

RANDOM NOTES

FROM THE NEWCASTLE ARCHIVES

by

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While organising and sorting the archives of the Newcastle Hebrew Congregation over the last few months I have been making random notes and reflections as an item stirred my interest. Sometimes I pursue the topic further at home or at the University library. The method is unsystematic, which may be a contradiction, and the inspiration is sporadic.

I did intend in this Preface to the first collection to launch into a serious discussion of the historiographical issues. What are the proportions of narrative and analysis, chronology and topics, people and institutions in historical writing? Some of the most important and rewarding writing of the past generation has been a sympathetic and detailed study of a single town such as Kenneth Lockridge on New England Dedham (1970) and E. Le Roy Ladurie on 14th century Montaillou (1975). To quote Lawrence Stone,

Montaillou is significant in two respects: first because it has become one of the greatest historical bestsellers of the twentieth century in France; and second because it does not tell a straightforward story — there is no story — but rambles around inside people's heads.

The French call that "mentalite". The Laduries of this world are in a class by themselves for our guidance and respect. Here begins a modest exercise, not too serious, in locality, spontaneity and "mentalite".

The Newcastle Congregation still holds recorded Minutes dating back nearly sixty years. The earliest are in a child's exercise book with missing cover which contain Minutes of the annual meeting held on 5 July, 1923 in the offices of solicitors Braye and Cohen until a meeting of 23 April, 1934. A partner of this firm, Henry Maurice Cohen, was elected President for 1923-24. It is now called Braye, Cragg, Cohen and Co. and there is no longer a Cohen on the letterhead; however, the original brass plate, Braye and Cohen, is still affixed to the doorway of their Bolton Street offices. Mr. Colyn Cohen, now retired from this firm, is Henry's nephew by marriage and the son of John Jacob Cohen, politician, Speaker and Judge. The meeting for the next year was held in the Social Hall, King Street, now the Central Mission of the Uniting Church. Services were held here until the present Synagogue was built in 1927. Erected in 1902, this is still one of the most attractive halls in Newcastle and its fine organ is still regularly played. The first annual meeting held in the Synagogue's own hall was on 2 July, 1928.

A major event described in this book was the well-attended protest meeting held in Newcastle Town Hall on 5 May, 1933 presided over by the Mayor, Alderman W. M. Snedden. Reverend Isack Morris spoke eloquently on behalf of the persecuted Jews in Germany. Persecution was then frightful but obvious. Modern anti-semitism may take more subtle forms such as the "Zionism is Racism" vote in the United Nations or the

"Myth of the Holocaust" nonsense — I would not dignify it as an argument — now endorsed by gurus of the Left.

From the building to the land: what did it cost? A central city location is of course worth plenty now. The receipt to Reverend I. Morris from the Australian Agricultural Co. dated 1 December, 1921 is for £36 deposit plus five equal annual instalments. A little arithmetic indicates that it cost £240 on a 15% deposit with the balance to be paid in five equal instalments of £40.16.0 each plus 5% interest p.a. on the outstanding balance.

The Congregation is entitled to appoint three trustees to administer the Jewish portion of the Sandgate cemetery. The law imposes certain obligations on such trustees of municipal cemeteries, which leads in turn to desirable inter-faith co-operation. The records include a bundle of papers indicating their duties, some of their accounts, a map of the burial plots and some miscellaneous correspondence. The Secretary of the Morisset Progress Association wrote to Rabbi Morris and other clergy on 22 April, 1948 asking for assistance to enable them to clean and repair their local cemetery. He pointed out that recent bushfires had destroyed the fences allowing local livestock to wander about. Rabbi Morris on behalf of the Jewish Cemetery Trust sent a sum of 2 guas. which was acknowledged on 16 June. In turn, the Congregation has received valuable assistance from the Maitland City Council and Historical Society in restoring the old Jewish cemetery at Louth Park, Maitland.

The road toll is an ever-present danger but should a Rabbi pull rank? A candidate for the post wrote to the Secretary as follows: "I will be driving up to Newcastle with Mrs. G— on Sunday, September the 15th 1963 and hope with the Lord's help to arrive about midday."

Speaking of Rabbis, one of the major post-war events was the visit of the Chief Rabbi, Dr. Israel Brodie and his wife. In those care-free, pre-motel days any guest was happy to stay at the noted Great Northern hotel, still a good example of the late 1930's style. The Congregation picked up the modest bill for the evening of 12 March, 1952 of £2.5.0 plus 11/- for breakfast and 4d for a telephone call.

The photo collection shows another distinguished visitor, H.E. Mr. M. Nurock, Ambassador for Israel, taken at a Mayoral reception on 12 July, 1954. Also depicted are the Rabbi, Dr. B. Gottshall, the President, Mr. D. Goldring, the Lord Mayor, Alderman F. Purdue, and Dr. James Auchmuty who had recently arrived to take charge of the Arts division of the then Newcastle University College and later became the Professor of History and first Vice Chancellor of the University between 1965-75. The Ambassador especially asked that he be invited as they had been contemporaries at Trinity College, Dublin.

Were there Jews in Ireland? A community was active in Dublin at the time of the expulsion of 1290 and was also restored in the 1650's in Cromwell's time. Professor Auchmuty was familiar with it in more modern times. He mentioned Robert Briscoe, a former Mayor, and told me that he had intended at one time to become a clergyman like his father and prepared to study Hebrew. His many Newcastle friends regret his passing in the United States late last year. His widow, Mrs. Margaret Auchmuty, has

now kindly given me, as a former colleague, his copy of Singer's *Daily Prayer Book* which includes his bookplate, signature and the date, October, 1929 and the stamp of "David Cornick — Hebrew Bookseller — Dublin". The motto of this distinguished Irish family is included in the bookplate design — *dum spiro spero* — a good Jewish sentiment.

An unusual item in the correspondence is a swatch of blue material. It is attached to a letter from Sylvia Cohen, 8 December, 1965, then President of the NCJW Newcastle branch, who had undertaken to renovate the hall. They recommended this material for the Board's approval and it now, in larger quantity, appears as the heavy front and rear stage curtains. True blue?

I do not intend to revive old disputes, there is enough of it in Jewish History writing, but the comments of the President, Samuel B. Morris, in November, 1962 on the conduct of the services shed an interesting light on the distinctive characteristics of this Congregation, and, indeed, this region of Australia. In a memorandum he described it as "an orthodox Shoul (sic) with relaxed and liberalised habits and customs." He emphasised the importance of clear speech and a coherent, attractive service. Perhaps the margin between such a community and a Liberal Congregation which has rediscovered tradition is not great. The same views are often expressed in the United States as mobile Jewish folk create new communities in the western states.

Then there was an exchange between Cam. Goldring, a singularly dedicated member, and President Morris, on 27 February, 1966 which illustrates the abiding interest in many traditional customs in our services. Some retain their value and others become outmoded. Some were designed for children, and to others, appear childish.

During the Purim service it became the custom for children to shake their "greggers" or rattles and hiss at the mention of the villainous Haman. Mr. Goldring considered it was a silly and outmoded custom and demeaned the service, citing a Jewish Encyclopaedia. Mr. Morris replied, promptly, and on his business letterhead as was his custom, citing other authorities and the analogy of Guy Fawkes day to prove its value. The article in Vallentine's *Jewish Encyclopaedia* (1938), of which our distinguished patron is a contributor, has "two bob each way" in saying "the practice is not now so prevalent."

Dr. Sep. Owen has now prepared a transcript of interviews with Cam. Goldring in March, 1977 just prior to the preparation of the Jubilee booklet and two years before his death. The full transcript will be lodged in the Archives. Cam. arrived in Newcastle in 1913 aged twelve with his two brothers and two sisters all born in Manchester, England where their mother was also born. Like most Jews they then lived in Cooks Hill near where the Synagogue was later built, while Samuel Cohen, resident partner in David Cohen & Co., lived in paternal splendour on The Hill near the Obelisk erected as a shipping marker in 1850, and still a prominent feature of the Newcastle skyline. By this time the older Maitland Jewish community was rapidly declining. He thought the regular floods induced many members to retreat to Newcastle and beyond.

The growing community often met socially in his parents new home in Hamilton South, which was the next step for newcomers if they became established and did not want to move too far from the central city. Built in 1925, it still stands as one of a number of good quality, spacious, redbrick, Federation style houses built in this area at this time. Mr. Goldring recalled that the community on certain occasions were split between English-speaking and Yiddish-speaking "foreigners", which is a familiar story. The Goldrings, English in outlook but with a solid orthodox upbringing from home and school, were somehow caught in the middle.

Those who collect the autographs of the great and powerful may be interested to know that the Correspondence files contain the signature of the then Prime Minister, Mr. E. Gough Whitlam. The circumstances, however, are somewhat unpleasant. The Board with other Jewish organisations had requested through the Member for Newcastle and Minister for Transport, Mr. C. K. Jones M.H.R., that passports should not be issued to P.L.O. representatives proposing to visit Australia early in 1975. Mr. Whitlam's unhelpful reply is enclosed with the usual, printed "with compliments" note from Mr. Jones.

Quite a different letter is typed from "David" to "Jack" on the letterhead of the R.M.S. "Queen Mary" which describes the trip taken by David and Elsie Goldring and a service on board ship on Saturday, 10 September, 1960. Mr. Goldring, President between 1951-56, is now resident in Sydney and the recipient was the then Secretary, Jack Lion. The letter reveals a lively personality and indicates only too clearly why he thought the service was "dull, uninteresting and a mockery" and what should be done to produce a Shabbat service both orthodox and attractive. Ships sometimes give a free passage to clergy willing to act as chaplains. One wonders if the Cunard Line were billed for this pseudo-pious nonsense. Next day they arrived in New York.

Note

Times change. The author and his wife live in a restored terrace house in the same Cooks Hill where there has been extensive "gentrification", as the Sociologists call it. Cooks Hill is actually flat; there is a slight elevation as one moves southwards from Hunter to Laman Streets, then the land falls again. The Synagogue building in Tyrrell Street is on the lower western slopes of The Hill. Cohen's mansion had a sea view and prominent aspect on the other side. The surf club at Bar Beach is still called the Cooks Hill S.L.C. Mr. Goldring's brother, Joe, still lives in Hamilton South and last year celebrated the seventieth anniversary of his Barmitzvah with a special Kiddush.

FOOTNOTE

1. My first venture, based on more limited material, was *Newcastle Synagogue Jubilee, 1927-77* (Newcastle, 1977); Lawrence Stone, *The Past and the Present* (Boston, London & Henley, 1981., 90.