

## ANNUAL PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2009

### AUSTRALIAN JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC

In 2009 the Australian Jewish Historical Society had a much quieter time than in 2008 when we celebrated our 70th birthday.

At the Annual General Meeting on Sunday 16 November 2008, Rabbi Jeremy Lawrence, of the Great Synagogue, was the guest speaker, talking of his family background, education, and his career so far. He came from a non-rabbinical family, with a university career in England replete with Jewish student activities in the United Kingdom and Israel, which ultimately led him to study for the rabbinate. His talk was illustrated with many photographs and slides. At the Meeting the same Office Bearers and Committee as previously elected were re-elected.

On 8 March 2009, our first general meeting was a talk by Rosaline Collins of Melbourne about her late husband Alan Collins' book *Alva's Boy, An Unsentimental Memoir*. This was the first presentation in Sydney. She subsequently spoke to the National Council of Jewish Women, the Emanuel Synagogue and other groups.

Another meeting on 9 August 2009 was also a talk about a book, when our member, Johanna Nicholls, spoke about her recently published novel *Ironbark*, an Australian historical novel with a Jewish hero, and about the problems of research this writing entailed. She noted her appreciation of, and the help she elicited from several of our committee members.

On 22 February 2009 a large number of members attended the consecration of the tombstone of our former president, journal editor and patron, Morris Forbes at Rookwood Jewish cemetery. Russell Stern had arranged for many of Mr Forbes' old friends and representatives of numerous organisations with which he was associated to attend. A number of those present gave brief speeches of reminiscences of Morris after the consecration by Rabbi Jeremy Lawrence who was assisted by Cantor David Hilton. This made for a more interesting consecration than usual.

On 9 February 2009 several of us attended a high tea at Mandelbaum House in honour of the 95th birthday of our faithful

former honorary secretary Louise Rosenberg, which she had requested be held whilst Rabbi and Mrs. Apple were in Sydney. The birthday high tea was immediately followed by a talk by Rabbi Apple on the topic 'The Controversy Over Sabbath Sport During the 1920s', a topic which should still be discussed nowadays, but which seems to have lapsed. As usual, Rabbi Apple's address was very interesting.

On 3 April 2008 the Great Synagogue organised the launch of a book of essays from the Jewish Adult Study Group with which Louise Rosenberg was very involved during the 1950s and 1960s.

On Sunday 24 May 2009 our office manager Noela Symonds organised a walk through the Jewish business and dwelling areas of Newtown led by herself and Gary Luke, culminating with talks by the current rabbi of Newtown Synagogue, Rabbi Chaim Rosenthal, as well as by a former rabbi of Newtown. This was followed by a delicious and substantial afternoon tea organised by the Ladies Auxillary of the Synagogue. This event was very well attended, with many people being turned away due to lack of space and fear of overcrowding. We intend to repeat this event in another year.

On Sunday 12 July 2009 the Society participated at the reconsecration of the graves of Mordecai Moses who died in 1860 and Abigail his second wife who died in 1841. Abigail's grave had been in a very parlous state and had been repaired with a new stone top. Gary Luke organised most of this, and Helen Bersten, whose husband Ian is a direct descendant of Mordecai Moses, wrote a lot of the publicity, including in the RSVP column of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Daily Telegraph*. This resulted in a very large attendance of both Jewish and non-Jewish descendants of Mordecai Moses and his first wife, which I estimated at two hundred people. Once again Rabbi Lawrence and Cantor Hilton of the Great Synagogue intoned the prayers whilst Rabbi Lawrence gave a short *drasha*. Although descendants had contributed, the work on these graves and several other older Jewish graves was made possible by a gift of \$15,000 from the Friends of Rookwood.

Our senior vice-president Judy Shapira has edited four issues of our Newsletter over the last year. The Newsletter is now emailed to a large number of our members, which is a considerable saving on postage.

On Sunday 23 August Russell Stern and I participated in a ceremony at Rookwood Jewish cemetery to dedicate a new section in honor of the Sydney Chevra Kadisha. Whilst the Chevra Kadisha arranges funerals, with volunteers preparing the bodies, the ground and the burials themselves are controlled by the Jewish Cemetery Trust.

This year once again I assessed the leading essays of the Dr Hans Kimmel Essay Competition in Contemporary Jewish History. There were 31 essays all told. The reading of the sixteen best essays took place at a Presentation Evening held at the Drama Space at Moriah College High School before an audience of parents, grandparents, teachers and some of our members on Monday 24 August. The prize-giving for the top essays took place at the College on Tuesday 11 August.

The four leading essays were, firstly *The Life of My Grandfather Alexander Hancz* by Simona Henley, whose brother Yoni Henley and their mother Bonita Hancz had also been first prize-winners. She was followed by Joanna Sleigh whose essay on her grandfather *Daniel Glasser* was a remarkable story of the man who revived the Queen Victoria Building. The third prize winner was Katherine Tobias, granddaughter of Bernard and Clara Tobias who wrote about their survival during the Shoah separately in Siberia; and, finally Micayla Kaufman who wrote about the unusual story of a German refugee girl in South Africa, quite a different story to the usual Lithuanian emigrants to South Africa.

On Sunday 13 September the Society organised a trip to Nowra and the South Coast of New South Wales in conjunction with the Jews of the Shoalhaven (JOSH) group. Twenty-two people went on the chartered bus. Unfortunately as I was overseas I could not go, but those who attended reported on a most enjoyable and stimulating day. A very complete report of the outing appears in Newsletter 86, prepared by Sarah Vorchheimer.

On Sunday 25 October our contribution to the E'nai B'rith Day of Jewish Culture and Heritage was a walk through the Jewish parts of Newtown, similar to the walk we had already held in May. This proved to be just as popular the second time.

This year two of our committee members became presidents of other Jewish communal organisations. Jeannette Tsoulos was elected president of the Australian Jewish Genealogical Society in NSW and is replaced as honorary secretary by Philip Moses. Russell Stern was elected president of COA, and continues as honorary treasurer. Senior vice-president Judy Shapira, editor Suzanne Rutland, Sarah Vorchheimer and I have continued as deputies at the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies throughout the year.

As president, I represent the Society at the Board of Governors of the Jewish Communal Appeal, of which the Society is a constituent and we receive some assistance towards our library from the JCA. Russell Stern has now joined me on the JCA Board of Governors as the representative of COA. Several of our members act as hosts at JCA appeal functions as well as participating in the JCA

telephone campaign. Our immediate past president, Professor Suzanne Rutland continues as editor of our *Journal* with assistance from Helen Bersten, Judy Shapira and Philip Moses. Helen Rasko is active in various charities for retired actors and singers.

Again, we are very grateful to Helen Bersten our extremely active honorary archivist, Noela Symonds our Office Manager, Russell Stern our honorary treasurer, Philip Moses our honorary secretary, and to Gary Luke who organised the replacement of our microfilm reader and continues to work on the upgrading of our website as well as Sarah Vorchheimer who keeps an eye on copyright matters and also gives us publicity in *Hamodia*, the religious weekly newsletter.

Sophie Caplan, OAM  
President