

FROM WEALTH TO PENURY: MORRIS COLLMANN 1828—1902

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Morris Collmann was born at Nakel, Posen, Prussia, of Jewish parentage, in 1828.¹ After serving in the Prussian army, he arrived on the Bendigo goldfields in 1853, after spending some time in America.² In partnership with his brother, Phillip Collmann, and John Tacchi,³ Morris established the Collmann and Tacchi mine on the Wetherall Reef on a fault called the Collmann Crosscourse in California Gully (sometimes cited as Long Gully).⁴ They were among the pioneers of quartz mining and very successful.⁵ At first, the mine made moderate returns, but when the shaft reached 63 metres they came upon a quartz reef nearly a metre thick, rich with gold. It proved to be one of the top six mines in the Bendigo goldfield and Tacchi and the Collmann brothers made a small fortune.⁶ When Phillip returned to Europe Morris purchased his share, thus owning two-thirds.

Morris Collmann earned respect for his policy of working his men in eight hour shifts. This was a very enlightened policy for the day, when a ten hour day was normal, and it was not universally approved of, even by underground miners, many of whom worked on a tribute system. Collmann, who paid above average wages, even granted paid Christmas holidays and was proud that he paid wages for 52 weeks each year.⁷

Collmann should be recognised a great social reformer. As he had already employed his men on the basis of an eight hour day, in 1865 he was approached by Robert Clark to lend his support for the eight hour working day campaign. Collmann became a champion of workplace reform, often sharing platforms at public meetings with Robert Clark and R.G. Johnston.⁸ On 22 July 1866, for instance, he chaired a meeting of 400 miners at Eaglehawk.⁹ He applied his energies to workplace reform and the improvement of conditions, but particularly the eight hour day movement. 1865 saw a compromise reached and the introduction of a nine hour day,¹⁰ and during 1880, when Robert Clark was minister for mines, the Mines Act was changed and the eight hour day was introduced.¹¹ Highly successful as he was in his mining enterprises, Collmann was equally noted for his charitable and benevolent actions. He contributed with a free hand for 'the relief of the necessities and afflictions of the distressed', and was reportedly generous to a fault, sincerely humane and utterly unselfish.¹²

Wishing to return to his native country, Collmann sold his interest in the Collmann and Tacchi mine and distributed the residue of his possessions among friends. On 15 May 1867,¹³ following a farewell dinner given by a number of leading citizens, he left Bendigo to return to Germany.¹⁴ Settling in Berlin, he married and fathered two daughters and a son. He speculated on the Berlin grain market, but unfortunately his Bendigo luck had deserted him.¹⁵ During seven years he lost steadily until, stripped of his capital, he became impoverished.

Disappointed and disillusioned, leaving his wife and family behind, Collmann returned to Bendigo in greatly reduced circumstances in 1874. He opened a tobacconist shop at the entrance to the Beehive Exchange, but after a few months he gave that up to return to mining.¹⁶ He had hoped that new opportunities would present themselves and that, by hard work, he might re-establish his financial position. But with very few financial resources he was unable to buy back into the business. He worked very hard physically, punishing his aging body, but he did not prosper and was not even able to raise the fare to return to his family in Berlin.¹⁷

During July 1880 a committee was formed under the chairmanship of W.G. Blackham to collect donations for a proposed testimonial for Collmann. The committee hoped to raise enough money to enable him to return to Berlin. Newspaper articles in February 1881 drew attention to Collmann's past benevolence and generosity and to the many people in the area who had benefited from his largesse. Mr Collmann (it was pointed out) had been fearless and outspoken in many causes to which he gave his support.

Meetings were arranged at the Miners Association office in the Beehive Building.¹⁸ Apparently these were not altogether successful, as Collmann remained in Bendigo and maintained his activities with the Miners Association. When the Trades and Labour Council was formed, he became the Mining Association's representative, also a trustee of the Trades Hall. He even became a member of the Mining Board, sometimes acting as chairman of that body.¹⁹ As the century drew to a close, financial depression set in in Victoria. Collmann apparently had some support from the Trades Hall; he was appointed caretaker of the Trades Hall and lived on the premises. In the twilight of his life, he often stood in the street outside the Trades Hall building in View Street, selling small items such as matches and pencils from a tray.²⁰ There were no pensions in those days and he had to get by.

After a short illness, Morris Collmann died on Sunday 18 May 1902 aged 73. The funeral was held over until 20 May so that office-bearers of the various bodies with which he had been connected could notify their members. The deceased had his life insured for £25. Just before his death he bequeathed this sum to the Reverend Mr Goldstein, specifying that £10 should be donated to the Bendigo hospital, of which he was a life governor and recent patient. In accordance with Biblical teaching, his remains were enclosed in a plain pine coffin, the lid covered with a piece of black cloth. Morris Collmann was interred in the Jewish section of the White Hills cemetery. The burial service was conducted in Hebrew and English by the Reverend Mr J.D. Goldstein.²¹

Many hard-working, successful, benevolent citizens who had migrated from various parts of the world to seek their fortune on the Victorian goldfields, and helped build a vibrant community, lie with Morris Collmann in the White Hills cemetery, shoulder to shoulder, rows of them in segregated denominational sections. Few would have experienced such a dramatic career as Collmann's roller-coaster ride from success, wealth and benevolence to disappointment and poverty.



Morris Collmann
(James A. Lerk collection, Bendigo)

On 5 June 1902, the president of the Miners Association, E.H. Laity, reported to his committee that he had attended a public meeting at the Town Hall where it had been decided to erect a memorial to the late Mr Morris Collmann. Mr Praed, who was also present, reported that there had been a representative attendance at the meeting.²²

After some lively debate, during which it was proposed that any donation might be illegal and that it might be better for individuals to contribute privately, a motion (moved by W. Thomas and seconded by D. Fleming) was carried, donating five guineas from the Miners Association account to the Morris Collmann Memorial Fund. Mr Thomas was of the opinion that Mr Collmann's generous service warranted such an amount be given. 'Morris Collmann had done much good for the Association,' he added.²³ The Collmann Memorial Appeal raised £58/13/-. As a result, a memorial was erected at a total cost of £59/18/-. The Reverend Mr Goldstein agreed to perform the Jewish rites in connection with the unveiling of the memorial. Subscribing societies were invited to send representatives and several speakers were called upon to make tributes.²⁴

The memorial unveiling was performed on 8 February 1903, revealing a tan granite hip ledger mounted on a grey Harcourt granite base, inscribed on one side in Hebrew and the other in English.²⁵ Today, it draws our attention to the contribution of Morris Collmann, who was a bridge between owners, employers and the men who worked for them. He lit a lamp for Australia and the world to follow.

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NOTES

- ¹ German Heritage Society, Bendigo Inc. file. Sources vary. He was known in Bendigo as Morris, actually Moritz. See James A. Lerk, 'Discover Bendigo' series in the *Bendigo Weekly*, 16 July 1999, p. 22.
- ² *Bendigo Advertiser*, 19 May 1902; obituary. Many gold seekers arriving from the German states had experience in hard rock mining in the Harz mountains or Saxony, or had been trained at the Schools of Mines in Clausthal, Frieberg and Chemnitz. Many came via the Californian goldrushes. See Ralph Birrell, *The quartz reefers*; Frank Cusack et al (eds), *Bendigo, the German Chapter*, p. 29.
- ³ Frank Cusack et al (eds), *Bendigo, the German chapter*, p. 156.
- ⁴ William Perry, *The end of an era*, p. 45.
- ⁵ Birrell, *op.cit.*, p. 36.
- ⁶ Tim Hewat, *Banking on the Bendigo*, p. 173.
- ⁷ James A. Lerk, *Bendigo's mining history 1851–1954*, p. 41.
- ⁸ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 19 May 1902; obituary.
- ⁹ *ibid.* Messrs. H. Hattam and G. Willan also gave their support; Lerk, *op.cit.*, p. 40.
- ¹⁰ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 7 February 1881, re testimonial.
- ¹¹ Lerk, *op.cit.*, p. 39.
- ¹² Lerk, *op.cit.*, p. 30.
- ¹³ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 7 February 1881, re testimonial.
- ¹⁴ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 19 May 1902; obituary.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.* According to the *Bendigo Advertiser* of 9 February 1903 he left Bendigo with between £14—£15,000. Among those attending the farewell dinner were J.J. (later Judge) Casey MLA, R. Burrowes (later MLA), Angus Mackay MLA, J. (later Sir John) McIntire (mayor of Sandhurst), C. Lethby (mayor of Eaglehawk), R.O. Smith (chairman of the Mining Board) and about 150 citizens. See *Bendigo Advertiser*, 19 May 1902, obituary; also James A. Lerk, 'Discover Bendigo' series in *Bendigo Weekly*, 16 July 1999, p. 22.
- ¹⁶ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 19 May 1902, obituary.
- ¹⁷ Lerk, *op.cit.*, p. 26.
- ¹⁸ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 7 February 1881, re testimonial.
- ¹⁹ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 28 July 1880; 5 February 1881; 7 February 1881.
- ²⁰ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 19 May 1902, obituary.
- ²¹ Lerk, *op.cit.*, p. 26; *Bendigo Advertiser*, 21 May 1902. The funeral cortege moved from the Trades Hall in View Street at 4.30pm on 20 May 1902. About 20 members of the Miners Association and the Trades and Labor Council marched in front of the hearse. These included Australian Miners Association general secretary J. Praed, president of the local branch E.H. Laity, and Bendigo Trades and Labor Council president C. Morgan.

Messrs. Sina and Bert Max accompanied the rabbi in the mourning coach. Joseph Sternberg MLC, president of the Hebrew congregation, was also present. The Mining Board was represented by W.G. Blackham (chairman), D.R. Fleming, C. Dolan, P. Phillips and F. Brown. Others attending included Sir John Quick MP, A.S. Bailes MLA, L.A. Samuels, P. Buchholz, H. Pinkus, W.R. Rowe and A. Grigg.

²² At the meeting a minute of condolence and appreciation for the late Mr Morris Collmann was moved by the chairman, W.G. Blackham, seconded by C. Dolan. Messrs Debney, Phillips, Fleming, Ryan and Potter also spoke. Fleming stated that no-one had done more for the working man than the late Mr Collmann. *Bendigo Advertiser*, 4 June 1902.

²³ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 6 June 1902.

²⁴ *Bendigo Advertiser*, 27 January 1903.

²⁵ Friends of Bendigo Cemeteries Inc. file.



Sandhurst (Bendigo) Synagogue
(Consecrated September 1872, demolished 1926)

*Watercolour from an illuminated address presented in 1889 by the
Victorian Jewish community to Sir Benjamin Benjamin, Mayor of Melbourne,
in honour of his knighthood*