
BOOK REVIEWS

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JEWISH WOMEN OF AUSTRALIA

Marlo L. Newton (Melb: Hybrid Publishers, 2000; x + 342pp)

The NCJW is a venerable national (and international) organisation, predicated on support for Israel and a range of voluntary welfare and charitable activities, Jewish and general. It was founded in Sydney in 1923, along the lines of the American Council of Jewish Women, by Dr Fanny Reading, with an agenda of promoting Jewish religion and education (in response to the assimilation crisis of the 1920s), philanthropy (according to the concept of *tzedekah*: 'the sacred obligation of every Jew to make the world a better place by ensuring justice for all'), and social contact.

In its 70 years of operation, the NCJW's outreach and activity have encompassed everything from lobbying governments, petitioning the Chief Rabbi of Israel for amendment to divorce laws or protesting the treatment of Soviet Jews, through to fund-raising, handcrafts, baking cakes, organising senior citizens functions, or Meals-on-Wheels. Membership has reflected the evolution of the community. At least up until the end of the Second World War (and, to some extent, as late as the 1960s), the organisation was led and dominated by middle-class English-speaking women born in either Britain or Australia; in the year 2000 'Council reflects its broader Jewish communal context. There are more South African-born members in Perth and Sydney, and more European-born retirees on the Gold Coast'.

Organisational and institutional histories, no matter how worthy, are frequently dull, often mere recapitulations of time and place which dwell primarily on achievements and tend to gloss over any less satisfactory aspect or event. *Making a Difference* is a pleasing exception. Author Marlo Newton has managed to produce both a celebration of the attainments of the Council and a refreshing analysis of that organisation's politics and personalities. On one hand she provides straightforward accounts of the NCJW's community services and its relations with Israel and World Jewry, as well as a detailed chapter each on the sections: Canberra, the Gold Coast, Brisbane, NSW, Victoria, Western Australia, South Australia, and the smaller and provincial constituents. One chapter speculates on the organisation's future while several appendices include profiles of national presidents Fanny Reading, Vera Cohen, Mina Fink, Sylvia Gelman, Ray Ginsburg, Malvina Malinek, Lynne Davies and Geulah Solomon.

Much more diverting are Newton's incisive exploration of feminism and leadership within the NCJW. Here Council activity and philosophy provide the springboard for discussion of the status of women in Jewish law, women and voluntarism (including the argument that collective charitable work 'creates

a ghetto' and curbs women's advancement versus the contention that leadership roles within the Council have served as a stepping-stone to empowerment within the broader Jewish community), opportunities to lead ('the whole premise of a voluntary organisation rests on the assumption that there are people with time to devote to the non-profit sector'), and leadership style. Where previous commentators have tended to concentrate on the 'acceptable side' of such dedicated individuals as Reading or Fink, for instance, Newton stresses that toughness, discipline, singlemindedness, even ruthlessness, have been essential to successful leadership. 'It would appear that most of the presidents referred to as capable of "getting things done" were also those who could be accused of being arrogant or overbearing in their manner', she concludes.

Well-written, well-researched and imaginatively argued, *Making a Difference* is a useful organisational history in its own right and an important exploration of issues surrounding women and power within the Australian Jewish community.

Malcolm J. Turnbull

IN SURE DWELLINGS: A JOURNEY FROM EXPULSION TO ASSIMILATION

Margot F. Salom (Adelaide: Seaview Press, 2000; xiii + 293pp)

Sometime chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, president of the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation in 1874 and president (for twenty years) of the local Hebrew Philanthropic Society, Maurice Salom (1832—1903) served five years with the Downer government and was a leading South Australian identity of his day. He was profiled by his grand-daughter, Margot Salom, in this Journal several years ago. In the present volume Ms Salom goes further, using his life and career as the pivot for her research into his (and her) Sephardi ancestry. She intersperses biographical data and useful background summaries of the evolution of the Sephardic diaspora with evocative descriptions of her extensive genealogical detective work. At the outset, she cites the irony of her family's complete and rapid assimilation into the broader Australian population, after centuries of survival — against the odds — within an often inhospitable diaspora, as the chief impetus for the book.

In sure dwellings fits comfortably into that sub-genre of family histories in which the author's account of her quest for ancestors is at least as interesting as the facts she unearths. (In this regard, it compares — not unfavourably — with Germaine Greer's fascinating *Daddy we hardly knew you*). For Salom, tracing her forebears' journey from mediæval Spain to mid-nineteenth century Adelaide has entailed travel back and forth between London, Istanbul, Jerusalem, Safed, Amsterdam, Charleston (South Carolina), Spain and Northern Italy. Along the way she has managed to unearth or collate information on such colourful individuals as the sagacious Rabbi Abraham ben Isaac Shalom of Catalonia, Dr Selomoh Salem of Adrianapole, Chazan Mordecai Salom (of the Bevis Marks synagogue), Rabbi Abraham Shalom (a Moroccan Kabbalist) and Rachel D'Azevedo (a pioneer opponent of slavery).