

‘BALLARAT BERNSTEIN’: REV. ISAAC (ISIDOR) AMBER BERNSTEIN, 1869–1955

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the life and times of Rev. Isaac Amber Bernstein, one of the few locally born Australian ministers. He served for short periods in several different congregations in Australia and New Zealand and became a controversial figure, particularly due to his approach to conversion but also due to his difficult personality, which often led to clashes between him and the congregational lay leadership, resulting in his often serving a community for a very short period. His actions in Melbourne, where he established the Caulfield Hebrew College and conducted courses for converts, later ministering at the convert's marriage ceremony, caused widespread communal concern and his conversions were not recognised by the mainstream religious leadership. The article also considers broader issues relating to conversion in Judaism.

KEYWORDS: Biography, Rev Isaac Amber Bernstein, Ballarat, religious issues, conversion

A maverick of the Australasian Jewish ministry in the first part of the twentieth century – and one of the few locally-born ministers¹ – was Rev. Isaac (Isidor) Amber Bernstein, who was born in goldrush Ballarat in 1869 to Jacob and Julia (nee Solomon) Bernstein. In those days, Ballarat – like an Australian *shtetl* – was widely known for its Jewish orthodoxy.² Called in Hebrew *She'arit Yisra'el* (Remnant of Israel), the Ballarat synagogue, which dates from 1861, was and is a dignified, impressive building and is still in use for services. A history of the congregation, its men, memories and melodies, was written in 1979 by Newman Rosenthal,³ whose literary skills focused (amongst many other aspects) on the split between two rival factions in the congregation in

the early twentieth century, and their eventual re-unification.

The leading Ballarat families were the subject of many of the colourful stories written by a stalwart of the congregation, Nathan Spielvogel, a collection of whose writings was published in a limited edition in 1956 by the Australian Jewish Historical Society.⁴ Spielvogel, a younger contemporary of I.A. Bernstein, was a bushman, writer, traveller, teacher and headmaster who spent most of his life in Ballarat and became known as the city's chief historian and keeper of the local archives. His tales of Ballarat Jewry are full of feeling and are a major contribution to Australian literature and social history.

The longest-serving minister of the Ballarat Hebrew Congregation in the Victorian age was Rev. Israel Moses Goldreich,⁵ whose Hebrew School pupils included the eight children of the Bernstein family. Amongst the Bernsteins, Isaac was referred to as 'Amber', not merely because it was his second name but because of a semantic link between the substance called amber (a fossil resin used for jewellery and amulets) and the name Bernstein. There was a historic trade route through Europe called the Amber Road which in German was *Bernsteinstrasse*,⁶ and this might be why Jacob and Julia Bernstein named their son Amber. However, I wonder why they did not call all their sons by this name.

It was taken for granted that the dietary laws, the set prayers, and the Sabbath and festivals (including all-night study on *Hoshana Rabbah* and *Shavu'ot*) were fully observed in Ballarat, and Isaac Amber Bernstein was brought up in that all-embracing atmosphere of tradition. It is likely that, because he had a good voice, he sang in the synagogue boys' choir and Rev. Goldreich trained him to officiate tunefully at the services. It is believed that Rabbi Dr Joseph Abrahams of the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation⁷ gave the young man additional practical and theoretical training in *shehitah* (ritual slaughter), as well as instructing him in the procedures and rules of *milah* (circumcision). Whether the rabbi and/or the Melbourne Beth Din (ecclesiastical court) gave him formal attestation as a minister with the title Reverend is not certain, but it is likely, as we see from the fact that when Bernstein conducted a wedding in Hobart in 1905 it was under the authority of Rabbi Abrahams, who had long kept a helpful eye on Hobart's small Jewish community.⁸ However, those who knew Bernstein say his Hebrew knowledge was limited and he had little acquaintance with *halakhah* (Jewish writings) and rabbinic writings.

Bernstein had a long and sometimes controversial career in the ministry, moving from place to place in Australia and New Zealand and generally not lasting long anywhere. He practised as a *shohet* (ritual slaughterer) and *mohel* (circumciser), preached, conducted services, taught the children and involved himself in local public concerns and campaigns. He not only carried out the usual ministerial functions but, as time passed, he became involved in converting people to Judaism and, as the current article shows, this made him a controversial figure. To write about him at this stage of Australian Jewish history is difficult and invidious, not only because he lived into the present age and is widely remembered, but because material about his dealings with the Melbourne Beth Din – as well as other Melbourne Beth Din registers and records – seem to no longer exist in Australia. The reasons probably involve personalities. It is therefore necessary to make judicious use of anecdotes and to try to reconstruct events, an invidious undertaking for a serious historical journal.

Most of Bernstein's ministerial career was spent in subsidiary roles, either because senior clergy needed assistance or because small congregations (usually in country districts)⁹ needed ministerial attention. The rural congregations – most of which have now disappeared – generally had poorly-trained ministers who performed factotum roles for very little pay. Bernstein was one of the most visible of them, at first being regarded with respect by the senior members of the ministry. Only at a later stage did the situation change with his being viewed with suspicion.

In Australia, he began with short incumbencies as an assistant minister and teacher in Ballarat and Perth.¹⁰⁰ Wherever he held office, 'strained relationships' (to quote Rabbi L.M. Goldman)¹¹ seemed to arise before long between Bernstein and the congregation.

After Ballarat and Perth, he was minister in Bendigo for a few months at the cusp of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His longest incumbency was in Christchurch, New Zealand, where he spent several years from 1906,¹² and whilst not serving overseas during the First World War, he provided chaplaincy support to the New Zealand forces. Christchurch had a fine synagogue in the central business district but a not very orthodox congregation, though there was unease when Bernstein allowed laxity in various religious practices including the times of Sabbath and festivals and the content and conduct of the services. He stood (unsuccessfully) for election to a municipal authority. Every now and then he lectured to Christian church groups on Biblical

and theological subjects. He was an active Freemason and after holding other Masonic offices was appointed Past Grand Chaplain.

His poor relationship with the Christchurch congregation and its leaders is graphically depicted in Rabbi Goldman's history of New Zealand Jewry. Goldman wrote:

The committee impressed upon him that he had to call twice a week upon the President, that he must not take gifts from members, and that he had to attend regularly in synagogue. The climax of strained relationships came when the committee instructed Bernstein not to preach on Rosh Hashanah and to blow the shofar on Yom Kippur at six in the evening. Bernstein preached, published his sermon in the press and received the admonition he expected. The congregation also objected when he accepted public positions without its permission. Eventually Bernstein resigned.¹³

Bernstein was not the only minister to encounter difficulties with his congregation. Even the rabbis of large, important capital city synagogues such as the Melbourne¹⁴ and St Kilda¹⁵ Hebrew Congregations and the Sydney Great Synagogue¹⁶ were treated badly from time to time by trouble-making presidents, boards of management and congregants. The lay leaders were sometimes or even constantly overbearing and over-powering. Not that the ministers were always in the right in times of conflict, but major congregations often had lay leaders with high level experience in commercial or public life who were used to controlling members of staff. Many such congregations, however, had a tradition of respect towards the minister. Bernstein was an example of a minister who was belittled even though it was possible that he invited trouble because of a tendency to be difficult, which went with him wherever he found himself.

When the Eastern Suburbs Central Synagogue near Moore Park in Sydney¹⁷ was established in 1912, Bernstein served as its first minister until 'in the middle of 1916 discussions on the future of the Minister began, and it was eventually decided that his term of office should cease'.¹⁸ Bernstein then established a small breakaway congregation in Sydney with the name *Bet E-l* ("House of God") and subsequently moved to Adelaide where he served as assistant to Rabbi A.T. Boas for a few years from 1919 and briefly replaced Boas on the latter's retirement.

In Adelaide, he not only officiated at services but performed pastoral and chaplaincy duties. He represented Adelaide at the opening of the Maccabean Hall in Sydney in 1923. He visited Hobart every now and then, for example conducting a wedding in 1905 and scraping a living out of unauthorised conversions. The sum of £25 per convert is sometimes mentioned although he was not the only minister who tried to build up his congregation (and make ends meet) by means of proselytisation.

Moving to Melbourne, Bernstein lived in Caulfield (which was then a distant part of suburbia) and tried to establish a congregation,¹⁹ naming it *Kehillah Kedoshah Bet E-I* (Holy Congregation of the House of God). At that stage, he was on good terms with some of the local Jewish residents – especially Simon Roth (Rothkopf), later a long-time congregational president, who had settled in the district in 1938. They organised High Holyday services in the courtroom adjacent to Caulfield Town Hall, where the witness stand was used as the reading desk. He and Roth acted as officiants and about sixty people attended the service. Bernstein advertised the services in the Jewish press and invited anyone who was interested to contact him. The synagogue president was Dr S.J. Cantor. But, by 1943, the embryonic Caulfield Hebrew Congregation had removed Bernstein from their Inkerman Road premises,²⁰ though his ‘congregation’ continued until about the early 1950s with sporadic services at his home.

Before long, considerable qualms about Bernstein and suspicions of ulterior motives began to circulate amongst the established congregations and the leading rabbis. The controversies were fuelled when, on his own initiative, Bernstein set up a so-called Caulfield Hebrew College in a large house in Hawthorn Road facing Caulfield Park, which became a centre for converting people to Judaism without the sanction or approval of the Melbourne Beth Din or any other rabbinic authority. In some cases, he converted nurses who wished to marry Jewish doctors. After performing the conversions, he generally proceeded to conduct the marriages of the ‘converts.’ The amounts he allegedly charged as tuition, conversion and marriage fees probably produced an income for Bernstein. Being a Justice of the Peace made him known to Caulfield Council, whose premises, as we have seen, he utilised from time to time. The claim that he ran a Hebrew College is likely to have secured him governmental accreditation and authority to solemnise marriages.²¹

The Melbourne Beth Din and Rabbi J.L. Gurewicz’s North Carlton

Beth Din made it clear to Bernstein that they repudiated his conversions, but not even Chief Rabbi J.H. Hertz in London or the London Beth Din could persuade him to desist. The London Beth Din ruled that Bernstein's conversions could not be accepted. The issue caused widespread communal controversy in Australia and beyond, though to this day there are people in Melbourne who rely on and stand by the conversion and marriage certificates issued by Bernstein and complain if the orthodox rabbis decline to approve such certificates.

To understand the establishment's opposition to Bernstein's proselytising activities, it is necessary to depict the history of Jewish proselytisation in Australia. Judaism had always accepted sincere converts, initially by ethnic and later by theological affiliation.²² Abraham and Sarah 'made souls' (that is they brought outsiders into the Hebrew people); the sages say that Abraham recruited the men and Sarah the women (Genesis 12:5). At first, there were no set procedures. Ruth adopted Judaism and Jewish identity by saying, 'Your people shall be my people; your God shall be my God' (Ruth 1:16). The sailors in the Book of Jonah were awestruck at the power of Jonah's God (Jonah 1). After Haman's defeat, 'many of the people of the land became Jewish' (Esther 8:17), though the verse might mean, 'took the side of the Jews'. There is a rabbinic view that the souls of sincere converts were disposed towards the Torah from time immemorial and the Midrash reports a dialogue on conversion between Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. Though the sincere convert is highly praised in rabbinic literature (for example Numbers Rabbah 8:2), it became the obligation of the rabbi to point out all the difficulties of being Jewish (*Talmud Yevamot* 47a).

The first convert to Judaism made in Australia appears to be Mary Connolly,²³ who was proselytised by Rabbi Aaron Levy of the London Beth Din on his visit to the Antipodes in 1830–31. After Levy left to return to London, Mary (now bearing the name 'Rebecca the Daughter of Our Father Abraham') was married to John Moses, most likely by Phillip Joseph Cohen. The marriage contract is still extant and bears textual evidence of the bride's conversion. Levy was the only rabbi who performed a conversion in Australia in those early days but subsequently several conversions were carried out by congregational leaders, as we see from the marriage and birth registers of the Great Synagogue, Sydney.

There was a fear of proselytisation in colonial Australasian Jewish community, mostly since it was considered likely to encourage mixed

marriage and weaken Jewish commitment, so that there were constant inter-congregational disputes about accepting *gueros and guerim* (female and male converts: there were more female than male applicants because intermarriage was prevalent). Some congregations totally opposed conversion. The British chief rabbi ruled that any application for conversion had to be approved by him though the conversion ceremony could be carried out in Australia.²⁴ Acting unilaterally, visiting Jerusalem rabbi, Jacob Levi Saphir, set up an ad-hoc Beth Din in Bendigo in the 1860s to convert the wife of a local pedlar. Rev Moses Rintel of Melbourne objected and accused Saphir of interfering with his livelihood and transgressing Jewish law. Saphir defended himself in his travelogue, *Even Sappir*.²⁵

Usually, it was the synagogue board that, bypassing the minister if there was one, made decisions about accepting or rejecting prospective converts, and about the fees that were to be charged, though eventually the boards relinquished their capacity to make such decisions. It was not that the laymen were automatically debarred from involvement in proselytisation but that there had to be adequate religious supervision. In Melbourne, the Melbourne Beth Din headed by the chief minister of the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation, the Beth Din in North Carlton headed by Rabbi Gurewicz, and the Sydney Beth Din headed by the chief minister of the Great Synagogue took charge of conversion applications. By the 1980s, the Sydney Beth Din became by convention the authority for conversions all over Australia and New Zealand apart from Victoria, and Beth Din members paid regular visits to other cities for the purpose of interviewing and, where appropriate, accepting prospective converts.

When the Liberal congregations were founded in Sydney and Melbourne in the 1930s and 40s, their conversions were not recognised by either Beth Din or by any of the orthodox ministers, but Bernstein's converts were recognised by the Liberal rabbis and admitted into the Liberal congregations.

It goes without saying that in the orthodox community Bernstein's converts and those made in Sydney by a maverick cantor were repudiated (and controversial). There were other congregations such as Newcastle whose ministers attempted private conversions which the rabbinate repudiated. In some cases, a proselyte was accepted by a strictly orthodox rabbi who acted in full accord with *halakhah* against the protests of the Melbourne or Sydney Beth Din and declared, 'My

conversions are as *kosher* as yours' and in the end such conversions had to be recognised by the orthodox community and its rabbis. When Rabbi Osher Abramson was head of the Sydney Beth Din in the 1970s there was at least one case of this kind.

Statistics of how many converts were made by Bernstein are not available; presumably there was a register, the whereabouts of which are unknown. Most converts were female and were probably motivated by impending marriage. We are not certain whether any or many of the persons whom Bernstein converted came to him because they were attracted by the ideology and/or the way of life of Judaism. On occasion, members of the Jewish community (such as Samuel D. Smith and W. Visbord in 1934)²⁶ joined Bernstein in performing conversions. Smith had been chairman of the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation's *Guerim* and *Gueros* Committee and possibly thought the Beth Din would approve Bernstein's actions.

In the absence of written records let us try to reconstruct the relationship (or its lack) between the rabbinic authorities and Bernstein. Obviously, the members of the current Beth Din cannot be responsible for things that were said or done by their predecessors many years ago, but it is likely that they would have dealt with the issue along the same lines as their predecessors. In the light of my long personal involvement in the Australian rabbinate, I am satisfied (as I think the current Melbourne Beth Din would be) that the questions raised with Bernstein by the then Melbourne Beth Din and his other critics would have included the following, to which are appended the likely responses:

1. With what authority did Bernstein make converts?
Presumably his own; anecdotal evidence is that many applicants felt that the official Beth Din was too strict and that going to Bernstein would be less demanding.
2. Did Bernstein assemble a rabbinic court and if so, who were the members? The decisions were made by himself, and he possibly convened a handful of local residents to assist him (see the reference above to Samuel D. Smith and W. Visbord).
3. Were applicants' *bona fides* investigated? Maybe he screened them himself. His experience with them during their studies of Judaism would have given him an idea of their thinking.

4. Who gave the applicants lessons in Judaism? Bernstein himself?
5. What experience did the applicants have of living a Jewish way of life? Possibly some but we cannot be certain.
6. Who circumcised the male 'converts'? Presumably Bernstein himself.
7. Which *mikveh* (ritual bath) was used for the immersion of the 'converts'? It is thought that he had some kind of *mikveh* at his house.
8. Did the 'converts' realise that their status would be in doubt? We presume so. We do not know whether Bernstein explained the situation to them. Perhaps a Bernstein conversion was preferred to a Liberal one.
9. Did applicants undertake to keep the commandments? Presumably, on some level.
10. Did Bernstein himself fully observe orthodox practice? We assume he did.

Presumably not all of Bernstein's converts upheld Jewish beliefs and observed Jewish practices, but (unfortunately) neither did all of those who went through conversion with an official Beth Din.

It is likely that the above questions were constantly raised with Bernstein but never evoked a full response, and Bernstein's conversions seem to have continued for some years into the early 1950s. They still cause upset on the part of family members who always thought of themselves as *halakhically* Jewish and sometimes played a leading role in Jewish communal life.

Despite his activities elsewhere, Bernstein never forgot Ballarat. He returned to the city for funerals, and after the death in 1941 of Rev. Zallel Mandelbaum,²⁷ who had ministered to the Ballarat congregation for many years, Bernstein became Ballarat's unofficial minister and went there to conduct the High Holyday services. On Sabbaths, the Ballarat synagogue was opened for services conducted by Nathan Spielvogel and subsequently by Marcus Stone, Bernstein's nephew.

Sabbaths generally saw Bernstein at the St. Kilda Synagogue or Temple Beth Israel, sitting in a back row wearing a clerical collar, a Homburg hat and several scarves. The congregants mostly had no idea who the elderly clergyman was, and some thought he was an Englishman.

They regarded him with some amusement, whilst their ministers – who *did* know who the elderly clergyman was – had their reservations about him and his activities. It is not recorded whether and to what extent Rabbi Dr Herman Sanger of Temple Beth Israel was uneasy about Bernstein and his conversions. The orthodox rabbis on the other hand were generally of one mind in their disapproval of Bernstein's activities and his 'converts' found themselves facing on-going problems with the orthodox rabbinate. They and their children sometimes approached the Melbourne or Sydney Beth Din to regularise their *halakhic* status, but regularisation was not always religiously possible.²⁸

Bernstein's family appreciated but did not endorse his efforts for Judaism. Possibly, there was a difficult relationship within the family. According to Rabbi John Levi of Temple Beth Israel, who had conversations with Bernstein's niece, they 'did not approve of him at all'.²⁹

Bernstein died in Melbourne on 23 October 1955, aged 86.

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Endnotes

- 1 Until recently most antipodean congregations preferred British-style ministers who were colloquially called 'Jews' College men'. Now there are a number of locally-born ministers including rabbis from the Chabad movement who serve various congregations, including rural and regional groups.
- 2 Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie used to say he was a fervent admirer of Ballarat by reason of its orthodoxy. The Ballarat community were upset that Chief Rabbi Hertz did not visit them on his 1921 tour: Newman Rosenthal, *Formula for Survival: The Saga of the Ballarat Hebrew Congregation*, Melbourne, Hawthorn Press, 1979, p. 87.
- 3 Rosenthal was an educator, writer and administrator. He was head of the Visual Aids department at Melbourne University. He wrote a history of the St Kilda Synagogue: *Look Back with Pride*, Melbourne, Thomas Nelson, 1971. David Havin has written extensively on the St Kilda congregation and its ministers and members.
- 4 L.E. Fredman (ed.), *Selected Short Stories*, Melbourne: Hawthorn, 1956. 'Spielvogel' was a derogatory surname acquired in Europe for lack of a large enough bribe to the authorities.

- 5 Israel Morris Goldreich (1834–1905), Rabbi, People Australia, <https://peopleaustralia.anu.edu.au/biography/goldreich-israel-morris-14078>. Accessed 3 June 2024.
- 6 Email to Raymond Apple from Chaim Freedman, 30 November 2022.
- 7 J. Aron and J. Arndt, *The Enduring Remnant: The First 150 Years of the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation, 1841-1991*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1992; Raymond Apple, 'The Doctor and His Brothers', *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal (AJHSJ)*, vol. 26, part 2 (2023), pp. 173–88.
- 8 Ann and Peter Elias (eds.), *A few from afar: Jewish lives in Tasmania from 1804*, Hobart, Hobart Hebrew Congregation, 2003.
- 9 S.D. Rutland, 'Jewish Settlers in Australian Country Towns', in S.D. Rutland, L. Mann, M. Price (eds.), *Jews of the Outback*, Melbourne, Hybrid, 2011, ch. 1.
- 10 Re Perth, see David Mossenson, *Hebrew, Israelite, Jew: The History of the Jews of Western Australia*, Perth, University of WA Press, 1990.
- 11 L.M. Goldman, *History of the Jews in New Zealand*, Wellington, Reed, 1958.
- 12 Ibid: to avoid using the name Christchurch, the congregation called itself Canterbury Hebrew Congregation.
- 13 Ibid p. 184.
- 14 J. Aron & J. Arndt, *The Enduring Remnant*.
- 15 Rosenthal, *Look Back with Pride*.
- 16 Raymond Apple, *The Great Synagogue: A History of Sydney's Big Shule*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2008.
- 17 *Hebrew Standard of Australasia (HS)*, 8 October 1915.
- 18 David J. Benjamin, *AJHSJ*, vol. 2 (1948), p. 518; and Melinda Jones & Ilana Lutman, *Orach Chaim: A Way of Life: The Central Synagogue, Sydney*, State Library of New South Wales Press, 2000.
- 19 Louise Rosenberg, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 7 (1979) and *AJHSJ*, vol. 7 part 2 (1972); Hirsch Munz, *Jews in South Australia 1836-1936*, Adelaide, Adelaide Hebrew Congregation, 1936.
- 20 Email to Raymond Apple from Joseph Aron, 20 June 2016.
- 21 The Commonwealth government lists religious denominations whose ministers are authorised to solemnise marriages.
- 22 D. M. Eichhorn, ed., *Conversion to Judaism: A History and Analysis*, New York, Ktav, 1965; Maurice Lamm, *Becoming a Jew*, New York, Jonathan David, 1991.

- 23 Raymond Apple, 'History and Politics: Mary Connolly Revisited', *AJHSJ*, vol. 10, part 2 (2011); Jeremy I. Pfeffer, *From One End of the Earth to the Other: The London Bet (sic) Din 1805-1825, and the Jewish Convicts Transported to Australia*, Sussex Academic Press, 2008.
- 24 Aron & Arndt, ch. 17; L.M. Goldman, *The Jews of Victoria in the Nineteenth Century* (Melb.: author, 1954).
- 25 A Raymond Apple, 'Rabbi Jacob Levi Saphir and his Voyage to Australia' (Sydney: *AJHS*, 1968); Jacob Levi Saphir, *Even Sappir*, II: 136-43.
- 26 Aron & Arndt, 354.
- 27 Raymond Apple, 'He Ministered Excellently', *AJHSJ*, vol. 22, part 4 (2016).
- 28 One of the reasons against reconversion was abandonment of Jewish practice.
- 29 *Halakhic* conversions were performed by the Melbourne Beth Din and the Sydney Beth Din and occasionally by other orthodox bodies. In some cities (e.g. Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, Auckland and Wellington) members of the Sydney Beth Din performed conversions together with the local rabbi. Unauthorised conversions performed in Sydney by a local cantor were repudiated by the Sydney Beth Din, whose then chairman was Rabbi Francis Lyon Cohen. Proposed conversions in Newcastle were disqualified by the Beth Din.