

A PASSAGE FROM INDIA – AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Reuben Aaron

Born 27 September 1928 – Calcutta, India

To Australia

I was the second youngest of a family of seven children – three boys and four girls. My father, Moses Aaron, was born in Baghdad and was a representative of a very large Jewish tobacco company called B N Elias and Company. Mother, Moselle Aaron (nee Israel), was born in Iran. Our home address was IA Grants Lane, Calcutta, India. In the area where we lived there were four synagogues with approximately 300 Jewish families – all Orthodox.

When I was three and a half years old I started at the Jewish Girls' and Boys' Primary School. For high school I attended St Joseph's College, where I completed my matriculation and two years immediate science. Following my high school graduation in 1947, I decided to apply for a visa to Australia. This was done with the knowledge and consent of my parents. I could see no future for me in an India that was about to become an independent nation, and had heard about Australia from various friends. My neighbour was also planning a visit there on a tourist visa. With the little information I had, I decided Australia was the place where I should live.

Two weeks later, when I arrived home from school, my mother told me that I had received a letter from Australia, and asked me whom did I know there? With great anticipation I opened the letter to read that I had been granted a permanent visa to live in Australia. I screamed with excitement. My mother was not pleased, and informed me that I was not going unless I received permission from my father and older brother, Aaron. They both agreed to my leaving for Australia and my father even suggested that he would contact a friend in Sydney and maybe I could stay with him.

I was unable to get a passage to Australia from Bombay, so I decided to write to the Australian High Commissioner in New Delhi asking for his help. He arranged for me to travel on a cargo/passenger boat leaving for Australia from Calcutta. The boat was called the *SS Talma*. I arrived in Fremantle late 1947 and was shocked to see white men carrying luggage from the ship, having expected to see black people doing this kind of work. An official on deck told me, 'This is Australia mate, and you better get used to doing everything yourself'.

Ten days later I was in Sydney with £50 in my pocket and headed for the home of my father's friend, a Persian carpet retailer, who lived in William Street. My arrival came at the wrong time as his wife had died only two weeks earlier.

Life was not easy with him and so I decided that I had to find a new place to live. Fortunately, I met my next-door-neighbour who was also from Calcutta, Nissim Shohet, and told him my story. Telling me not to worry, he arranged for me to meet him with my luggage the following day at 6 p.m. when he would accompany me to a boarding house in Bourke Street, Sydney.

The next evening I told my host that I was leaving and could I have the £50 that I had given him to look after. He said, 'What money?' I decided that there was no use arguing but now I had no money, no home, no parents, and had to fend for myself. My friend took me to the Bourke Street boarding house where I rented a partly furnished room with a gas ring for 10 shillings a week. The boarding house had six double and two single rooms and in no time all the new rooms were taken by new arrivals from India and Burma. All these people had come on tourist visas.

As I had no money, my friend paid for the room until I got my first job with the Sheriff's Office in King Street, Sydney. My salary was three pounds two shillings and sixpence per week, paid fortnightly. I had to pay for my room, cook, wash, buy new cloths, and most importantly date girls, as well as basically keep alive with what I earned. I met some very nice people from Burma who lived in the same house, but one in particular befriended me. He lent me money every fortnight until I got paid. I then borrowed again for the following fortnight. I speak of my very good friend of 49 years, Mr Eze Cohen.

Very soon I came to the realisation that working for the government was not going to improve my lifestyle, and so I decided to find a job in the private sector. I applied to Prouds, a well-known jewellery store, as an accounts clerk. It took a month to get an interview. Mr Stan Proud told me at the time I was the first foreigner employed by this company. My salary was 5 pounds 10 shillings a week. Also I enrolled in a technical college to study accountancy. It was there I met Berryl Ginges.

Brother's arrival

In July, my elder brother Aaron left Calcutta for Bombay without his wife and two children. He sailed for Sydney on the *SS Strathaird* on 15 July 1950, seeking a new home for his family. If he had known it would take him two years without his family to fight the ignorant Department of Immigration and the equally ignorant Ashkenazi communal leaders, he would have caught the first boat back to India. Aaron was a British citizen and yet the then Australian government would not allow his wife and children to come to Australia. India had become taboo to the government and being Jewish was worse.

One day Aaron, who was on a tourist visa, went to the Department of Immigration in Sydney where he was threatened with deportation if he did not abide by their decision. Aaron told them that he was a British citizen with a British passport. He decided to fight the immigration policy affecting him. Not allowed to work, he had to live on his assets.

He approached the Jewish Board of Deputies and was referred on to its President. Then he was invited to attend a meeting of the ECAJ in Melbourne where he might have been able to address its plenum and ask for help to solve his problem with the immigration authorities. Though asked to speak, the President of the ECAJ told him 'We do not know who you are. You are not white. You are Eurasian or Anglo-Indian. We cannot assist you.' Aaron was so upset that he took off his shoes to throw them at him when he was stopped by the President of the NSW Board of Deputies asking the ECAJ President, 'How far can you trace your family?' Then a representative from Adelaide asked him 'What do you know about Sephardi Jewry? – Nothing! – You should not be insulting our guest. He came seeking our help and this is the way we treat him!'

Aaron had to keep on fighting both the Department of Immigration and the leaders of the Jewish community. The President of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies did arrange a meeting for Aaron and myself with the Department of Immigration, Mr Tasman Heyes to plead our case. The response was the same, 'You have to leave Australia or you will be deported'. My Uncle Jacob Aaron introduced Aaron to the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce who arranged a meeting for him with the Federal Member of Parliament for North Sydney. Within a fortnight a meeting was organised with the Minister for Immigration, Harold Holt, in Canberra where we spent two days of discussion. The Minister seemed very understanding and approved Aaron's stay in Australia and a permanent visa for his family. This took two years and with no help at all from Jewish communal leaders.

Sephardi tradition

At a meeting called by my brother and myself with a few new arrivals from our part of the world, it was decided that if we were to continue with our Sephardi heritage, tunes, and customs, we had to form an association with a view of building a synagogue, the first of its kind in Sydney. And so the NSW Association of Sephardim was formed. I was asked to contact the leaders of the Jewish community for advice and help. Some of these so-called leaders told me:

You are not Jews

You are Indian

You are black

How did we beat the White Australia Policy?

I tried to explain to them that our parents all came from the Middle East of pure Jewish stock, and that we happened to be born in India. They took no notice. We were told to contact Rabbi Dr Porush of the Great Synagogue to ask for his help. His counsel was that that we must build our synagogue, adding that the Sephardim were in fact the princes of Judaism.

In my endeavours to find Sephardi Jews I met two lovely ladies, Mrs Jessie Grant and Mrs Mozelle Ezekiel. Both knew my father and uncle. They informed

me that my grandfather Charles Aaron had come to Australia in 1854 and had been buried in Rookwood Cemetery on 5 August 1904. I contacted the Office of Births, Deaths, and Marriages, and a few days later picked up and read the contents of his death certificate. In 1954 I organised for a headstone to be erected at his grave, exactly 100 years after his arrival in Sydney.

In October 1952, I attended the Maccabean Hall dance with some friends and was attracted to a young girl. I asked her to dance, and learned she was 16 years old and had come from Holland. I considered asking her out but she lived in Manly and I in Bondi. Eze Cohen advised me to do so. Two weeks later I proposed and we were married two years later on 12 September 1954. We celebrated our forty-eighth wedding anniversary only recently. Two wonderful daughters blessed our marriage – Debbie born on 28 January 1958, and Mandie, borne on 25 December 1960. Today we have four beautiful grandchildren – Natalie, Robbie, Cassandra and David.

The Synagogue

The Association held High Holyday services first in the Maccabean Hall dugout conducted by our own Lay Reader, and later in a hall of the Central Synagogue. In June 1961, I went to London to meet the President of the World Sephardi Federation, Mr Sebag Montefiore, to share with him our dreams for our own synagogue. He was convinced of the benefits of the idea and donated two thousand pounds, and provided another two thousand pounds to be repaid whenever we could, subject to a number of conditions.

A Board Meeting was scheduled on 15 July 1961, and he requested that we present our plans for the purchase of a block of land on which to build the synagogue. This was a challenge as I was still in London. I contacted my brother Aaron in Sydney, told him about my discussions, and asked him to arrange a meeting for 28 June.

On my return, I went to this meeting which was also attended by Mr Ralph Leonzini, a real estate agent, and Mr Albert Hassid who worked for T C Whittle Builders. After advising the members of my discussions in London, Mr Leonzini said that he had just the right property for us. He had listed two condemned semis at 40-44 Fletcher Street, Woollahara, which we could buy for four thousand pounds. Albert Hassid said he could arrange for preliminary plans to be drawn up by an architect called Busriel Bulrich.

I knew that the Almighty was on our side, and news of the purchase of land plus the plans were sent to London even before the due date. In early August we received a cheque for four thousand pounds.

Now the problems started. How were we going to raise the balance of the money? We had no money or assets against which to borrow from a bank. The land had been purchased for four thousand pounds less the commission donated back to us. We appealed to the Jewish community at large to help us with funds.

Every night for weeks we worked addressing envelopes together with our appeal letter, but to no avail. Some eight hundred pounds arrived which only just covered the amount spent on printing and postage. We then canvassed door to door, only to have many shut in our face.

In no way did this rejection dent our determination to build our synagogue, and we asked Albert Hassid if he could arrange a meeting with his boss, Mr T C Whittle. Albert Hassid was not happy about it, but nevertheless he arranged the meeting. After a long discussion, the outcome was favourable. He agreed to be the first Catholic builder to build the first Sephardi synagogue in Sydney, Australia, and asked Albert Hassid to personally supervise it. A quantity surveyor quoted that the building would cost twelve thousand pounds. We decided to sign the contract anyway and build with our faith in the Almighty and one hundred pounds in the bank.

We prayed for a miracle and it happened. My brother and I decided to talk to our Aunt Dot (Rachel Aaron) about naming the prayer hall and the communal centre as the 'Jacob Aaron Hall'. She was very excited by this naming, and we added that it would cost about twelve thousand pounds. Anyway God was on our side, and I must say Aunt Dot did a magnificent job. Our uncle, Jacob Aaron, agreed to give us the money.

Plans were drawn up and lodged with Woollahra Council. After many discussions it was approved with no parking conditions applied. Building commenced and the foundation stone was laid by Jacob Aaron himself on Sunday, 15 July 1962. The Synagogue was dedicated on Sunday, 23 September 1962. Both ceremonies were attended by leaders of the Jewish community, politicians from both sides, the Mayor and of course our 160 members.

The Synagogue in all its glory opened for High Holydays. Finally, our own Lay Reader conducted our services in our own Synagogue. We held our first Annual General Meeting of the Sephardi Synagogue on 9 December 1962. I was elected its first Treasurer and became one of the five trustees. Charlie Marshall and myself mastered the art of quickly converting the Prayer Hall into a Community Centre for our *Kiddush* every Saturday, for *Bar/Bat-Mitzvot* and weddings.

We appointed our first Rabbi, Rabbi Simon Silas from London. He arrived in Sydney with his young wife Nadia on Friday, 30 August 1963. Great publicity was given in Jewish papers around the world about the building of the first Sephardi Synagogue in Sydney, Australia. We started to receive letters from people living in Egypt, Iraq, Israel, India and Singapore who all wanted to migrate to Australia but had been advised, 'Under the present Immigration Policy your application for Permanent Residence has been refused'.

The Synagogue Board asked me if there was anything that we could do to assist these people. Again I approached leaders of the Jewish community, only to be refused. Because I was ashamed that Jews were not prepared to help others, particularly those from Arab countries, I sought the assistance from my local

Federal Member for Phillip, Mr William Aston. Our synagogue was situated in the seat of Wentworth, a blue-ribbon Liberal seat where most of our members lived. I appraised Mr Aston of the immigration problem. The electorate of Phillip was a marginal seat. I promised him that in return for help for those Jewish people refused visas on no real grounds, I would make sure that all our Board members would man his voting booths and assist him to get votes he needed. To this day I still work for the Liberal Party.

A few weeks after our meeting, some of the immigrants rejected earlier were given permission to come to Australia. For a second time I met with Mr Tasman Heyes along with Mr William Aston in Canberra. With their support I was able to bring out over 250 Jews who had initially been refused entry. Many of these people were accommodated at my home until such time that I was able to find them jobs – sometimes at Prouds where I worked – and a place to live. My wife prepared huge meals for people we had never met before. After ten years of fighting I was able to bring over my mother, sisters and brother who had all been living in London. It was very rewarding to see our family reunited.

In 1965, I was elected President of the Sephardi Synagogue and together with my fellow Board members, built the War Memorial Hall next to the Synagogue. It was used for *Kiddush*, Sunday school, and other social functions. The Hall was opened on 8 November 1970 by the then State Speaker, Sir Kevin Ellis. It had cost \$56,000, but within two years was paid in full.

Personal honours

I rose to the position of credit manager and then acting store manager. Early in 1973, Hookers took over Prouds with the message that all Prouds' executives had to leave by 31 March that year. My distress was exacerbated by the fact that I had a family to support. Fortunately for me news travelled fast, and one evening Albert Hassid phoned to say that Mr Albeit Scheinberg had heard of me and wanted to offer me a position with Stocks and Holdings.

The June 1972 Queen's Birthday Honours List saw me awarded the 'Order of the British Empire' for services rendered to the Jewish community, and that same year my biography entered the Dictionary of International Biography. I became President of the Synagogue in 1973 with a mandate for the new Board to build a Ladies' Gallery as our synagogue was now bursting at the seams.

In October 1974, I received an invitation to attend a meeting of the World Sephardi Federation in London under the auspices of its new President, Dr Nessim Gaon. The Synagogue Board thought that it was a good opportunity to raise money for the Ladies' Gallery. I had learned that Dr Gaon was a philanthropist and helped Jewish causes. So I asked our architect, Mr Bulrich to draw up new sketch plans. With an estimation of the costs involved, I proposed to approach Dr Gaon.

I spoke to his wife Renee, and on 3 November 1974 caught a plane back to Geneva with them in order to speak to Dr Gaon about this matter. After my return to Australia a letter arrived from him with a cheque for \$50,000. With this

money we arranged for the drawing of proper plans, and the work was completed for the High Holydays with extra seating for 144 people. In November 1975, Dr Solomon Gaon (no relation to Dr Nessim Gaon), the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, along with his wife Regina, arrived in Australia. On Sunday, 30 November 1975, the 'Renee Gaon Ladies' Gallery' was dedicated.

The Chief Rabbi was accorded VIP treatment everywhere he went. He met the Premier of NSW, Mr Tom Lewis, also the Prime Minister, Mr Malcolm Fraser, and had afternoon tea with the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr in Canberra in the presence of some of the leaders of the Jewish Community. The Lord Mayor of Sydney, Mr Leo Port, gave a civic reception in his honour.

In March 1976, I retired from the Synagogue Board and became an Elder. I was once again elected President in 1982 and again from 1988 to 1991. After this last period in office I retired from the Board without office, and only acting as an advisor if asked.

I will never forget the words of the late Rabbi Abrahamson who was asked to speak during one of the openings of our Synagogue, who said, 'Everybody does not have the *Zekuth* to build a new synagogue. You and your colleagues have been chosen by the Almighty to do so'. I believe that I have done my duty for the Jewish Community in Sydney.

Apart from the Sydney Jewish Community, where I have continued to be involved with the UIA, JCA, and the Jewish Board of Education, in my capacity as Manager of the Imperial Arcade in Sydney, I was able to raise large amounts of money for UNICEF, World Vision, and the Prince of Wales Hospital, now known as the Westmead Children's Hospital. Each Christmas, working closely with the Smith Family, I collected hundreds of toys for the under-privileged children of NSW. None of this could have been achieved without the support of my wife and two daughters.

On three occasions I was honoured for my service over 25 years and for activities on behalf of Israel and the Jewish People. In 1994, there was the Certificate of Honour from the United Israel Appeal, in November 1995 a Bronze Medal from Jerusalem, and in November 1998, to celebrate Israel's fiftieth anniversary I was presented with the Max Freilich Award. On Sunday, 28 May 2000, the Historical Society of Australia and the A M Rosenblum Jewish Museum in the Great Synagogue opened an exhibition called 'L'Chaim to Life' celebrating Jewish life in Australia from 1788 to 2000. Among those featured were myself, who had arrived in 1947, and my brother Aaron who came to Sydney in 1950. The Aaron brothers were described as the 'Aristocracy' of the Sephardi Community. Our long-standing commitment to our people and congregation were described as a credit to our families and the Jewish community in Sydney.

On 31 December 2000 I retired from the Stockland trust after a period of 28 years of loyal service. However, this year, 2002, I was elected as the Vice President of the Centre of Ageing in Sydney and the Chairman of its building committee. It looks like my voluntary work in the general community is never ending!

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