a real responsibility which cannot be ignored, although it has not the actual financial resources necessary for the implementation of a serious programme of conservation. It may now be recorded that efforts made to save the historic Geelong Synagogue have not proved fruitless. The oldest Synagogue structure at Hobart is always in need of repair, and attention is also required to preserve the Launceston building. By way of further example, the disused Maitland Synagogue building had stood for 100 years but apparently nothing could be done to save it from demolition. Only a few brief years ago, a pioneer Sydney Jewish cemetery was literally demolished because of complete disinterest, particularly in certain quarters, against which the Society could only protest belatedly. Again, the early Jewish cemetery at Goulburn is rapidly now approaching final destruction without there being any prior concerted efforts to prevent its disappearance. This Society, to its credit, assisted in the salvage of the old Maitland burial ground, although more has to be done to secure its preservation.

As a result of steady progress, not usually spectacular, this Society has developed to its present position. We pay a sincere tribute of appreciation to all its leaders and supporters over the last 40 years or more, not overlooking the helpful, even if modest, financial assistance now coming

from the N.S.W. Jewish Communal Appeal. Whilst the history of Australian Jewry should be popularised in so many ways, the basis of our success has always rested on the earnest scholarship of researchers and on the concern and genuine care for our heritage. Such aims are materially aided by suitable facilities, accommodation, recording systems etc. By all means, if the Society's finances are not unduly depleted thereby, appropriate accommodation, equipment, and perhaps even staff, should be provided. But, funds are limited, so that all our requirements cannot be subsidised by the community at the expense of other organisations. On the other hand, our minimum requisites must be assessed if our work is to be carried on, without delays, effectively, and even with some dignity.

In New South Wales alone, there are more than 40 communal bodies, some of which have a long record and access to large funds. In very few instances, indeed, has any kind of history been produced by these organisations. Often, their archives are locked away or relegated to virtual oblivion in some inaccessible repository. Whilst isolated steps are sometimes taken to secure these archives, practically nothing is being done to invite or encourage study and research thereof.

Many of the Society's researches and publications are quite often biographical or of genealogical interest. Much has now been written of some of the Jewish convicts in this country, as well, also, about early settlers and pioneers of Jewish origin. Yet, and in proportion to all this, much less has been contributed regarding communal trends, the history of the last 50 years, the history of local movements and of Synagogues and the many other organisations. Would it not be desirable, for example, to publish the history of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, and of the Boards of Deputies in N.S.W. and Victoria?

The truth is that little has survived from the early days of the Jewish communities, and the task of the historian has been rendered so difficult. Were it not for the dedication of a few, most of whom have sprung from this Society, there would have been even less to record, preserve and publish concerning the story of our predecessors in this land. Surely, then, positive measures should be adopted for the recording of the history of communal institutions. The various minute books, reports, periodicals and relevant correspondence should be micro-filmed, where appropriate. They should be readily available in some convenient location to all who have a bona fide need to consult such archives. The deferral of such action will make the historian's work more arduous, if not impossible, in the future.

And whilst communal history is in the process of being made, publications in the Press, and in article or other forms, are seldom produced by any of the protagonists or by observers of the scene. Perhaps this is also an area for which the Jewish Press must accept a responsibility. Little snippets of information may appear but there is barely an organisation that presents its members and the community with a comprehensive record of its activities. For such a flow of information, which is, in any event, so essential to the student and historian, the usual annual report or the occasional brief bulletin, is no substitute. This situation seems to be in marked contrast to the records of the past which,

where they have survived, are extremely informative.

The founders of the Australian Jewish Historical Society took as its motto, the Scriptural text, "Remember the days of old". It is obligatory on our membership, and upon the wider community, to be conscious of the value of our history and traditions, and of the contribution made by the pioneers and earlier generations of Australian Jews — most of whom were migrants — towards the progress of Jewry in this land, not, of course, ignoring their role as Australians. In all these efforts, to which I have referred, time is now of the essence. The necessary resources can be found within the community, and some Government assistance may also be provided, subject to there being a proper awareness of the need and urgency of maintaining, recording and preserving our history and heritage. Although these remarks are largely generalisation and seem so obvious, there remains, with some notable exceptions, a wide indifference to these requirements. Our Society plays its part in many ways. It could achieve much more if the real importance of its work was generally appreciated and supported throughout the Jewish community.

M.Z. Forbes