

THE ROLE OF THE PERTH HEBREW CONGREGATION IN JEWISH EDUCATION AND YOUTH ACTIVITIES IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

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THE EARLY YEARS

Since early Talmudic times the cornerstones of a Jewish community have been the synagogue and the school. The Jews of Western Australia since the formative and early years of their communities have understood this well, and each congregation in its history endeavoured to provide a Hebrew and religion school.¹

At a meeting of the Perth Hebrew Congregation on 23 August 1896 it was decided to establish an education board to arrange a school for the education of Jewish children in Perth.² The Reverend A.T. Boas of Adelaide, who came to lay the foundation stone of the Brisbane Street Synagogue, October 1896, kindly consented to inaugurate the Hebrew School in a temporary building . . . upwards of fifty children attending the school who are taught by honorary teachers . . ."³

The Perth Hebrew School, which has educated generations of Jewish men and women on the observance of Judaism and knowledge of their Jewish heritage, was born. Throughout the ninety-six year and occasionally chequered history it has never failed to provide some form of tuition, nor has the Perth Hebrew Congregation in that time ever underestimated the importance of Jewish education in Jewish communal life.

The Reverend D.I. Freedman, recently appointed minister and teacher to the congregation, assumed the position of headmaster of the Perth Hebrew School immediately after his arrival in March 1897 as the congregation took over control of the school. He retained this position with but a brief absence at war until his death in 1939, some forty-two years later. As he put his mark not only on the Perth Hebrew Congregation but also Western Australian Jewry, so did he stamp the Perth Hebrew School with his own philosophy and style of Jewish education in his time and beyond. As he sought to unify the disparate social groups within the community so he sought to socialise their children in each generation through the teaching of Hebrew and religion at the Perth Hebrew School. His insistence on the centrality of the school for all the Jewish children of the community never

diminished. Dismayed at the “appalling ignorance” of elementary bible knowledge by the Jewish children in his classes at the public schools where he would teach once or twice a week, he wrote: “A Jewish community should consider as one of its most important duties, the object of rearing and training their children as pious Jews. In a city like this the duty becomes terribly urgent.”⁴

From the start, finance, administration, attendance, teaching and curriculum posed chronic problems and attempts to solve them have occupied succeeding boards of management ever since.

Although the Board of Management at first did not expect to reap any profit from the school, they obviously did not want to sustain any substantial financial loss. To avoid this, the headmaster was voted £26 in lieu of school fees.⁵ Congregation members were to pay a capitation fee of 3d per week; it was thought they would be only too delighted to pay the tax. The school was thus to be free to all children. This changed time and again over the years. To pay or not to pay was the vexatious question. With the arrival in the community of new families who were too poor to be members of the congregation, it was not long before a charge to non-members was made.

The school was administered by an education committee recruited from members of the Executive and Board of Management of the congregation. Characteristic of the committee members was their prominence in the world of business, commerce and some few in the professions. They gave generous time, serious thought and planning to the administration of the school, not only in its financial and educational aspects but to social and sporting activities as well. This has been evident throughout the history of the congregation.

The annual examinations were carried out in conjunction with the headmaster by independent examiners who were appointed each year and who reported their results in the printed congregation annual reports. At first the public examinations took place in the synagogue where the children were tested — before admiring parents and friends.

Prizes were distributed in plenty with support from generous donors. Cash prizes from five shillings to one guinea were common and on occasion ten and twelve guineas. Prize night was one of the highlights of the school year, the prizes being distributed by the minister's wife and the wife of one of the senior members of the board. Scenes have been recalled of the table full of prizes, “everyone got one”, the excitement and pride of walking onto the stage and the concert that followed. It was usually a long concert including recitations (both humorous and serious), instrumental solos, anything up to twenty or more items.⁶

From the start a co-educational school, dux of the school was the prize often taken by girls. The apogee of the school year, following the examinations and distribution of prizes, was the annual school picnic and sports day, a much looked forward to event. The first was in 1899 when the children were taken to Canning Bridge. Thereafter the ferry *Duchess* was hired and a picnic at Point Walter with organised sports and prizes and hampers of food and drink to be enjoyed. No effort was spared by the caring band of men of the Education Committee to ensure

a good time was had by all. In 1905 a near tragedy occurred as the *Duchess* collided with the steam tug *Dunsky*. There were some miraculous escapes, some were injured and many suffered shock. On the Sunday following the ill-fated picnic, "a special thanksgiving service was held in the Synagogue when in the presence of a crowded congregation we offered our gratitude to God for His Divine Providence . . ."⁷ The annual picnic did not take place the next year but was resumed in 1907.

Names which stand out in Jewish education in the early years are Henry Seeligson, S.L. Horowitz, Solomon Herman, E.P. Solomon, Gus Lubet, E. Casper, Joe Sharp, L. Van Praag and I.H. Boas.

In a short time the Perth Hebrew School became a distinctive Jewish institution. The children took part as a discrete body in the school demonstrations which were part of the 1901 Commonwealth celebrations. While preserving Jewish identity the school was an agent of socialisation and acculturation into the wider society for the children of the English speaking as well as those of the "foreign", mostly Yiddish speaking immigrants who arrived in substantial numbers during the first and second decades of the century.

The children learnt to have concern for fellow Jews in far away places by contributing to charity. In 1905 Mrs Adler, wife of the chief rabbi in England, acknowledged the receipt of £10 contributed by the school children, at the rate of one penny per week, towards the Loudon Children's Penny Dinner Fund. She wrote, it was "a real happiness to know that the kindly Jewish heart, which has ever a warm corner for the suffering of others, was as ever ready to show practical sympathy in the far Antipodes as in crowded London."⁸ Furthermore she hoped they would all continue in their kind efforts, which they did entirely until the headmaster was asked to join the Annual Protection Society in Perth. A general charity fund was then established and donations made not only to that society but to the Children's Hospital and the "poor Yemenite Jews who were dying" from exposure and starvation. To bring home the tragic violence of the Kishinev massacres in 1903 there was no music or concert at the annual prize giving ceremony.

The availability of suitable Hebrew School teachers was then and ever since a source of worry. Reverend Freedman complained:

I regret to say that the matter of assistant teachers is still in an unsatisfactory state . . . I frequently have had to take the whole school alone, and have been compelled to employ some of the pupils themselves as teachers occasionally.⁹

Women were the mainstay of the teaching staff and in 1907 Freedman appealed to the young men of the community:

I wonder why it is that young men do not help in the work of the school to the same extent as young women . . . If you read the names of teachers in connection with Synagogue Religion Classes it is so rare to find "Mr" it is "Miss" all the way down. I do



Girls of the Perth Hebrew School, 1912.

hope that some of our Perth young men if capable of teaching will be filled with a sense of their duty and assist us in educating our children. You will understand, therefore, how grateful I am to Mr W. Davis who apart from myself is the only male teacher in the School.¹⁰

Freedman defended his teachers from criticism on many occasions, and although their stipend may have been pitiful, the reward to deserving retirees was often a presentation of a suitably engraved gold watch or diamond and gold locket.

The original synagogue schoolroom was not practical. Notice of a special fund raising meeting for new accommodation read in part:

At present the Synagogue has to be used as a Schoolroom and apart from the injury caused to the property, this weakens the feeling of reverence and respect in which the sacred building should be held by the children.¹¹

The school hall, to be known as Princes Hall, and built in 1905 at a cost of £800 was also impractical and the synagogue was again used as a school. However, Princes Hall, behind the synagogue, came to be the focal point for all community activities for young and old alike until the shule moved to Mount Lawley.

School attendance was encouraged and a gold medal was given for perfect attendance, a silver medal for not more than two absences. This practice continued for several decades from 1902. Absenteeism was not to be tolerated and notes were delivered to parents informing them of absence, or on occasion of leaving their children too long before the hour of instruction commenced.

The first books to be purchased for the school by the headmaster were 100 Hebrew Primers, 50 Abrahams Scripture History, 20 Hebrew Grammars by M. Adler, 1 dozen Pentateuch, 2 dozen Daily Prayers, 2 dozen Bibles (Hebrew and English) and 2 dozen Hagadas.

The curriculum was composed of Hebrew reading, translation, scripture history and religion, *Neginos* of the *Sedra*, a *Barochos* of the Haphtorah, the reading of the law and the Haphtorah for the upper classes.

Tuition took place on Wednesday afternoon, Saturday and Sundays. In various years the headmaster, who gave nine hours instruction as against four by assistant teachers, also taught boys Haphtorah classes three days a week. By 1913 there were classes on six days a week. Boys of seven years and up were able to sight read *Haphtorot* and the school provided a shule choir. Enrolments had increased to 184 from 50 in 1897, due to increased immigration and high birth rate in those years.¹²

A significant change occurred in 1914. A Perth Hebrew School and Choir Board was appointed to guide the school, an experiment to place the school under the control of a body outside the Synagogue Committee. As many of the children were those of non-paying members, regulation was again invoked for non-seat

holders to pay a fee. The teaching staff was the largest ever, comprising the headmaster and twelve assistant teachers.¹³

The syllabus of instruction had been extended and included reading, translation, scripture history, the Jewish religion, the sacred days of the Jewish year, a glossary of Hebrew words and phrases concerning Jewish life and ritual texts, psalms and scripture portions (by heart), Hebrew grammar and Hebrew writing. The examiners applauded the syllabus but regretted "a tendency to recite the prayers in a hurried and in many instances a slipshod manner".¹⁴

A branch of the school was established in West Perth in the home of Mrs Charles Nathan. Nine pupils were enrolled and seven attended regularly. The well-to-do West Perthites paid one shilling for the services of the teacher, Miss Mandelbaum.¹⁵

In 1916 the Reverend Freedman, who had been appointed chaplain to the Australian Military Forces in 1913, went to war where he served in Gallipoli and France. There was a marked drop in student enrolment, down to 112, the Hebrew School and Choir Board disbanded and control returned to a Congregation Committee. Sidney R. Jaffe was acting headmaster. He is remembered as a small man who wore high heels, was very English and "inclined to hit the kids".¹⁶

When Rabbi Freedman returned from the war in 1918 there was a marked change. The social cleavage which divided the Anglicised from the "foreign" Jews was reflected in Jewish education at the time. In that year there were three other schools in existence. First, there was a school conducted under the auspices of the Zionist Association and known as "Mr Honig's School". Mordechai Honig came to Western Australia from Palestine in 1913 as a teacher of languages. He was rejected from the Australian Army at the outbreak of war, officially because of poor eyesight, but some say because he was thought to be a Turkish spy.

Most of the pupils came from the Yiddish speaking families who felt the Perth Hebrew Congregation was not religious enough and resented it. Honig has been remembered as a handsome, gentle man, fluent in modern Hebrew, who taught children the Hebrew names for animals by singing them to the tune of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm".¹⁷

Secondly, Ben Zion Sharp ran a Haphtorah class for boys only; and third, there was the West Perth School of Miss Mandelbaum. "They used to field three cricket teams (not always an eleven) in the paddock near the shule, where the cries could be heard. 'I belong to Mr Honig's team' or 'I'm in Mr Sharp's team', or 'I'm playing for the Hebrew School Team'.¹⁸

Rabbi Freedman set about reunification, but failed to effect a merger between the Perth Hebrew School and Honig's Hebrew Speaking School. In 1918 the West Australian Jewish Education Association was formed and control of the school passed from the Congregation Board to that body, independent of congregational control. Although under its auspices, it was hoped to be seen by others, particularly members of the Perth Jewish Association,¹⁹ as being free of Anglicised influence.

The Perth Hebrew School had gone backward for the first time since its inception: from 184 enrolments in 1914 to 54 in 1918.

Youth activities were centred around the synagogue and the school primarily, the Princes Hall being a meeting place for various organisations and where younger people could meet. Freedman noted his concern for teenagers as early as 1911, "Something needs to be done for boys and girls between the ages of fourteen and eighteen now", but all experiments proved unsuccessful. It was not until the second decade of the century that social activities for the young became institutionalised.

AFTER 1918

The Perth Hebrew School was administered now by the West Australian Jewish Education Association, an independent board, but with permanent representatives from the Perth Hebrew Congregation. The first president was Joseph Sharp, a position he maintained for twenty years until his death in 1938. "Shy, his visits [to the school] were like a visit from the Governor", recalls one ex-pupil of the 1930s with wondrous voice.²⁰

The Hebrew Speaking School and the Perth Hebrew School continued side by side for more than a decade. First Miss Cohen, then Joachim Wardeman, excellent linguists, conducted classes at the Hebrew Speaking School which attracted those who valued the teaching of modern Hebrew language. By the late 1920s this school was absorbed by the Perth Hebrew School which agreed to provide instruction in modern Hebrew. For this purpose Israel and Anuita Savouray-Serebrier were recruited from Palestine. Arrangements were made at the highest level of immigration authority to expedite the admission of the Serebriers to Australia.



First Junior Certificate Hebrew Class, 1935.

*1. to R Seated: Sylvia Walters, Rae Berad, Rabbi Freedman, Eve Golding, Goola Berinson, Ethel Perlou
1. to R Standing: Lionel Horry, Izzy Chester, Eva Spokone (teacher), Syd Hartstein, Eddy Zeffert.*

The Depression had its effect on the school. Enrolments which had leapt to 160 in 1930, fell a year later to 100. The salary bill had doubled and many parents were unable to pay fees. To overcome the financial difficulty, guarantees (bank and individual) were sought, and fund raising activities were initiated. The hope and excitement engendered by the engagement of the Serebriers waned quickly. Their limited command of English proved them unsuitable and as doubts arose of the centrality of Hebrew Language their contract was terminated in 1931. The school reverted to the earlier style of religious knowledge and familiarity with the synagogue service as the core curriculum.

Rabbi Freedman devised new methods of instruction. He composed verses set to music based on traditional melodies of the Synagogue Service, explaining the significance of the festivals. To the tune of *Kol Nidrei* was sung "When Tishri is but ten days old/The story of our life is told/On Yom Kippur the Solemn Fast/The life of every soul is cast."²¹

He later extended the ideas to cover a wide variety of subjects from the ten commandments to parts of Hebrew grammar.

Good things happened in 1936. Biblical Hebrew was introduced as a subject in the State public examinations for Junior and Leaving. A substantial schoolhouse was built on a block of land adjoining the synagogue with eight classrooms to accommodate 250 pupils. At the same time an adjacent hall was built for the Monash troop of boy scouts (and later girl guides). The financial problems of the school were overcome as a result of the magnificent bequest to the Perth Hebrew Congregation from the estate of Phineas Seeligson.

By the 1950s there was a critical dissatisfaction with the standard of Jewish education at the school. A new board headed by Albert Gild led to some reforms. Modern Hebrew pronunciation was re-introduced, Leon Zeffert replaced congregation minister Rubin-Zacks as headmaster, and negotiations to recruit a teacher from Israel began (again).

Isaac Atlas, a graduate of the Hebrew University, arrived in Perth, accompanied by his wife, in 1953. Like on the arrival of the Serebriers a generation earlier, spirits ran high. Optimism based on a touching faith in the ability of the new teacher to lead the Jewish children of Perth toward enlightenment was soon dashed. Plans had been made and executed. The president and the minister of the congregation with the president of the School went to Fremantle to greet the Atlases who arrived on the S.S. *Orcades*. They were taken to a self contained apartment which had been prepared for them and were guests at a reception given in their honour. Hope was high for success. However, a disgruntled Atlas refused to prepare a programme for the school or supervise staff. He would do nothing but teach class. The president and committee were affronted by his intransigence and he left the State with not a lesson given.

Undeterred the committee obtained the services of Sarah Finkelstein, a professional Hebrew teacher from New South Wales. Miss Finkelstein was of English birth, possessed of deep spiritual faith, and was regarded with the utmost respect by

the community. She trained many young boys for their Bar Mitzvah. Trained teachers were now employed on a part time basis and right of entry to public schools for religious instruction was established where there were numbers of Jewish children.

Albert Gild and his committee (of mostly concerned parents) pressed for a young teacher. After several attempts at recruiting a suitable teacher from England the congregation, with its usual penchant for engaging one person to perform multiple offices, decided in 1959 to employ Emanuel Fischer as assistant minister and teacher. He proved unsuitable as a *chazan* but took over in 1964 as principal of the Hebrew School. In that time he was subsidised by the congregation to acquire a professional teaching qualification, which he did. And then in 1968 he left the State with his family to settle in Israel. During his term as principal Fischer oversaw the division of scripture classes at Coolbinia School into liberal and orthodox and arranged with the Education Department that Jewish children should have two days of *Yom Tov* to observe the major festivals. For a time some classes were held at Floreat where a number of young Jewish families lived. Even correspondence lessons were offered to families who lived far away.²²

However all this began to fade as the Jewish Day School movement picked up pace. Jewish education was transferred almost entirely from the congregation to a new secular organisation. It started in 1957 with twenty-four children in the Seeligson Kindergarten with Miss Finkelstein as director and Dr O. Tofler as president. Two years later Carmel School, a day school, started with seven children in Grade one. From 1960 a grade was added each year. Rooms were allotted in the Robinson Avenue schoolhouse until 1963 when the school moved to new premises in Cresswell Road, Yokine, in part of the Maccabean Grounds. The congregation and the Seeligson Trust provided financial support, but advised the school should take only children of orthodox parents. That is, the children were to be *halachically* acceptable as orthodox Jews. An enrolment summary for Western Australian Hebrew Schools in 1960 showed Perth Hebrew School 183, Temple David School 110, Seeligson Kindergarten 25, Carmel School 23.²³

The success of the day school meant a decline but not the demise of the Perth Hebrew School. By 1968 enrolments had fallen sharply and lessons for a few students took place at Carmel School. In 1973 Julia Solomon took over the school as headmistress, a post she retained until 1989. Lessons take place in Breckler Hall within the synagogue building in Freedman Road, Menora.

During Rabbi Coleman's time as minister he started a Tephilin Club and arranged for older boys to take the higher exams in Hebrew from England.

Youth activities have always been supported by the congregation but not necessarily instigated. The role of the congregation in youth, sporting and social activities has been supportive, rather than dynamic as in the sphere of education. In the 1920s the Tennis Club and Zionist Athletic Association were formed, and later the Maccabean Club. In the 1930s a boy scout and girl guide troop was organised. Dances were held in the Princes Hall where young people could meet. Organisations



Hebrew School Class in the Synagogue, 1992.

like the Girls' Guild and Holy Vestment Society had existed from the early days. Later the C. & Y. Juniors were organised. These were all activities within the rubric of the congregation and much of the activity took place in the synagogue precincts.

In 1963 a young people's group was started by Pearl Breckler to encourage young adolescents to mix together. The group, attached to the synagogue, was known as Teeners, joined in supervised dances and outings. The Temple David Congregation were affronted as children of liberal, converted non-Jewish mothers were not accepted. Teeners flourished for some years but then stopped, with nothing to take its place.

The only young group, apart from the school now at the synagogue, is Bnei Akiva. This group which started in 1983 in Perth had developed in the Diaspora as a youth group to make *Aliyah* and to be religious following the way of Chief Rabbi Kook of Israel. There is a membership of sixty children organised into four groups with their own room and phone; they hold meetings in the Breckler Hall, they conduct a youth minyan each Friday night, and their activities include the collection of palm fronds and *lulavim* for the shule on succoth.²⁴

As the Perth Hebrew Congregation celebrates its centenary and enters the final decade of the twentieth century its role in Jewish institutional life is still vibrant despite the increasing secularisation of communal life. It subsidises much social activity, and its role in education, although diminished in terms of number, is still vital in providing a Jewish education.

The advent of Rabbi Freilich as minister to the congregation in 1988 brought new life and enthusiasm for Jewish learning and education to congregants of all ages. A library and a bookshop support the learning process. Fifty to sixty people attend the rabbi's *shiurim*. The Perth Hebrew Congregation is educating all. For those adults who missed out along the way there's now plenty of opportunity to pick up the missing educational pieces.

NOTES

1. Early congregations in Western Australia were Fremantle, Perth, Coolgardie, Kalgoorlie and Menzies. At Northam, although not a congregation, the community established a Hebrew and Religion School.
2. Perth Hebrew Congregation (PHC) Minutes 1896.
3. Ibid. Letter Book 1895-96.
4. Ibid. *Annual Report 1898*.
5. The new minister's salary had been fixed at £200 per annum and £50 for school fees.
6. Interview with Edna Luber Smith.
7. *PHC Annual Report 1906*.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid. 1900.
10. Ibid. 1907.
11. Ibid. Minutes 1903.
12. In 1911 there were 33 births recorded, and in 1913 there were 55 births recorded.
13. S.R. Jaffe, M.E. Zeffert and the Misses Jacobson, M. Cohen, G. Cohen, N. Book, B. Shineberg, A. Nissenson, I. Luber, D. Shimenson, L. Rotenberg, D. Salter.
14. *PHC Annual Report 1914*.
15. Daughter of Rev. Z. Mandelbaum, 2nd reader and shochet to the congregation 1914-27.
16. Interview with Josh Simenson.
17. Interview with Sylvia Hirsch.
18. Interview with Simenson.
19. D. Mossenson, *Gemilat Hasidim: The Story of the Perth Jewish Free Loan Society* (Perth: 1955).
20. Interview with Dr J. Hoffman.
21. *Western Judean* 1930.
22. *Perth Hebrew School Headmaster's Report* 1967.
23. *Maccabean* 1960.
24. Interview with David Berinson regarding history and aims of B'nei Akiva in Western Australia.

THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Founded November 1987

Chairman: Dr David Mossenson

Vice Chairman: Mrs Louise Hoffman

Secretary Treasurer: Mr Jeffery Pearlman

Committee: Dr Keith Shilkin
Mr Harry Atlas

Meetings: Meetings are held in the foyer of the PHC Synagogue. Three or four meetings are held each year.

Archive: The Society has established an Archive of Western Australian Jewish History which is located within the synagogue complex.

Postal Address: c/- Perth Hebrew Congregation
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