

LEAH HASKIN: A TRIBUTE ON HER 100TH BIRTHDAY

Mark Haskin

Leah Haskin (née Wertheim) was born on 13 October 1908. The first child of Solomon and Rachel Wertheim (née Zelikovsky), she was born in Rishon le Zion in Palestine, which at that time was part of the Ottoman Empire. Palestine became a British mandated territory after the First World War.

Solomon Wertheim, her father, was born in 1874 in Bendery, which is situated some 70 kilometres east-south-east of Kishinev. He had already left Kishinev for Paris some years before the notorious Kishinev pogrom of April 1903, which was followed by another in October 1905. In 1895 he was in the audience of a public meeting that was addressed by Theodor Herzl, whose speech profoundly affected him. This, together with the later violence against the Jews in Kishinev, provided the catalyst for Solomon's lifelong commitment to Zionism. He arrived in Rishon le Zion as an immigrant prior to the turn of the century.

Leah's mother Rachel was born in 1885 in Minsk. Her family emigrated to Palestine in 1897. According to Rachel, her family had 'landed in Turkey' and then walked for six weeks to arrive in Rishon le Zion. Rachel and her family may have landed in Beirut and then walked south to that destination, where they settled.

Solomon played an important role in the establishment of the Jewish National Fund and antecedent organisations in Victoria. He was guest of honour at a dinner held in 1938 that paid tribute to his work on behalf of Zionism over the previous 25 years. His portrait now hangs in the board room at the Beth Weizmann Community Centre in honour of his work for the JNF. He was seen to weep tears of joy at a public meeting held to celebrate the proclamation of the State of Israel in May 1948. He died shortly afterwards, in July that year.

According to family folklore, Solomon suggested to Rachel's father that he would in time marry his daughter. Rachel's response was that she would rather 'run away to Jerusalem than marry Solomon'. Rachel did not keep her word: she and Solomon were subsequently married in Jaffa in 1904. The union lasted for 44 years, until Solomon's death in 1948. It produced four children: Leah, Israel (1911–56), his twin Joseph (1911–97), and Theodore (1913–60), who was named after Herzl. Rachel lived until 1982.

Although the couple chose to live in Rishon le Zion owing to its promise of work and refuge, it did not prove to be an ideal location. There were on-going armed skirmishes between the local Arab population and the Jewish settlers that resulted in deaths on both sides. There were also outbreaks of disease.

Leah's husband Henry was also born in Rishon le Zion. He was born on 14

June 1900 and arrived in Australia as a ‘babe in arms’ on 12 December that same year on the *SS Duke of Buccleuch*. Although both he and Leah were born in Rishon le Zion, their respective families did not know each other there.

The Wertheims’ decision to emigrate to Australia was facilitated by the fact that Rachel’s sister Mary (Miriam), wife of Samuel Finkelstein, was living in Perth. The Wertheim family boarded the *SS Bremen* at Port Said in Egypt and arrived at Fremantle on 2 March 1909. The family appears on the passenger list as follows: Solomon Vertheim (painter); Richel Vertheim [Rachel]; Lilu Vertheim [Leah].

According to Solomon Wertheim’s application for naturalisation, which was lodged in April 1911, the family spent only five months in Perth before moving to Mulline near Menzies in the Western Australian goldfields. However, ‘Sol Wertheim’ is only listed in the Western Australian Post Office directories as a miner at Mulline for the years 1911–14 inclusive. It is believed that the family moved to Melbourne in 1914. The Western Australian directories list a Samuel Finkelstein, working as a fruiterer at Mulline in 1910–11 and this explains why Solomon and Rachel moved to Mulline. Rachel had told the author about the tribulations of life at Mulline. Solomon would sometimes be away from home, prospecting. On occasion Rachel would be the only European person living in Mulline, along with many Aboriginals. She was in a dilemma. She did not speak their language and they did not speak Yiddish. Mulline was also susceptible to serious drought. Food and potable water was always scarce. As if to compound the harshness of life at Mulline, Solomon did not make his fortune there.

Both Leah and Henry attended state schools in Carlton. Leah attended Rathdowne Street State School and Henry attended Faraday Street State School. Henry was dux of his school in December 1914. His prize was the 1912 edition of the *Boys’ Own Annual!*

Leah remembers the Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1919, when Solomon brought home the baby of the Hebrew teacher and his wife who were both ill with influenza. Rachel treated Leah and her brothers with Castor oil to prevent infection. The treatment ‘seemed to work’, as Leah and her brothers were not infected!

Solomon was reported by a military policeman, as a result of being overheard ‘talking in German’ to a Mr Cohen during the Easter holiday period in April 1918 at Cowes on Phillip Island. This was six months prior to the end of the First World War. The policeman had not been able to distinguish between Yiddish and German!

Leah and Henry were married on Thursday 19 November 1931 at the Toorak Road Synagogue. The marriage was solemnised by Rabbi Israel Brodie, who later became Chief Rabbi of the British Empire and Commonwealth. The marriage lasted 48 years until Henry’s death in 1980. It produced three children: Leon, born in 1933, Ruth, born in 1937, and Mark, born in 1943.

Leah is a woman of principle, courage and integrity, with a concern for humanitarian values. This can be illustrated by several examples.

The first example relates to her role in saving one family from persecution. On a Friday afternoon in the late 1930s she was reading the local weekly Jewish newspapers. At that time, the persecution of the Jews in Germany was worsening. This resulted in German Jews becoming increasingly desperate to escape the persecution. Jews wishing to emigrate to Australia who did not have Australian relatives willing and able to help needed to find an Australian citizen to act as sponsor. The Commonwealth mandated the need for sponsors. Consequently, an increasing number of German Jews would advertise in the local Australian Jewish newspapers seeking someone to help them escape the persecution. Leah saw one such advertisement and encouraged Henry to act as sponsor. Henry agreed and one such family was brought to Australia. Leah has told me that she chose that particular advertisement because the couple seeking refuge had a child.

The second example happened relatively recently. When Leah's 95th birthday was approaching in 2003, I suggested to Leah that an application could be made whereby she could receive congratulations from the prime minister. Her adamant refusals were based on humanitarian grounds. She firmly believed that the mandatory detention of asylum seekers (particularly women and children) by the government of the day was both unnecessarily harsh and utterly unconscionable.

The third example relates to Leah's diagnosis with cancer in 2004. Her initial reaction was to use a few most uncharacteristically 'choice words'. She then quickly accepted the situation for what it was, faced the surgery with great equanimity, and went on to make a full and most impressive recovery.

Now in her 100th year, she lives independently, shops by herself, walks as often as she can and keeps her mind active with word games and playing card games with a group of friends. She keeps the score at cards and eschews the use of a calculator.

Leah's integrity and *joie de vivre* are inspirational to all who know her.

Author's note

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