

JEWISH NORTHBRIDGE

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PREAMBLE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 2005, at the initiative of the Premier of Western Australia, Hon Geoff Gallop, the Northbridge History Project was established within the State's Department of Premier and Cabinet. Originally swampy land and a series of small lakes around which lived the Nyoongar people, the Northbridge district is located just north of the main central city block and is deemed to be of significant historical importance in the development of the city and the State. After the completion of the Fremantle to Perth railway line

In 1881, its one and a half square kilometres was the area to which successive waves of new arrivals gravitated—British, Irish, Chinese, Jewish, Greek, Italian and Vietnamese among others. As part of the Project, each year from 2007 to 2010, a Northbridge Studies Day was held, attended by a broad cross-section of the general community and at which a range of special interest papers were read. The following article is based on the 2008 oral presentation by Dr Keith Shilkin and its subsequent publication in 2009.* The permission of Professor Richard Nile, General Editor, Dr John Yiannakis and Dr Felicity Morel-EdnieBrown, Volume Editors, and the publisher, Network Books of the API Network-Curtin University of Technology is gratefully acknowledged

INTRODUCTION

The Jewish history of Northbridge was centred around the Perth synagogue which was located in Brisbane Street towards the north-east area of what has become known as Northbridge but was, at the

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time of its construction in the 1890s, simply considered to be part of Perth. The Jewish community of Northbridge originated from a range of geographic and cultural backgrounds but it successfully developed a considerable level of cohesion. Religious practices varied but broad accommodation of traditions was, in the main, achieved. Its hallmarks included its relatively painless integration into the life and general endeavours of the broader community, its loyalty, its self-sufficiency and the substantial contribution its Jewish citizens made to the advancement of the State.

The Beginnings

The Jewish presence in the Swan River Colony commenced essentially at its foundation with the arrival in Fremantle of Lionel Sampson on 5 August 1829 on the *Calista*.¹ Sampson, from a well-to-do English Jewish family, became an eminent citizen in many ways and, although maintaining a Jewish life style in the early days of the Colony was difficult, he identified with his Jewish background. In 1842, he sailed to England where he married his Jewish bride, Fanny Levi. They returned to the colony and Lionel continued his business and other interests, while he and Fanny raised their family of six children.

The Jewish community of the colony increased in the penal era between 1850 and 1868 during which time at least twenty-seven Jewish convicts were transported.² As the 1890s approached, the Jewish population located in the Fremantle area was approximately fifty,³ many of the new arrivals being from England or the other Australian colonies. In 1887, the community leaders in Fremantle formed the Western Australian Hebrew Congregation but already the migration influx had resulted in more Jews tending to reside in the Perth area. Between 1881 and 1891, the Jewish population had increased by 129 so that the colony now had in the vicinity of 200 Jews divided between Fremantle and Perth, as well as numbers in rural and remote areas.⁴

Perth soon became the clearly favoured destination for new arrivals.⁵ On 13 November 1892 the first recorded meeting of the

Table 1
Phases relating to the Jewish Northbridge experience

1	Pre-Northbridge	1829 – 1892
2	The Northbridge Era	1892 – 1951
3	The Transitional Phase	1951 – 1974
4	Post Northbridge	1974 –

Perth Hebrew Congregation was convened.⁶ This signalled the beginning of the community's Northbridge era which continued to grow and gain strength for the next sixty or so years after which time the population drift towards more northerly suburbs began to have an impact on communal life. The unfortunate demolition of the Brisbane Street synagogue in 1973 signalled the end of the Jewish Northbridge era (see Table 1).

The Early Years

At that November 1892 meeting, held at the home of Solomon Levi Horowitz in Stirling Street, Perth, the decision was taken to establish the Perth Hebrew Congregation (PHC).⁷ The small but growing congregation of the PHC held its first services in the home of Mr and Mrs H Sam Cohen also in Stirling Street. In 1893, Jewish Festival services were held in the Perth Club Rooms. In 1894, as the



The Brisbane Street Synagogue of the Perth Hebrew Congregation, c.1899.

(Courtesy: K Shilkin and the Perth Hebrew Congregation, NBHIM 02331)

Western Australian gold rush developed, communal numbers grew considerably, approaching 500, causing services to be moved to Oddfellows Hall in Hutt Street, now William Street, where they were held until 1897. In January 1895, through the new President and Treasurer, Nathan Harris and Phineas Seeligson, the PHC wrote to the Commissioner of Crown Lands, Sir John Forrest, requesting consideration of a land grant at the corner of Francis and Beaufort Streets, their letter indicating that they, together with Elias Solomon and William Frederick Samson, both of Fremantle, would act as Trustees; this was an example of the amply documented frequent co-operation between the Fremantle and the Perth congregations and indicates a continuity between the two. In the event, the Government offered Perth Town Lot N38 in Brisbane Street, east of William Street. In quick succession, the PHC built a fine synagogue in the Moorish style (Figure 1) completed in 1897, an adjacent Minister's residence, and a row of cottages fronting Robinson Avenue on the south side of the grant.

The other vital activity was to engage a Minister, which resulted in the recruitment from England of Reverend David Isaac Freedman who took up his appointment, also in 1897. Freedman's appointment proved to be a triumph as he set the tone of the relationships not only within the Jewish community but also with the wider community of Western Australia. He continued as the religious leader until his death in June 1939, having made a significant contribution to the State and the Nation, not least in his role as Chaplain-Major in the battlefields of World War I.



*Rabbi David Isaac Freedman wearing his medals earned
as Chaplain-Major in World War One
(Courtesy: Perth Hebrew Congregation, NBHIM00566)*

As the Jewish population in Perth continued to grow, it surpassed that of Fremantle, which declined. By the turn of the century, there were just over 1,200 Jews in the State mainly living in the Northbridge area. At this point they represented 0.7 per cent of the State's population, the highest proportion attained either before or since, and there was a relatively higher proportion in and around Northbridge. The postal records displayed at the Jewish Northbridge exhibition held at the Stuart Street Gallery in 2006,⁸ demonstrated that many Jewish families had settled in the area around Brisbane Street, tending northwards towards Highgate and North Perth.

The population growth soon outgrew the synagogue, especially the upstairs ladies gallery that consequently needed to be enlarged; the work was completed in 1904. To further cater to the growing religious, educational and cultural needs of the community, land immediately adjacent to the Synagogue was obtained (Perth Town Lot N37). A hall, the Princes Hall, named for George, Prince of Wales, was built on the land between the synagogue and the Robinson Avenue cottages; its first purpose was as a religion school but it served rather as a general communal hall for myriad social and other functions. The hall, together with the synagogue, was the focal point of a rich communal religious and secular life.

The Religious Aspects

Demographic data shows that a majority of the Jewish arrivals up to the turn of the century were from England or the other Australian colonies,⁹ the so-called Anglos.¹⁰ However, especially from the late 1890s, significant numbers came from Eastern Europe and Russia, notably White Russia, the Ukraine and the Baltic States; these were Yiddish speaking, the so called Yiddishers.

From 1900 through the 1920s, the community was also enhanced by arrivals from Palestine among others from the United Kingdom and Eastern Europe. The Anglos' religious practice at the PHC with Freedman followed the style of the Chief Rabbi in London. First at Fremantle and then at Perth, the Sabbath-religion schools, conducted by knowledgeable volunteers, followed this style. The growing numbers of Yiddishers felt a need for their religious practice to be more in keeping with their tradition. This, as well as a certain cultural affinity, led the Yiddishers to form a separate Perth Jewish Association, which became incorporated in 1909. It originally held services in a house in Monger Street, then in the Protestant Hall in Beaufort Street, and continued to attract adherents from among the Yiddishers and the Palestinians. In August 1917, the Association purchased land in Palmerston Street

near the western end of Brisbane Street where they proceeded to build a synagogue. This was a much smaller building than the PHC synagogue, catering to a much smaller congregation, the fortunes of which waxed then waned over time. The 'little *shule*' as it was known was demolished in 1973.

A kosher butcher shop was established around 1913 at the corner of William and Aberdeen Streets, to cater for the community's expectation for such food (Figure 3). This was the first of a series of possibly three kosher shops in Northbridge, the last being La Mottes at the corner of William and Brisbane Streets.



*The Kosher butcher shop at the corner of
William and Aberdeen Streets c.1913.
(Courtesy: J Helfand, NBHIM 00551)*

Religious education, as with education generally, has always been important in Judaism. The first visit of a qualified Jewish Minister, Reverend Abraham Tobias Boas of Adelaide in 1891,¹¹ promoted the idea of a Hebrew and Religious School to the Fremantle community who received it enthusiastically, as also did

the Perth community. As a result, the first school commenced in the home of Henry Seeligson in St Georges Terrace, Perth. Boas' second visit in 1896 also emphasised education and he inaugurated the Perth Hebrew School, established by the PHC to cater to the fifty or so children. The number of children taught in the Princes Hall from 1905 onwards grew and, by 1913, the number enrolled was 184 boys and girls. Reverend Freedman was its headmaster. His influence, among other factors, may be judged by the sharp drop in numbers to just fifty-four by 1918, the period during which he was away at the War. A rival school, Honig's Hebrew Speaking School, conducted in the Zionist Club in James Street, attracted some following but with the rejuvenation of the Perth Hebrew School after Freedman's return, the two soon were merged.

As the Jewish population slowly recovered after World War I and climbed from around 2000, again the synagogue needed to be enlarged. Structural modifications were made in 1928, producing the synagogue's final shape. The base was widened and the apex at the front was raised, becoming higher than the cupola that was thus somewhat dwarfed (Figure 4).



*The Brisbane Street Synagogue after final enlargement, 1928.
(Courtesy: B Walters, NBHIM 00508)*

With the improvement of economic conditions after the Depression of the early 1930s, it was decided to build a small purpose-designed school and hall on vacant land between Brisbane Street and Robinson Avenue. Comprising eight classrooms and a headmaster's office, as well as a hall (Monash Hall), it was completed in 1936. Hundreds of children of the community received their Jewish religious, historical and cultural education in this Northbridge building until it faded in importance in the 1960s with the advent of a full-time Jewish day school in the suburb of Dianella-Carmel School-located on land that was to become the focus of Jewish activity later on.

Communal Life

Second only to making arrangements for their religious requirements, the Jewish community formed organisations to care for those of its members in need. Even when comprised of such small numbers, the Fremantle community, in 1891, formed a Jewish Mutual Aid Society. In Perth, in 1896, a Ladies Benevolent Society was established, quickly becoming active in the social and charitable side of Jewish life. That the religious and charitable aspects of the community could coalesce, as it did on so many occasions, may be seen, for example, when, on Sunday 12 December 1897, at a special service held for Western Australia's Hospital Sunday, a collection was raised for donation to the Perth Children's Hospital Fund. In 1898, a Perth Hebrew Philanthropic Society was formed to distribute charity to the community but PHC charity was non-exclusive and it identified with appeals for hospitals and other endeavours in the wider community. A Jewish Girls Guild was formed in 1903 to help distressed women and children, for voluntary duties in hospitals to both Jewish and non-Jewish causes and, during World War I, providing support to the Red Cross with the collection of comforts for the men serving overseas. At one stage, immediately after World War I, a Jewish Young Peoples' Charity Organisation was formed to assist war widows and their dependents.

In 1913, the members of the Perth Jewish Association formed a Free Loan Society, an organisation that continues to this day. So too does the WA Branch of the Australian Jewish Welfare Society, a descendent of the original Immigration Welfare Society formed in 1926, re-formed as the Western Australian Jewish Welfare Society in 1937 and merged with the Philanthropic Society in 1974 to create its current structure.

Although there were, occasionally, internal 'turf' disputes, newcomers to the Perth area were well served by the support offered

by these societies. By 1921, the Jewish population of the State was around 2000, with 80 per cent living within the boundaries of the City of Perth,¹² the numbers having virtually doubled from the early 1900s. For the next thirty years there was only slow growth of the Jewish population due to relatively small migrant numbers arriving before and just after World War II, most having left the Nazi ravages of Europe, with approximately 243 names being identified and listed.¹³ Nevertheless, there was plenty for the Jewish welfare agencies to do, at first mainly in Northbridge, less so in that area as time passed and the Jewish population spread beyond the precinct.

In addition to sometimes-lavish private entertainment, communal social activities were always popular. Perhaps the first organisation to be formed along these lines was the Perth Hebrew Literary Society that began in 1896, and for many years it arranged programmes of lectures, musical items and literary topics. Participants included eminent people from within and beyond the Jewish community. These early functions were often held in the Bohemian Hall, then in the Princes Hall. In 1908, the Society became the Perth Hebrew Literary and Social Society to reflect its activities in holding dances, picnics and river cruises. As early as 1899, a highlight of Perth's social calendar was the Annual Jewish Ball. Over the years it was held in the Perth Town Hall, St George's Hall, the Young Australia League Ballroom, and elsewhere. Later there was a Jewish Dramatic Club that arranged and presented plays, usually in the Princes Hall. A Jewish Glee Club that organised dances operated in the first three decades of the new century; its functions included fancy dress balls, which were held in the Princes Hall and also in Millman's Hall at 177 Brisbane Street. These were in addition to the Annual Jewish Ball. These various activities were patronised mainly by the Anglos.

The Yiddishers interests at this time were somewhat different including an awareness of a need for Jewish regeneration. They were attracted to the first Zionist association in Australia, the Perth Zionist Society, formed in 1900 by Reverend Freedman. Their activities also tended to be of a social nature. They held meetings at the Perth Jewish Association's hired premises, the Protestant Hall, but their numbers were small and the society faded. Nevertheless, it vigorously revived in 1913 and held meetings at the Zionist Club rooms located in Brisbane Street west of the synagogue (perhaps number 177). As the Zionist Club's activities — lectures, dances, discussion groups, and social outings — flourished, the Literary Society began to decline. The PHC and Reverend Freedman then facilitated the formation of a Western Australian Zionist Association in 1913 that brought the disparate elements together. With a

membership of over 300, their meetings moved to Mitchell Chambers in the city, then to a building at 82A James Street and finally to Millman's Hall, sometimes also referred to as the Zionist Hall. This hall was the venue for their Freak Ball held at least in 1923 and 1924 (Figure 5), perhaps for a few more years as well.



The WA Zionist athletic Club Annual Freak Ball, 15 June 1924, organised by Roy Shilkin, at 177 Brisbane Street, (Courtesy: from the personal papers of the late Roy Shilkin MBE OAM in the author's possession, NBHIM 002328)

Like all Australians, the youth of the community had a keen interest in sport. This manifested at the communal level first in 1924 with the conversion of part of the vacant Brisbane Street land alongside the synagogue into asphalt tennis courts and the formation of an active tennis club. Also in 1924, the WA Zionist Athletics Club (WAZAC) formed with activities in gymnasium, cricket, soccer and basketball (netball). Two cricket teams were fielded in the local organised competition, as were basketball teams. The soccer team (Figure 6) became known as the Maccabeans and has played under this name or its successors to this day. Its home ground was the Esplanade on the Perth city foreshore. Over the years, several players made the WA State soccer team.



Maccabean Soccer Team c.1930.

*Back (l to r) Leo Same, M Rebe, Sol Becove, Zalman Tiompkin,
J Berlinsky, Wally Kino.*

*Centre (l to r) Hymie Hoffman, Bruce Hoffman, Sam Same, Reuben
Steinberg.*

Front (l to r) Goldenberg, Fred Paskoff, Phil Shilkin.

(Courtesy: S Krasnostein, NBHIM 00529)

The WAZAC and its successors, the Maccabean League of WA (later incorporated), the Maccabean Youth Club and WA Maccabi Inc continued to administer sporting activities.¹⁴ The highlight was the annual interstate sporting Jewish Carnival held over the Christmas-New Year period,¹⁵ to which WA joined in 1926-27, sending a contingent of nineteen to Melbourne. To celebrate Western Australia's Centenary Year in 1929, the Fifth Jewish Interstate Carnival of 1929-30 was held in Perth with teams from Victoria and NSW travelling across the Nullarbor. In the post World War II period, Jewish youngsters played informal sport on weekends at the Brisbane Street lot, at Dorien Gardens off Fitzgerald Street and at Woodville Reserve in North Perth, mingling with others from the neighbourhoods; these were the training

grounds for the more serious senior sport's teams to which they aspired. At this time, the various organised sporting clubs came under the umbrella of the Maccabean League which in the early 1950s began to consider alternatives for a home ground as the demographic move out of Northbridge continued apace.

As may be gauged, there was a richness of Jewish life from the earliest days in Northbridge that only continued to improve as the numbers increased. By 1935 the Communal Directory published in the *Westralian Judean* of 1 October 1935 listed fifteen welfare, social, sporting, and artistic organisations (Table 2). Listed as well were the religious groups of the PHC, the WA Jewish Education Board and the Chevra Kadisha (the burial society) and also a WA Zionist League with interests in supporting the Jewish population in the British Mandate in Palestine.

Table 2
Jewish Northbridge Communal Directory 1935

Welfare, Social, Sporting and Artistic Organisations
Ladies Benevolent Society Perth Hebrew Philanthropic Society Jewish Free Loan Society The National Junior Council of Jewish Women of Australia Jewish Girls Guild Council of Jewish Women of WA No 56 WA Scout Group – The Monash Troop Young Men's Hebrew Association WA Jewish Returned Soldiers Circle The Maccabean Soccer Club The WA Zionist Athletic Club The Jewish United Dramatic Company The Hebrew Dramatic Company Judean Debating and Literary Society <i>The Westralian Judean</i>

Public Life

From the outset, Jews participated actively in the life of the general community and displayed the characteristics associated with the building of a successful civil society in Western Australia.¹⁶ Lionel Sampson of Fremantle had set an example in this regard. He was a leading member of society, he served his fellow colonists in many ways and he became a member of the Legislative Council, appointed

by Governors Fitzgerald, Kennedy and Hampton. In the Perth community, from 1890 onwards, there were many who made significant contributions. Reverend Freedman set the pace. As outlined by P. Masel, the list of voluntary duties, committees and organisations he became associated with is amazing:

Among the more important positions which he held were: member of the University Senate; trustee to the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery; State President of the Returned Soldiers League; President of the Children's Protection Society; President of the Victoria League, Institute and School for the Blind, and the Soldier's Scholarship Trust; Chairman of the Prison Gate Committee, and of the Education Board for children of deceased soldiers; Past Senior Grand Warden of WA Freemasons; President of the Perth Repertory Club', (and others).¹⁷

Over the years other Jewish organisations and numerous individuals were associated with the broader community's charitable and societal and civic endeavours.

The Jewish community was particularly active in the business and commercial world in and around Northbridge. 'Boan Bros' emporium in the city, just over the railway line from Northbridge, operated from 1895 by Harry Boan, became a household name. Benjamin Rosenstamm's tannery, started in 1888, was located at the corner of Aberdeen and Sutherland Streets at the western edge of Northbridge. There were several bag stores in the area: Zeitlin's in Lake Street, Millman's at 177 Brisbane Street and Solomon Shilkin's in Lane Street. Ritcher's corner store was at Brisbane and Dangan Streets and Millman's garage was in William Street. Later there was Krasnostein's hardware at Lake and Bulwer Streets, Moldavsky's grocery shop at the corner of Lake and Amy Streets, Bensky's furniture store in James Street then Beaufort Street, S & L furniture store in Newcastle Street, Pilpel's printing business in Stirling Street, and Topelberg's 'Perth General Dealers' in William Street. In the 1930s, in William Street, between Bulwer and Brisbane Streets, there was also Levitt's factory and later, in the 1940s, between James and Roe Streets, their hardware store.

Dr M. Kasner Moss, who became President of the British Medical Association WA Branch, the first of seven Jewish British Medical Association or Australian Medical Association State presidents, was the local doctor whose practice was at the corner of Lake and Brisbane Streets. Other medical practitioners were located outside the Northbridge area, as were several prominent lawyers,

accountants and other professionals in the period up to the late 1940s.

Perhaps the contribution that best exemplified the Jewish community's loyalty, support, identification and participation in the spirit of the Australian ethos was its wholehearted response to the national effort during World War One.¹⁸ From its small population of around 1600 in 1914, a total of 180 Western Australian Jews served overseas in the War of whom 47 were killed in action or died of wounds.¹⁹ In December 1919, Governor Sir Francis Newdegate unveiled the Jewish War Memorial in Kings Park, the foundation stone of which had been laid by perhaps Australia's greatest Jewish figure, General Sir John Monash, paying honour and acknowledging the inordinate commitment to the war effort of the local Jewish community. In World War Two there was again a strong Jewish response,²⁰ with 239 enlisting in the Navy, Army and Air Force, and a further 52 giving service in ancillary bodies.²¹ Like Rabbi Freedman before him, the new Rabbi of the PHC, Rabbi Louis Rubin-Zacks, volunteered for service overseas as Chaplain in the Second AIF and served in the jungles of New Guinea in forward camps as well as in the bases.²² The names of those killed in action in the various theatres of War between 1939 and 1945 were added to those from World War One in the Kings Park Jewish War Memorial. (In light of the topicality of the recent discovery of *HMAS Sydney* off the WA coast, it is worthy of note that Ordinary Seaman L. Rothbaum of the Perth Jewish community was lost at sea with that ship).

Not least, but perhaps not specifically a Northbridge topic, was the contribution of Jews to local, State and Federal Government as council members, mayors, or members of parliament, a subject worthy of a separate analysis. Another subject worthy of its own description, also in the context of the public life of the community, is the way in which the children from different backgrounds interacted at the local schools, particularly Highgate Primary School. Here the camaraderie especially between the Jewish children and those of Greek background is still remarked upon when members of those groups are together.

The Era of Transition

When the Perth City Council gave notice in 1951 that sporting fixtures were no longer to be played on the Perth foreshore Esplanade that had long been the home ground of the Maccabean Soccer Club, it precipitated a decision that was to change forever the character of Jewish Northbridge. In 1952, the Maccabean League of WA decided to purchase nine hectares of bush land in the suburb of

Yokine in order to establish a replacement ground for its soccer teams and for other sporting and communal purposes. Even from the 1920s and 1930s, more so through the 1940s and then into the 1950s, the Jewish population had been moving from the central Perth-Northbridge area and extending into Highgate, North Perth and Mt Lawley. With the prospect of a shift of communal activities even further to the north at the planned Yokine facilities, this pattern of movement grew apace. In 1952, the entrance pillars of the new Maccabean Memorial Park were constructed and Rabbi Dr Israel Brodie, the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, officially opened it. In 1954, Rabbi Rubin-Zacks consecrated the sports oval, which had been prepared. The Maccabean League relinquished use of the Princes Hall in Brisbane Street, presaging its eventual demise as a place for communal gatherings. The Temple David Congregation for progressive Judaism purchased its property in Clifton Crescent, Mt. Lawley, in 1954 in response to the demographic shift.

Soon after Rabbi Shalom Coleman became the PHC Minister in 1965, on the retirement of Rabbi Rubin-Zacks, he recognised the need to have a synagogue closer to the Jewish population areas. In 1967, the PHC was granted land in Menora and completed the building of a new synagogue in 1974.²³ Many of the artefacts from the Brisbane Street synagogue were transferred and incorporated into the new structure. At that point the old synagogue was demolished and the site sold to the Post Office. This moment, together with the purchase by the City of Perth of the Palmerston Street synagogue and its demolition around the same time, marked the end of the Jewish Northbridge era.

However, these events also signalled a new, more exciting and positive phase in the growth and development of the State's Jewish community. The Northbridge era had provided a solid basis for a new focus in the more northerly suburbs where they could continue to care for their own religious and other requirements, as well as maintaining their contributions to the life of the city, the state and the nation of which they are such a vital and integral part.²⁴

ENDNOTES

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