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## HISTORY OF THE BANKSTOWN HEBREW CONGREGATION AND WAR MEMORIAL SYNAGOGUE

by  
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*(Read at General Meeting, Sydney, 23 May 1983)*

The land extending west from The River Road to the Georges River is today divided into the suburbs of Panania, Picnic Point, East Hills and part of Revesby. The thousands of residents, including the many Jewish families, living within these Sydney suburbs share the common heritage of the long, colourful history of the development of this area.

The first residents of the district were nomadic Aborigines who living in harmony with their environment, took their food and sustenance from it. They sheltered from the weather and the dark nights in many caves which can still be seen in the Hawkesbury and Georges River districts. They hunted in the dense forests of the time, and fished in the creeks and rivers. They assembled in secret and sacred places where the tribal elders performed ancient religious ceremonies — and where they relived their magic Dreamtime in song and dance and painting.

The first Europeans to venture into this district were George Bass and Matthew Flinders. In the year 1795 they explored the Georges River in their tiny eight-foot dinghy, which they had named *Tom Thumb*. During their nine day expedition, they explored some twenty miles farther than any previous exploration of the river. They discovered land which they described to the Governor, John Hunter, as being suitable for farming along the banks of the upper reaches of the river. Bass and Flinders were later rewarded for their effort by being granted adjoining land grants near Prospect Creek (today Georges Hall). This was the first step towards the formation of "Banks Town". Soon, land grants in the area were being made to eligible citizens of the colony. The first grant of Crown land in the district west of The River Road was made by Governor King to George Johnston Junior, son of Major George Johnston and Esther Julian, in 1804. The grant of 200 acres became known as "New Jerusalem". This name later inspired Jewish families in other regions to move to "Banks Town" district. George Johnston Junior did not reside permanently on this grant; however, he later had a tenant farmer, Robert Gardiner, who managed the farm "East Hills" on the property. The grant would today be bounded by The River Road, Bransgrove Road, Thompson Road and extend west almost to the present Panania Shopping Centre.

In 1813, Esther Julian, mother of George Johnston Junior, was granted 570 acres

of land by Governor Macquarie. The land she was granted adjoined her son's land, both properties sharing a common boundary which today would be Bransgrove Road, the other boundaries being The River Road, Milperra Road and the approximate position of Marigold Street. In the course of time, the settlement of "Banks Town" became established and prospered. The opening of railway transport — for example, the extension of the line from Belmore in 1909 — encouraged a greater influx of settlers into the region. Among them were a number of Jewish families. Today, Bankstown — named after Sir Joseph Banks, who was a member of Captain Cook's scientific staff on the first voyage of the *Endeavour* — enjoys the full status of a City, which was proclaimed by the present Queen, Elizabeth II, when she paid an official visit to the city in 1980.

The history of the Bankstown Hebrew Congregation can be seen as the developing history of a group of immigrant pioneers from eastern and western Europe — from Russia and Poland and Great Britain — who settled in the district on their own land as farmers and artisans.

The first Synagogue in Bankstown was established in North Terrace. The foundation stone was laid on 14 September, 1913, and the building officially opened on 29 March, 1914. The first actual service, however, had been held in 1911 in the home of Leao Axle, who lived in Liverpool Road, which was at that time the centre of Bankstown and the site of the Post Office and the Town Hall.

Rabbi F.L. Cohen officiated at the opening on 29 March, 1914. The following is a copy of the official invitation.

"March 1914 (5674)

The Executive of this congregation give themselves the pleasure of inviting your attendance at the CEREMONY OF OPENING THE SYNAGOGUE by Mr A. Blashki, J.P. at North Terrace (adjoining Bankstown Railway Station) on Sunday afternoon, March 20th next, on the arrival of "the" train leaving Sydney at 2.30 p.m.

The Rev. Rabbi Cohen has kindly consented to deliver the Inaugural Address and the Rev. M. Einfeld to recite the customary Prayers, on this occasion.

The Synagogue is regularly in use as a schoolroom (through the kindness of the Religious Education Board) and has been occasionally used also for Divine Worship. We anxiously hope that our Sydney friends will support the efforts we have ourselves made so that we may now be able to purchase a Sefer Torah for regular worship and enter our Synagogue lightened from the debts we have incurred for the material and its erection.

We remain.

Yours faithfully.

S. DAVIES, President  
Gibson Avenue, Central Bankstown

D. SOLOMON, Hon. Secretary  
Meredith Street, Bankstown."

A sturdy, cast-iron fence, sunk into concrete, and with the "Star of David" motif here and there, protected the grounds from the straying animals which were a feature of Bankstown's early days.

The building had no pretensions to grandeur. It was built to serve the Jewish Community. Over the years it was hard to imagine that it was, in fact, a place of worship — its walls were shabby and in need of a coat of paint — but it served the early Congregation well as a place of worship, a meeting place, and recreation centre

for the young. Although the cost of the Synagogue building itself was estimated at £400, donations received and the work performed on a voluntary basis by members of the congregation saw the project completed on a satisfactory basis, but not entirely debt-free as the official invitation discloses. Donations towards the cost and expenses incurred in the establishment of the Synagogue came from several unexpected sources, including "The Lithgow Small Arms Factory". A Christian friend, Mr Spendelove, the Timber Merchant of North Terrace, donated much of the timber that was used in the building as a gift to the new Community.

One of the interesting points of argument at this time (1916) was the need for a regular supplier of kosher meat. It evoked a great deal of somewhat heated discussion until, finally, it was agreed to grant permission to a local supplier, McDonald's Butchery in South Terrace, to sell meat to the Jewish people. The fee of 10/- required for this service met with opposition and disapproval. However, as it turned out, McDonald's were only able to supply the kosher meat for a short period of several months.

During the early 1920s it became apparent that the Synagogue was too limited to cater for the needs of the growing Jewish Community. It was decided, therefore, to build a Synagogue on the same site as the existing one. The first building was then converted into a social hall with the addition of a games room and a kitchen — and later, a tennis court. The second Synagogue was opened on 30 May, 1926 (5686) by Mr David Ross and dedicated by Rabbi Cohen. The President at the time was Mr Maurice Koffel.

During the years of 1932 to 1950, Messrs R. Lilienthal, J. Fogelman (one term only) and L. Gans untiringly bore the presidential burden and saw the Community through the difficult years of World War II. The Congregation rose to its peak of activity in the years from 1951 to 1956. In 1952, the Rev. M.B. Benson, B.A. was appointed as the first official minister to the Congregation (an office which he has fulfilled, and continues to fill honourably to this day). During those years, also, the Congregation had a flourishing Youth Club and School.

Presidents of this period were Mr. W. Greenstein (1950-52) and Mr M. Platus, who held the office from 1952-1967 (and has served the Community continuously ever since). Also during this period the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, Sir Israel Brodie, made a special visit to the Bankstown Congregation as part of his Australian pastoral tour. The visit was a result of a particular request by the Congregation, expressed in a letter to the organising Committee, dated 28 December 1951, as follows:

"We would esteem it a favour if the Chief Rabbi would unveil a portrait to honour our oldest living foundation member, Mr Lewis. We wish this to take the form of a surprise to Mr Lewis. We then hope to introduce the Chief Rabbi to our congregants."

The "Mr Lewis" was Bernard Lewis, the father of Mr Jack Lewis, the President of the congregation today. The portrait hangs in the social hall of the modern (third) Synagogue.

The enthusiasm of the 1950s gave birth to the desire to build a new and larger Synagogue for the Community. The Municipality of Bankstown, on its way to becoming a City, had then a Jewish population of about seventy families. The opportunity arose when the construction was planned of the vast shopping centre, known today as Bankstown Square. After some negotiations the developers, Waltons Stores, offered for the Synagogue site a price of £15,000 which was accepted by the Synagogue Committee — and then the Synagogue buildings suffered the same fate as the other buildings on North Terrace. The "closing service" in the

North Terrace Synagogue, held on 18 January 1959, was an event of sadness tinged, however, with some joy at the prospect of the new Synagogue to come.

The gentlemen of the Synagogue Committee concerned, acting on behalf of the Jewish Community, secured ground fronting Meredith Street, and an imposing new building, known as the Bankstown War Memorial Synagogue, was built at a cost of £30,000.

The foundation stone of the new Synagogue was laid on 21 June, 1959, by the President, Mr Max Platus and consecrated by Rabbi Dr I. Porush in the presence of Mr N.J. Mannix, M.L.A. (later Minister for Justice) representing the N.S.W. Premier, Mr H.B. Newman, President, N.S.W. Board of Jewish Deputies, and Mr S.D. Einfeld, Senior Vice President Executive Council of Australian Jewry. Many other dignitaries and communal leaders were amongst the large assembly of members and visitors. The Rev Benson, who was then the Honorary Minister of the Congregation officially assisted Rabbi Porush in the conduct of the service. The culmination of much hard work was the opening of the Synagogue on 3 April, 1960. On this occasion the service was also conducted by Rabbi Porush assisted by Rev Benson and the visiting ministers. The procession of the Scrolls of the Law carried by the clergy and members of the Board of Management constituted a spectacular moment in the official proceedings. The Mayor of Bankstown, Alderman O'Brien, and Mrs O'Brien were greatly impressed. In his address, the Mayor described the Synagogue as "an important landmark and a great asset to the Bankstown Municipality". The Synagogue's design is a radical departure from that of traditional places of worship. It is based on the form of the Star of David. The framework of steel is covered with corrugated aluminium. Coloured glass projections in the roof form a diamond shape. The ceiling is lined with a two-inch thick acoustic material. In front of the Synagogue is a Memorial Court with sloping walls, glazed with multi-coloured panes of glass, inscribed as memorials to former members of the Congregation. Plaques have been placed in memory of those who lost their lives in the two Great Wars and to the victims of Nazi persecution. This Court was named the "Minnie Diamond Memorial Court" after the late Minnie Diamond who served devotedly for some 25 years in the interests of the Congregation.

Mr Jack Lewis, who has been the Congregation's devoted president since 1971 until today and is a Past-President of the Master Builders Association of the Canterbury-Bankstown Division, assisted in the building with his professional, technical advice and skill. The building contractor was Mr Peter Cassel and the architect for the building was Mr Harold Smith. As a matter of interest, both the architect and the contractor were Jewish — although it should be said that they did offer the most acceptable tenders for the contract. The credit for the idea and realisation of this Synagogue must go to the then President, Mr Max Platus.

The original foundation stone (1913) was removed from the old building and is now incorporated in the west wall of the Memorial Court of the new Synagogue. Inscribed on the foundation stone are 13 names:

Marcus Horne (coppersmith; manufactured the metal guttering for the first Synagogue)

Samuel Davis (the first President and first draper in Bankstown)

Maurice Silverman (french polisher)

Abraham Schultz (furniture maker and designer)

Woolf Levine (merchant)

Michael Cohen (skirt manufacturer; brand name 'Henco')

Joshua Fagelman

Joseph Wegner (merchant)

Bernard Lewis (Metropolitan Water Board technician)

Max Rosen (merchant and property developer)

Leon Axle

Max Goldberg (cabinet maker)

Abraham Solomon (office manager)

Throughout its existence, the Bankstown Hebrew Congregation has given great importance to Jewish education. Ever since the founding of the first Synagogue a Hebrew School has been maintained, with only occasional breaks due to unavoidable causes. Even during the War years of the First and Second World Wars the Hebrew classes were kept open. The first class, conducted in 1914 by a Mr Cohen on Thursday afternoons, had more than a dozen pupils. In the 1950s the school had an enrolment of up to 70 pupils, whilst some 25 pupils attended in 1975. The gradual movement of the Jewish population from the western to the eastern suburbs finally led to the closure of the school in 1979. The school re-opened in 1982 as a kindergarten of 10 children, and shows promise of growing into a larger and permanent institution.

The Bankstown Hebrew Congregation has seen more than 70 years of changing conditions in both its suburban and national life. It is hoped that, as a change of population movement in modern times brings more Jewish families to the western suburbs, so will the congregation grow and play a more vital role in the Jewish Community of Australia.

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Ed.—If, as reported, more than 35 people attended the 72nd annual meeting of this Synagogue, there is certainly no immediate danger of extinction for this small Congregation. The first communal Seder, which was indeed a highlight of 1984, was marked by the attendance of as many as 117 persons. Although the Congregation is in need of more members, its future lies in the hands of the younger families. The honorary minister, Rev Benson, believes that the Synagogue will survive into the future.