

GWEN GREEN (née LOEWENTHAL) 1900–1988 CONFRONTING THE GREAT DEPRESSION HEAD-ON

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Gwen Green (née Loewenthal) was born into one of the oldest Jewish families in Australia. Both her parents, Abraham Marcus Loewenthal and Carlotta Miriam (née Cohen), were prominent members of the Jewish community over many decades. In his early years her father was a commercial traveller and her whole background was from pioneer stock.

Gwen Green's maternal ancestry is of particular interest. Her grandmother was Phoebe Isaacs, who married Elias Cohen. Phoebe's father, John Isaacs, came to Australia in the 1840s, and was one of the leading figures in the establishment of an organised Jewish community in Sydney. He was the first treasurer of the York Street Synagogue when it opened in 1844. When two of his daughters married at the synagogue on the same day he donated a silver *chuppah* in honour of the occasion. That *chuppah*, together with other such donations, form part of the treasures of the Great Synagogue. Gwen grew up hearing stories of her great-grandfather's contributions to the development of Australian Jewry in its early days. His daughter Phoebe was, like her father, a 'family legend', although she died in childbirth at the age of 29, leaving a widower and a large family.

One of these children, Carlotta Miriam, married Abraham Marcus Loewenthal. He also was prominent in Sydney during the early decades of this century. Born in Grafton in 1874, A.M. Loewenthal, as he was affectionately known, was a man of great philanthropy. His principal interest was in helping the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children. He was also a leading figure in the establishment and running of the Maccabean Hall, which today houses the Sydney Jewish Museum. His wife Carlotta (Lottie), was also actively involved in communal welfare. She was president of the Scarba Home Committee from 1922 until 1934, and was made an honorary life member. She was a representative on the Board of the New South Wales Benevolent Society. The A.M. Loewenthal family consisted of Gwen, Louis, Charles, Enid, Betty and John. It might be

of interest to note that John became a renowned surgeon, Professor Sir John Loewenthal, who served as Dean of the Faculty of Medicine; his brother, Louis, was a surgeon at the Royal North Shore Hospital.

Gwen, the eldest of A.M. Loewenthal's children, was born in Orange in 1900 during a fierce snow storm. She was very much her parents' daughter; in her teens she had wished to study medicine, but at the time it was not feasible. After the family moved to Sydney in 1915, Gwen immediately headed a committee of children from the Great Synagogue religion classes which organised a bazaar to help the Belgian Relief Fund. On this committee she worked to obtain goods from businessmen in the community — mostly her father's friends and associates. She took it upon herself to approach the Belgian Consul-General to obtain his co-operation. He was greatly impressed by this young girl, and donated a painting by a distinguished Belgian artist to be raffled. This project necessitated the permission of the Attorney-General. It was Gwen who wrote to him seeking that permission. The raffle raised £300. As a result of her efforts she received a letter of thanks from the Belgian King as well as one from the Consul-General.

Gwen Loewenthal married Judah Green, who was also imbued with a strong pioneering spirit. In 1925, after a few years in Sydney, they moved to Leeton in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area of New South Wales, where they opened a grocery shop. At that time, Leeton was flat, mosquito-infested, and hot and dusty in the summer. Its population was made up mostly of returned servicemen and their wives. It was not a prosperous town. The Greens were the only Jewish family in the district. Life was made bearable for the women by the establishment in 1926 of a Country Women's Association (CWA) Branch, which gave the women of the town a meeting place. Gwen Green became its honorary secretary and, in 1933, its president. Through the CWA, she worked hard to help the women on the land. Their goals included establishing better hospitals, maternity centres and baby clinics; holiday homes on the coast for women and children for a break during school vacations; emergency housekeeper services; and arranging rest and play areas for children at country shows. The CWA also aimed to teach the women handicrafts which would bring in extra income. It offered general education projects for women, lobbied for better roads in country areas, got electricity to all areas, and had special carriages set aside for women on the railways and on station platforms. When she was interviewed, years later in her 80s, Gwen said, 'Country women used to help their husbands, as did the children after school. Those women were my friends; their children and mine were at school together.'

One project to which Gwen gave all her thought and energy during the Depression years of the 1930s was to put the products of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, in Leeton, on to the market. She introduced this project when she saw that the previous year's fruits were still not sold 12 months later. She wrote letters to the local newspapers outlining a scheme whereby women could help the economy of the country. Here is an excerpt from a letter she wrote to the editor of the local newspaper:

My idea is to hold a monster rally of women of Leeton and District under the aegis of the Country Women's Association, with the object of petitioning all women's organisations throughout the Commonwealth to join in a campaign, to increase and popularise the use of fruit, canned, dried and fresh. This is no job for one person, but there is a little to be done by a great many people before there will be a proven result.

The paper's editor agreed to help and give the campaign as much publicity as possible. The Country Women's Association placed the idea on the agenda at its Conference in Sydney in June 1934, and an appeal to the women of Australia to buy more canned and dried fruits, signed by 500 women from Leeton and surrounding districts alone, gained Australia-wide support. One newspaper reported: 'A little woman of courage, intense enthusiasm and ability has set on foot a movement that, beginning in New South Wales and extending to Victoria will be felt not only throughout Australia but overseas.' Speaking at the Conference, Gwen Green stressed:

Canned fruit buying is wise buying. The fruit is rich in vitamins. It holds all the precious qualities imparted by sunshine, because it is allowed to ripen on the tree. If our fellow women will pledge themselves to use at least two extra tins of fruit or two pounds of dried fruit each month, this will materially improve the situation.

One can feel the urgency of her words. The newspapers reported that her speech 'electrified the Conference and the hall rang with applause.' All the major newspapers in Sydney, Melbourne and in country towns gave the campaign publicity and, as Lysbeth Cohen wrote in her book *Beginning with Esther*, 'Gwen Green found herself a public figure overnight.' The *Murrumbidgee Irrigator* of 9 March 1934, and the *Leader* of 9 June of the same year gave the project maximum publicity. The *Sydney Morning Herald* in its 14

February 1935 issue published a half-page illustrated feature article, reporting that the campaign developed 'with such rapidity into the snowball of enthusiastic activity ... mitigating the immediate position of the Leeton fruit growing and canning industry of Australia on a firmer footing.' In April and May of 1934, the *Herald* featured a Women's Page with pictures and recipes using tinned fruits and dried fruits and, in its issue of 17 July, it reported:

She's five foot nothing in stature, but just burning up with enthusiasm in her self-appointed task, Mrs. Judah Green of Leeton is a shining example of what a lay person, unskilled in the ways of politicians and public platforms can do when she has a mission before her and a stout heart to bring to the job.

Gwen Green also compiled a recipe book introducing tinned fruits for winter desserts, and the Prime Minister of the day, Joseph A. Lyons, wrote the introduction. Two hundred and fifty thousand copies were distributed free. Samples of those puddings and pies were served at Country Women's Association meetings. Radio stations and the Retail Groceries Association helped to promote the scheme. One designated day, every grocer asked every customer to buy one extra tin of fruit. The ABC gave Gwen 15 minutes on air in each State to publicise the 'Eat More Fruit' campaign. She wrote 550 letters — plus sending out two series of 1,500 circulars. In response to all of this she received 800 replies.

The campaign was such a success that before the end of 1935 they were asked to desist — the canneries could not meet the demand! Fifteen thousand farmers, labourers and cannery workers and their families — estimated to be about 60,000 people — had been helped confront the challenge of unemployment and the effects of the Depression. One publication, in its 30 December issue, called Gwen Green 'The Fruit Canners' Joan of Arc ... who lifted local sales by 45 per cent in 18 months.'

The sales to England in 1936 were followed by an exhibit of Australian tinned fruit at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto. Gwen Green told an interviewer from the *Sydney Mail* in November 1935, 'I have made contact with 300,000 women in my campaign and 6,000 more cans of fruit have been consumed, since the onset of the campaign.' In 1937, Gwen was awarded the King George 6th Coronation Medal.

As a direct result of Gwen's connection with the Country Women's Association, the organisation was able to expand its premises, enabling a new library, a clinic and rest room, with meeting and function rooms being made available free of charge to local



Gwen Green with her children:

From left to right: Betty Susman, Robert E. Green, Gwen Green, Judy Slutzkin and Rosalie Field

groups. The Australian Canned Fruit Industry Sugar Commission Committee, in appreciation of what Gwen had achieved, presented her with a handsome canteen of cutlery with a brass plaque attached which read: 'To Mrs. Judah Green, from the FISCC in recognition of her Fine Services to the Australian Canned Fruits Industry, 1934-5.' It was presented to her in Canberra by Joseph Lyons.

Gwen and Judah Green and their four children, Judy, Rosalie, Betty and Robert, left Leeton and, after a few years in Sydney, moved to Goulburn. The Greens' home, *Corrinyar*, was six and a half kilometres from Goulburn, and was the scene of many groups of young folks' excursions from Sydney for dances and picnics and other regular social events. The Green family of Goulburn contributed greatly to the term 'As solid as a Goulburn Jew', probably coined by Charles MacAlister, the historian, who recorded his tribute to the Jews of Goulburn thus: 'Goulburn owed much in the formative years to the commercial genius of the Hebrew race.'

In Goulburn, Gwen immediately plunged into communal life. She joined the Soroptimist Club, the Red Cross and the Garden Club. She became president of the Goulburn Country Women's Association

and, before long, she had a weekly 15-minute broadcast over the local radio station women's session, speaking about fashion, cooking and other issues of concern for women during the 1950s. After the death of her husband, Judah, in 1960, at the age of 68, and with all her children married, Gwen moved to Sydney. Here, her strong pioneer background prevented her from 'sitting on her hands'. Always a keen gardener, she began to cultivate African violets, propagating them in pots, until she was able to give friends and organisations vast numbers. On one occasion, in 1984, she estimated those given to the Montefiore Home Fete realised upwards of \$300. Her pickles, chutneys and jams were always the most sought after at fetes. She was made a life member of the Country Women's Association, and she continued sewing and making jams well into her 80s. She helped the National Council of Jewish Women teams' Meals-On-Wheels, and the Woollahra Senior Citizens' Centre. Gwen's unit in Edgecliff Road, Woollahra, was in the same building as that of another well known identity of the Jewish community, Queenie Symonds, who was some eight to ten years her senior. On one occasion, when Gwen was awakened at 2 am by screams of distress, she found a fire, caused by a faulty electric blanket in Mrs Symonds' unit. She broke a window and helped her neighbour to safety, taking her into her own unit and comforting her until the fire brigade extinguished the blaze.

In 1980, at the age of 80, Gwen Green made a return visit to Leeton where a welcome reception awaited her at the Hydro Hotel — a Walter Burley-Griffin designed building. She was received with such warmth by her old friends that the occasion is still spoken of today, over 20 years later.

When Gwen died in December 1988 at the age of 87 and a half, she was the matriarch of eight grandchildren and ten great-grandchildren. She lived her life to the full; her whole attitude could be summed up with the aphorism 'Do what you love, love what you do, and be honest about it.' She learned early the truth of knowing who you are and what you value.