

THE SEELIGSONS
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by
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The name Seeligson has been respected within the Perth Jewish community long before it became associated with the kindergarten which bears his name in the growing complex of the Carmel School which will shortly attain the full status of a Senior High School catering for children from the tender age of pre-school years to full maturity and University entrance examinations; no mean achievement for a community still hovering around the figure of 1,000 Jewish families. But before becoming so familiar to the parents whose children attend the Seeligson Kindergarten, the name was vaguely known to some and more intimately to a smaller number who had benefited through the assistance they had received from what is more accurately known as the 'Phineas Seeligson Charitable Trust'. The identity of those who have received assistance for the last 40 years or more remain locked in the confidential archives of the Trust. It can be disclosed that many a doctor or professional might not have been able to gain his or her diploma had it not been for the loan received from the Trust free of interest; equally many received a loan which enabled them to start in business, later to prosper. It must be said that the majority of loans were repaid as the borrowers became established, but like every other business the Trust also had its bad debts; these were written off, when repayment was clearly not likely, and yet, even these sometimes came good after many years. There were also Grants, that were outright gifts. There still exist today, in spite of the affluence of our society, and also of the Social Security provided by the Government, some who are paid an additional monthly 'pension' from the Trust and who will continue to receive it, presumably, for the rest of their days.

Two years ago we discussed at a similar lecture the life of a Benefactor whose name is closely associated with the Carmel School; I refer, of course, to the late Godel Korsunski who had the pleasure and satisfaction of seeing the school grow during his lifetime. Not so the late Phineas Seeligson whose name also appeared early on the stationery and signboards of the school.

Phineas Seeligson died in Perth on 11 August, 1935, long before the new school was thought of; in fact, many of the generation to whose credit goes the establishment of the school, were at that time mere infants, perhaps not even born. According to the plaque in the foyer of the synagogue commemorating his demise, Phineas Seeligson was 77 years old when he died and, had he lived, he would have been, according to the plaque 120 years old this year, a meaningful age in Jewish history, reminding us of the life span of Moses. When the well wishers of Phineas Seeligson wished him to live until 120, little did they consider, that while his physical life was not likely to continue for that length of time, his memory would indeed last for that span and beyond. In fact, Phineas was not 77



Phineas Seeligson 1856-1935.

years old when he died but 79, as is clearly stated on his tombstone both in Hebrew and in English and which is certainly accurate. So tonight we are commemorating not the 120th but the 122nd year of his birth, he having been born in 1856.

He left no autobiography, and Seeligson is remembered largely, not for what he did during his lifetime, but by what the Trustees of the 'Phineas Seeligson Trust' did in his name after his death. Nevertheless, his last will and testament sheds some light on Seeligson — the Man, and the tribute paid to him already by a grateful Congregation at the time of his death underscores the esteem and affection in which he was held.

A cemetery is an interesting place, where one can follow not only the history of a Congregation, the prevailing architecture of an era, and of course mainly the respect, love and veneration in which a departed was held. On the left hand side of the Mortuary building at the Karrakatta Cemetery, there are two graves which concern this study. The older one is erected to the memory of Henry Seeligson, the father of Phineas, who died on 15 January, 1906, aged 77 years, and the other, immediately next to it, is that of Phineas. What else do we learn, as we stand in reverence in front of these two graves? The tombstone of Henry is not very impressive; it is an upright standing slab of white marble, already showing signs of age, with a rusting cast iron grill; it looks like dozens of other headstones of that time; one would normally go past it without giving it a second thought; what strikes perhaps the observer, who may know something of the history of the family, is the inscription: 'Erected by his son Louis'. Why only Louis? Why is Phineas's name absent from the inscription, or his brother Henry, or that of his sister Theresa? We shall come back to this later. For the present we want to go back for a few moments to the tombstone of his son Phineas.

If one could use the word 'ostentatious' for a tombstone, this could be an apt description of a monument which stands out even today amongst others. It towers above that of his father's with its solid grey granite base and an obelisk-like square column of red marble rising to the sky and dwarfing the others around it. The tombstone was obviously meant to impress the observer with the importance of the deceased; it is clear that no money was spared on this monument, although the will distinctly instructed that no more than £150 was to be spent on the stone. It was of course erected, not by the members of the family, but by the Trustees of the Congregation, heirs of a not inconsiderable estate. The inscription on the stone tells concisely but fully the story.

Generous supporter of Jewish causes all his life.

He bequeathed his Estate to the Trusteeship of The Perth Hebrew Congregation (incorporated) for the purpose of helping to meet the spiritual, educational and philanthropic needs of the Jewish Community of Western Australia.

One notices again the absence of the names of any members of the Seeligson family on the stone.

Henry, the father of Phineas, was born in Poznan, Silesia, on the Polish-

German border in 1829; in common with other Jewish boys of his age and town, he must have had a good Jewish education; this is borne out by the fact that Henry's father was *Shamash* and sometimes reader in Poznan's Synagogue. About the same time, in far away Holland, a certain Elias van Weerden married one Charlotte de Groot; they were both Jewish and blessed with seven children, one of whom being named Julia. Fate would have it that Julia some 20 years later would marry Henry Seeligson. Julia's brother was a diamond cutter. While Julia was still at The Hague, Henry's parents decided to leave Poznan and they set sail for England, arriving in Manchester about 1845. Henry was then 16 years old, and ready for a commercial career. Some years later business brought him to The Hague where he met and married Julia van Weerden. Julia bore Henry four children in this order: Phineas, Henry, Louis and Theresa. It is perhaps not usual for a son to be named after his living father, although perhaps, the first signs of assimilation were on their way. The father was hereafter known as Henry the Elder, and this appears in Henry's will. About the year 1875, Henry the Elder decided to seek his fortune elsewhere and they set out for the antipodes, arriving in Sydney after months of travelling. This was to be their home for some years to come. But fortune did not smile on them in Sydney, so they set sail again, this time for Western Australia, arriving in Fremantle towards the end of the 70's.

Henry, the father, was quite prominent in the early formative years of the Fremantle Congregation and later of the Perth Hebrew Congregation. From the small booklet written by Philip Masel on the occasion of the Congregation's Jubilee Year in 1946, it seems that in the year 1887 "Messrs Seeligson and Rogers appear to have been the only Jewish residents in Perth". There were however some Jews living in Fremantle. We quote again:

"That year (1887) in Mr. Mandelstam's home, the first Jewish Service was conducted. Shortly afterwards a meeting was convened by Benjamin Solomon, at which it was agreed that weekly services would be held. Lawrence Alexander, Henry Seeligson and Benjamin Solomon were elected President, Reader and Secretary respectively; the first Hebrew Congregation in Western Australia had been born."

Now one has to assume that the reader's duties would include the reading from the Torah which arrived the same year by the sailing ship *Hampshire* commanded by a Jewish captain. As mentioned earlier, Henry Seeligson must have had a better than average Jewish knowledge. But, no sooner was the Fremantle Congregation established, when the Jews of Fremantle began to gravitate towards Perth and only 20 years later the Fremantle Congregation was absorbed by the Perth Hebrew Congregation which, in 1896, laid the foundation of the Synagogue in Brisbane Street. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that, whereas the Brisbane Street Synagogue was demolished a few years ago, the Fremantle Synagogue with its arched windows and Magen David still stands today, though, of course, it is no longer used as a House of Worship, but is a warehouse.

I was intrigued to find out a little more about Henry and, to the best of my knowledge, his Will is the only document which might shed some light

on this man. I examined the original Will in the Probate Office of the Supreme Court. It is handwritten, not in the testator's own handwriting, and consists of a page and a half. There exists also two codicils and these are of some interest. The Will was executed on the eleventh day of July 1896, 10 years before Henry died. He was described as being a retired jeweller. We know, however, that his business interests were manifold; at one time he used to ply a cargo boat between Fremantle and Bunbury; the name of the boat was *Theresa*, named after his daughter. He appointed as his Executors and Trustees, Ernest Krug, husband of his daughter Theresa and one, William Britnall. He provided in his Will a gift of £100 for the "Jewish Congregation in Perth, for the purpose of building a Synagogue", possibly the first such provision in a Will in Perth. He left some properties to his daughter Theresa to whom he also left one half of the residue of the estate and one quarter each to his sons Phineas and Louis. His son Henry is not mentioned in his Will. As was to be expected a bitter feud developed, which did not abate as time went on. The codicils mentioned before did not vary the substance of the Will; the one dated 1.3.1902 removes William Britnall as Executor and appoints Phineas Seeligson, financier of Perth, and Henry Stirling Trigg of Perth, additional Executors to Ernest Krug. The other children are omitted from the Executorship. The second codicil dated 5.5.1903 adds another name to the Executors, that of John Elliott of Perth. What is of interest is that both codicils were not signed by Henry in person; on both occasions he was too ill to sign his name; the first codicil was signed by a witness in his name; in the second codicil he just managed to put a cross where his name should have been; this was also duly witnessed and both documents were admitted by the Court. All this took place three years before Henry died, although the above incidents would indicate that he was at death's point on two other occasions. After the death of Henry, his son Phineas renounced his Executorship but the others remained. When the Will was lodged for probate on 10 April, 1906, the total estate was valued at £1,341.3.0, not a very large sum of money even in those days, although it led to the estrangement of the whole family. However, I learn from his grandson, Lionel, that the family was never united even while the old man was alive. What is strange is the fact that the most contentious of all the children, Louis, who was autocratic and almost tyrannical in his own family, should have taken the initiative to have the tombstone erected, evidently at his own cost, and had his own name engraved on the stone. However, we read on the marble slab dedicating the mortuary building on 21 October, 1906, the name of Phineas Seeligson who contributed five guineas in his own name and a further 10 guineas in the name of his father Henry; the dedication took place only six months after Henry's death and possibly before Louis had the tombstone erected.

Perhaps, I should mention one more paragraph in Henry's Will which reads, "I direct that all moneys due and owing to me by my Executor Ernest Emanuel Krug, shall be paid to my Trustees upon Trust for the maintenance, and education of my grandchildren, the issue of my daughter Theresa". Again he shows preference to his daughter; Phineas was of course single, but both Louis and his son Henry are omitted.

Let us now follow the fortunes of the children of Henry. Phineas remained and died a bachelor, but the other three children married while Henry was still alive. Theresa married Ernest Emanuel Krug and she bore him four children: Albert, who passed away recently and who never married, Dora, Ettie and David, the latter having been killed in action at Bray, France on 23 August, 1918, aged 27 years. Henry, the second son of Henry the Elder, had three children: Joseph Henry, Camillo Cyrus and Zenobia Rosemonica Winifred. Neither Henry nor his children played any part in the growth of the Community. Henry severed his affiliation with the Congregation long before his death, yet his Will revealed that the old ties had not been completely cut. He was not a wealthy man, and the statement of his assets lodged for probate shows an estate valued at £5,955.11.11, when he died on 9 December, 1927. His Will reveals some interesting information. Among his possessions was a painting of the 'Madonna'; this he bequeathed to the Roman Catholic Bishop of Perth, in trust for the Christian Brothers College. After providing an income for his wife Gertrude Clara during her lifetime, the children Joseph Henry, Camillo Cyrus and Zenobia Rosemonica Winifred were to receive the balance of the income in equal shares. Upon the death of his wife her income was to revert to the children, but upon the death of any one child, his or her income should be divided amongst the following institutions: Perth Hebrew Congregation, Jewish Philanthropic Society, W.A. Deaf and Blind Institute, Industrial School for the Blind, Childrens' Hospital, Salvation Army, Home of Peace, Y.M.C.A., Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals, Childrens' Protection Society and Parkerville Home. With the death of Joseph, the Perth Hebrew Congregation and the Philanthropic Society do in fact receive a small income from the estate. Upon the death of the last child the total income and capital will be divided among the Institutions. None of his grandchildren benefit from the estate.

Louis Seeligson was 13 years old when his father and the rest of the family arrived in Sydney in 1875. He was apprenticed to a German watchmaker and jeweller by the name of Burmeister, who treated the boy as if he were a slave. The boy suffered terribly under his cruel master who often deprived him of food for a small misdemeanour. It is therefore not surprising that the boy himself became hardened to other people's suffering and he himself became tyrannical when he grew up. After being apprenticed for five years Louis established himself as a jeweller and prospered. He became rather too friendly with a non-Jewish girl, Lily Elizabeth Marr, who came from Brooklyn, U.S.A., from Irish parents. The mother saw to it that Louis married her daughter. The first child born to Lily did not survive many months; there seems to be no record in Sydney that the child, Lewis, was buried in the Jewish portion of the cemetery, since the mother was Protestant. Louis and Lily moved to Perth in 1898; the Synagogue in Brisbane Street was consecrated only one year earlier, and Lily's conversion could have been the first one performed by Rabbi D.I. Freedman in Perth. Lily gave birth to another child Isme, but she too only lived nine months and two days. Louis kept a diary of births and deaths and other important dates of the family history; the diary is precise to the

smallest detail and is still in existence and in the hands of his son Lionel. Isme was buried in the Jewish portion of the cemetery, and hers is grave number one, on the right hand side of the Mortuary in Karrakatta.

Following the conversion of Lily, Rabbi Freedman insisted that Louis should come to the Synagogue every Sabbath, to be duly called up and make a handsome offering. But this form of penitence did not suit Louis; he broke off his relationship with the Rabbi and resigned from the Congregation. In the meantime four other children were born after the conversion of Lily: Lionel, Ariel, Raymar and Nate. However, the marriage was not a happy one; the children called their father a tyrant, and his wife left him 20 years before her death, and she lived to be 90. Louis died in 1942, already after the death of Rabbi Freedman, but his daughter Ariel knew of her father's relationship with the Congregation. She had him cremated and the ashes interred in the Protestant section of the Rose Garden. Louis died a wealthy man; his estate was valued for probate in the sum £56,073.5.4. Apart from leaving the house to his wife during her lifetime, although she lived in Melbourne at that time, he left his piano to his daughter Ariel, and the rest of the estate to all the children in equal shares.

Phineas Seeligson came into prominence in communal life as early as 1894, and I quote again from Mr Masel's booklet.

"The second annual meeting, held on 16 September, 1894, was a momentous one, as a decision was made to secure a grant of land from the Government and to proceed with the building of a Synagogue. Mr. Nathan Harris, the new President, and Mr. Phineas Seeligson, the new Treasurer, jointly wrote to Sir John Forrest, asking for a block of land on the corner of Francis and Beaufort Streets. As the land was required for other purposes, the request was refused, but the Government offered to make available a lot in Brisbane Street. The offer was accepted, and in 1895 a Building Committee began to raise funds."

Both Henry and Phineas were well in the forefront of those who endeavoured to solve the financial problems of both Fremantle and Perth Congregations. The active association of Phineas with the running of the Congregation extends over the years 1897 to 1904, but he remained a member of the Congregation all his life. The Perth Hebrew Congregation and the Hebrew School attached to the Congregation are especially mentioned in Phineas's Will as perpetual beneficiaries; philanthropy too was put on a solid and permanent basis when Phineas died. The business which both father and son conducted, was that of jewellers and financiers; they had a shop in Barrack Street and pawnbroking was part of the game. Later on they opened up an office in Warwick House, in the Terrace, which was run under the name of Perth Finance and Discount Co. Ltd.

The first appeal held by the Perth Hebrew Congregation, possibly at the beginning of the century or even earlier, (the date is not shown on the Board which used to adorn the Brisbane Street Synagogue), resulted in pledges totaling £1,250. Henry Seeligson headed the appeal with £100 and Phineas contributed 25 guineas. The mortgage redemption appeal held in 1929 resulted in total promises amounting to £3,890.14.0. There were exactly

100 contributors, and heading the list were: Mr. Phineas Seeligson, Mrs. Fanny Breckler and Mr. Meyer Breckler, each with £500. We might also mention that Alec Breckler contributed £50 on this occasion and Cecil Breckler and Nate Rosenwax £25 each. The Finance Company which Phineas controlled prospered, so much so, that he virtually retired from business before reaching his 50th birthday. He travelled often to England, he even bought a house in Hampshire, where he installed a housekeeper and a manservant by the name of Plush, and because Phineas was very fond of horse-riding, Plush also acted as a groomsmen. Phineas treated his employees well. In his Will Plush received an annuity for life and this was faithfully observed by the Trustees until Plush's death some five or so years ago.

While Phineas was no doubt an excellent financier, he did not have the stamina of a communal leader which was shown by his contemporaries such as Gustus Luber, Joseph Sharp or Meyer Breckler, who followed the vicissitudes of the Congregation throughout their life. In the latter years Phineas's eyesight dimmed, and it was Mrs. Rosenwax who used to escort him to the Synagogue whenever the occasion arose. In these years he became closely attached to Rabbi D.I. Freedman and Mr. Meyer Breckler, and there is little doubt that it was due to their influence that Phineas changed his Will creating the Trust which we know today. The new Will was executed on 19 December, 1934, i.e. only nine months before Phineas died. How different might have, nay would have looked, the community and the school had he delayed signing this Will.

Let us look at this document a little closer. The gross value of the estate was £52,229.19.10 and the net value was £52,157.17.0, meaning that at the time of his death his debts amounted to exactly £72.2.10. The death duties amounted to £5,140.15.8. These figures do not seem very impressive by today's fortunes, so it is necessary to bring them to present day costs to be able to evaluate their magnitude. From the Department of Statistics, I learnt that the average wage in 1906, when Henry died, was £2.15.0 per week or the equivalent of \$5.50; in 1935, at the time of the death of Phineas, it was £4.4.2 or \$8.25 per week; today the average wage in Perth is \$151.24. This means that the purchasing power of Henry's estate would be the equivalent of 30 times \$2,722 or \$81,660, a sum which sounds much more impressive than the £1,341 which he left; similarly Phineas's estate could be worth 18.33 times more than the £52,229.19.10 which he left at his death, and this would amount to \$1,914,751. However, here we find that real values do not always follow theoretical ones; in fact Phineas's estate would be barely worth half of the figure quoted above. The economists would confirm that the standard of living rose considerably quicker than the prices reflected in real estate or investments, which barely kept pace with inflation.

It now remains to briefly examine some of the details of Phineas's Will, which are of some considerable interest. Whereas Henry's Will, which was handwritten, would barely fill half a page of a typewritten sheet, that of Phineas occupies six full tightly typed pages and leaves little unsaid. It was prepared by one of the leading solicitors of his time, Sir Walter James, a

close friend of Phineas. The administration of the estate was granted by the Court to the Executors, Rabbi David Isaac Freedman, Meyer Breckler and Joseph Sharp, while holding offices of Rabbi and Trustees respectively of the Perth Hebrew Congregation, leave also being granted for Sir Charles Nathan, the third Trustee of the Congregation to join the above three. It is quite obvious that the Testator wanted his affairs to be permanently administered by the officers responsible for the running of the Congregation. The path upon which the Trustees were allowed to tread was therefore clearly defined. On the other hand, the Trustees have on several occasions approached the Court and have been granted leave to extend the objects of the Will in a manner which the lawyers call *cy-pres*, which means, as close as possible to the Testator's wishes. From the school's point of view, the greatest boost to its finances was an order of the Court to grant to the school such sums of money as remain after the primary objective of the Will, namely the assistance to indigent people, has been fulfilled. The testator left, as mentioned before, some legacies to his employees; to Eric Mills, accountant of his firm, £300; to his housekeeper in Almondbury Road, the use of his residence for five years, the furniture and an amount of £300. To Mrs. Rachel Rose Green £100; to Philip Snider, the Shamash of the Synagogue £250; to the Braille Society £150; to the rest home for the aged blind £350. In addition to the above, to his housekeeper, Ernestine Weil an annuity of £5 per week; and to Sidney Plush of England £312 per annum during his lifetime, free of any transfer costs, exchange etc. The Perth Congregation was to receive a grant of £400 per annum to be increased to £500 per annum at the death of Frederick Plush, and the congregation was to receive an additional £180 per annum for educational purposes to be increased to £250 per annum on the death of his housekeeper, Ernestine Weil. He directed that after payment of the above legacies, the Corpus of the Estate be retained in full and only the income be spent under three headings:

- A. For making periodical payments of lump sum payments to poor and indigent members of the Jewish Community in Western Australia who are sick, blind, crippled, maimed or in need of medical, surgical or hospital treatment.
- B. For making lump sum payments to poor and indigent members of the Jewish Community in Western Australia who are struggling against adversity, either by gift or loan, and if by loan, without charging interest.
- C. For making periodical or lump sum payments to assist in the fuller education of students at the university.

These three clauses define within fairly narrow limits the powers of the Trustees; modifications, when granted by the Court from time to time, invariably referred to the principal wishes of the Testator, and were mainly extended in view of the changes in the economic life of the Community. The Will also provided that the co-operation of the Philanthropic Society and the Ladies' Benevolent Society, if and when required, be sought. The Trustees have in fact sought the assistance of the Ladies' Benevolent Society often, when the applications were from indigent ladies of the Community.

The Seeligson Trust, has now been in existence for 43 years. During all this time it has only had three Chairmen, Mr. Meyer Breckler, Mr. Alec Breckler and Mr. Cecil Breckler. The number of those assisted in one form or in another runs into hundreds; the demands on the funds vary naturally with the general economic situation in the Community. In the last 20 years the Trust was able to contribute enormously to the budget of the school; without the Trust, the drain on communal funds would have been very much greater, so much so that it is doubtful if the present high standard could have been achieved without the assistance received from the Seeligson Trust. I have not checked the actual figures, but as a rough estimate I would say that the Trust has distributed between \$600,000 to \$700,000 during its life to date.

The Community is fortunate that people like Phineas Seeligson and Godel Korsunski have seen to it that a perpetual Trust was established in their names for the benefit of the Community. Their names will indeed live beyond the proverbial 120 years; they will live as long as there is a Jewish Community in Perth. I am indebted to Dr. Ossie Tofler for having provided me with the family tree of the Seeligsons and to Lionel Seeligson, a nephew of Phineas, for producing documentary evidence as well as filling in many gaps in the fascinating study of this family.