LOUIS PULVER (1855-1897): HEAVEN-BORN INSTRUCTOR OF YOUTH

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Generations of Sydney Jews were proud to say, 'I won the Pulver Prize'. In a Jewish sense this carried almost the same cachet as the Pulitzer Prize in the United States, named after a Jewish newspaper publisher. The Pulver Prize honoured a late nineteenth-century Jewish educator and musician whose pupils would have echoed the phrase made popular in Reader's Digest many decades later, 'My Most Unforgettable Teacher'. Winners of the Pulver Prize were listed on an honour board at the Great Synagogue, Sydney, the scene of much of Pulver's activity.[1]

One could write a whole paper on Australian Jewish Pulvers, ranging from Rev. Isaac Pulver, Louis' father, to Professor Lisa Jackson Pulver, the Aboriginal academic who became a synagogue president, with others along the way, but it is Louis Pulver to whom this present paper is dedicated. His family connections take in significant Australian figures such as Rabbi A.T. Boas of the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation and his distinguished family, as well as the famous South Australian Solomons (with their connection to Sister Mary MacKillop,[2] who was befriended by Emanuel Solomon at a time of difficulty). There are also some non-Jewish Pulvers in various parts of Australia. 'Pulver' means 'powder', from the Latin *pulvis*, dust, and it is linked with the English verb 'to pulverize'. It is an Ashkenazic surname (an American version is Pulwer), possibly denoting an apothecary (in Hebrew *roke'ah*, which is also a well-known family name); it is connected with Pulvermacher, a maker of gunpowder.

Louis' father Isaac was a competent, learned Jew, born in Germany early in the nineteenth century. He had a traditional Jewish education as well as a good voice and an aptitude for languages, so that we find him in various countries exercising the skills of minister, teacher, cantor, *shohet* and *mohel* – and language tutor. He came to England as a young man (the date is not certain) and in 1840 in Birmingham married Rosetta Hadkins, also known as Solomon, who was born in about 1815 in Gloucestershire.[3] Hadkins is a version of a European

Jewish surname; it might originally have been Hutkin or Gutkind. Not much is known about Rosetta Hadkins' family. A John Hadkins (Moshe ben Yaakov), presumably a relative, was born in 1804 and buried in a Jewish cemetery in London in 1885. He had married Maria Woolf at the Great Synagogue, London, in 1829. Edward Hadkins, possibly Rosetta's brother, lived in Melbourne in 1851, when he gave three guineas to the synagogue building fund.[4] If Rosetta, indeed, was his sister, this might explain why the Pulver family chose to come to Australia. At least one male descendant of Rosetta bore the first name Atkins; the females were sometimes called Rosetta, though none seems to have had the first name Isaac after Rev. Isaac Pulver.

Isaac and Rosetta had six children (maybe others were stillborn), four born in England and two in Australia.[5] Adela was born in Cheltenham, England, and married her cousin Judah Moss Solomon of Adelaide; they had two children, John (Jacob) and Elias. Jacob (John) Wolf was born in Cheltenham (does his name indicate that Isaac's father was Jacob Wolf?); he died at 17 in Melbourne. Sarah was also born in Cheltenham (her birth certificate calls it Chiltingham); she married a relative, Samuel Isaac Solomon and died in childbirth. They had two children, Adela Sybil (later Mrs Isaac Herbert Boas) and Harold Isaac. Miranda was born in Cheltenham, the last of the children to be born in England. Subsequently, Solomon was born in Melbourne, where he belonged to communal committees and Louis was born in Melbourne and also never married; when he was ill in Sydney he was looked after by a sister, 'Miss Pulver'; the *Jewish Herald* obituary of Louis calls her 'his only sister'. Thus, of the six children, only two married and had families.

Though a *shohet*, Isaac is not listed in Solomon Hirschell's Kabbalah Book of London, which enumerates *shohetim* authorised by the chief rabbi.[6] Isaac was appointed 'reader' to the Cheltenham Jewish congregation in 1839 and spent ten years there.[7] As well as conducting services he was the religious factotum and was paid £5/16/8 per month, complaining that it was not enough to support his family. In 1845, when he tried to resign, the 75-member congregation increased his salary to £6/15/- per month; they liked him but could not afford a larger sum. He advertised himself as 'Professor of the Hebrew and German Languages' and taught Hebrew to local Christian clergy.

Isaac Pulver was one of the first Anglo-Jewish ministers to preach in the vernacular. His congregation reported to the *Jewish Chronicle*, 'Our brethren have been lately delighted by a series of religious discourses, delivered by their reader, the Rev. Mr. Pulver'.[8] When he finally left Cheltenham in 1849, they told the chief rabbi, 'It will be long before we become reconciled to a change'.[9]

Chief Rabbi Nathan Marcus Adler sent him to Cape Town as the first Jewish clergyman in South Africa. He stayed only two years and officially left for health reasons, though the truth is that he was disappointed at the religious laxity of the congregation and did not wish to bring up his children in that environment.[10]

The family moved to Australia and settled in Melbourne in 1851.[11] Isaac by then was almost 50. He dabbled in business without much success, though when he had money he gave five guineas to the synagogue building fund and bought some or all of Dr David Hailperin's Hebrew library.[12] For a while he was a committee member of the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation and local educational bodies and then became assistant reader at the Melbourne and subsequently East Melbourne Synagogues. From 1854-59 he was *shohet* for the Bourke Street Synagogue (Melbourne Hebrew Congregation) and from 1860 for East Melbourne. He was a member of the Melbourne Beth Din with Revs S. Herman and M. Rintel; when he left subsequently for Tasmania he was replaced by Woolf Davis. It was he who wrote to the chief rabbi urging the creation of the Beth Din, an indication of the level of his rabbinical knowledge. In 1871 he went to Hobart as minister and *shohet* but died there in 1873.[13] His tombstone does not mention his family, which may or may not be significant.

Gravestone of Rev Isaac Pulver, Hobart.
Photo courtesy of David and Pnina Clark, 7 July 2014

As mentioned, his son Louis was born in Melbourne in 1855 and was educated there. From his father he gained a good Jewish knowledge and training in synagogue *nussah* (traditional melodies), though he followed Rintel's style of *hazzanut* (cantorial music).[14] His secular education came from the Jewish day school and the Melbourne Model School. He specialized in music and gained a certificate in music from the Victorian Education Department. He financed most of his studies by working as a warehouse assistant for Feldheim, Jacobs and Company for three or four years.

Louis was a competent violinist, pianist and organist,[15] and could handle other instruments. He was honorary secretary to the local orchestral society, composed music for some of Longfellow's poems and taught music and singing, but his main focus was within the Jewish community. His Jewish career initially centred on the East Melbourne Hebrew Congregation[16] where he was choirmaster, secretary, teacher and headmaster, He did not enjoy the secretarial work and had problems with Nathaniel Levi.[17] He also felt dissatisfied with his work with the choir, partly because he could not recruit enough boy choristers.

Where he shone was as a teacher, even though he did not have formal teaching qualifications. He did have a philosophy of teaching: he said, 'My first and principal duty is to make my pupils good; to instil knowledge comes next'.[18] This of course echoes the moralistic tone of nineteenth century education. He had an amazing rapport with his pupils; it is said that there was an electric current in his classroom.[19] His classes were so popular that money had to be spent on enlarging the synagogue classroom. Classes took place on Sunday mornings and three afternoons a week after school. There was a carefully crafted syllabus. Boys and girls were taught separately and no child could be promoted to the next class without passing Pulver's test. The day's lessons concluded with the singing of 'God Save the Queen' – in Hebrew.

School did not begin and end in the classroom. Pulver was creative in the extracurricular activities he spearheaded and conducted - even to the extent of providing biscuits with coloured icing. Everyone wanted to come to his picnics at Brighton Beach and to his birthday parties, because he was like everybody's uncle. All-in-all as an educator he was far ahead of his time.

Pulver involved himself in a range of other activities. He raised funds for the Young Jewish Men's Russian Relief Fund. He was active in the Melbourne Jewish Club, though he was less than impressed when the club sold *hametz* drinks (containing leaven from prohibited grains) on *Pesah* (Passover). He was secretary of the Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society. His musical interests included the Melbourne

Artists' Society, dedicated to classical music, where he was the librarian. With his sister Miranda he lived in Richmond, within walking distance of the city synagogues.

Yet Pulver worried that he was being taken for granted. Following the early death of Hyman Isaacs, headmaster of the Sydney Jewish Education Board, in 1884, he applied for the position and was appointed, a position he filled until ill health forced him to resign in 1896.[20] East Melbourne tried to retain him and offered to increase his salary, bit it was too late. Melbourne showered him with farewell functions and testimonials, and so many children wanted to bid him farewell that a whole series of parties had to be organized, and children and adults alike wept at his going. Crowds (including Rabbi Dr Joseph Abrahams) came to the station to see him off on the Sydney train on 7 January 1885. Melbourne never knew another teacher like Pulver, even though the years produced a number of very competent educators. Amongst the latter was Rabbi L.M. Goldman, whose *Jews in Victoria in the Nineteenth Century*[21] records Pulver's achievements.

Pulver was still in his 20s when he moved to Sydney in 1884. He spent thirteen years there before his passing, aged 42, still unmarried. In one sense he had no offspring; in another he was like Mr Chips with thousands of children, though the story-book Mr Chips did not have girls amongst his pupils.

Sydney's new headmaster was the same Pulver who had worked in education in Melbourne, blessed with irrepressible energy and ideas - yet this was a more mature Pulver who not only relied on instinct and inborn talent but worked out educational ideas and policies that reflected and enhanced the thinking of the time. He was once again the musical stalwart of the community, acting as officiate and choirmaster when necessary and giving occasional sermons when the chief minister, Rev. A.B. Davis, was away. He was known for his clear enunciation of English, and argued cogently in communal debates. He prepared solid research papers for the Jewish Literary Society. He ran Sabbath afternoon services for children for a mostly locally-resident community.

Louis Pulver on his tricycle.
This photo appears in Volume III, AJHS Journal, p.71.

As in Melbourne, Pulver involved himself in musical organisations and literary societies, but now he became a writer of considerable merit and accomplishment. If textbooks did not exist, he wrote them. Guides to the prayer book and Bible, vocabulary exercises, explanations of Hebrew grammar - all appeared from his fertile pen.[22] His writings proved in many respects to be superior even to those in England. It might also be said that in Pulver, the Australian Jewish community had a greater educator than many of his counterparts in England – with the honourable exception of the famous Moses Angel of the Jews' Free School.[23] Not least amongst Pulver's books was his famous *First Bible Stories for Little People*, first printed in 1889 and subsequently re-issued several times.[24] Rev Morris Rosenbaum, the scholarly minister of the Borough Synagogue in South London, revised the last edition, published in 1930.[25] The success of the work has much to with the author's ability – as he explains in his preface – 'to bring down to the mental capacities of young children the histories contained in the earlier portions of the Bible, and the principal moral truths which they teach'.[26]
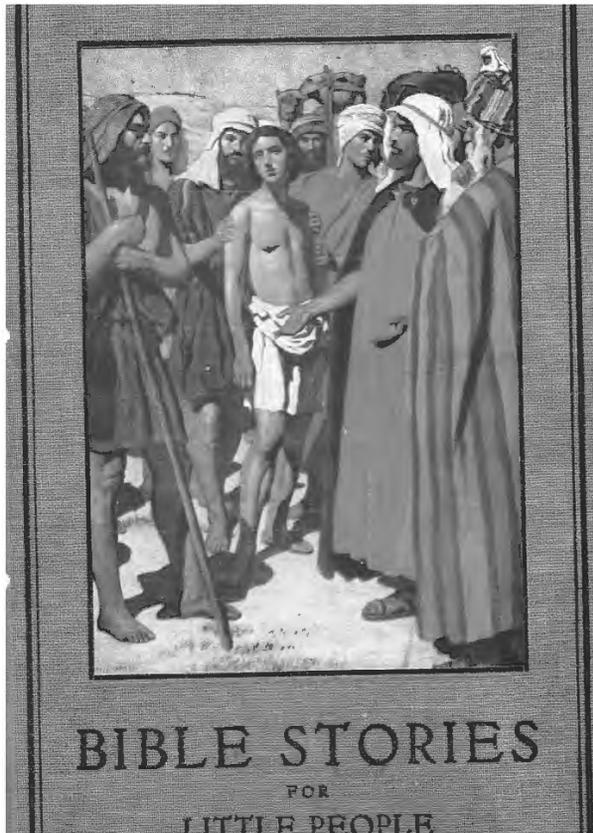
Cover of Bible Stories, 1930 edition, Revised by Rev. Morris Rosenbaum, Courtesy of Leonard Symonds.

It went without saying that his classes were run professionally, with syllabuses, teaching aids and discipline standards. Teachers – most of them well-meaning youngsters themselves, with little knowledge or educational training – received careful guidance. They must have included some really promising teachers, since in the preface to his First Bible Stories he thanks colleagues for their suggestions. He also thanks 'the headmistress of one of our largest public infant schools', who tested his language with her pupils to ensure that small children understood it.[27]

Right of Entry classes in public schools, introduced with the New South Wales Free, Secular Public Instruction Act of 1880, added to the Sunday morning and weekday afternoon lessons. Where necessary, Pulver undertook fundraising activities as well. Formal lessons went hand-in-hand with recreational and social events. The pupils had no chance to be bored. They and their headmaster were friends. The *Jewish Herald* said that in him, children had 'a true friend, a loving companion and a sympathetic instructor'.[28] M.H. Kellerman says in his history of the New South Wales Board of Jewish Education that Pulver's influence 'cannot be over-estimated'.[29] An obituarist called Pulver 'a heaven-born instructor of youth'.[30] When he died in 1897 he was described in a poem published in the *Jewish Herald* as

> …The teacher, rarely gifted to instil
>   The love of God in childhood's budding mind;
> Who from the mouth of babe and suckling strove
>   To established strength in Jacob's tents;
> Whose loving heart called forth responsive love,
>   Implanting gentle virtue's elements.[31]

In reminiscences published half a century later, M.H. Cohen refers to the children's excitement at Pulver's lantern lectures.[32] Pulver also shared his other hobbies with the children, especially photography. Pulver's assistant, Maurice Abraham Cohen, who had been educated at Jews' College and London University, succeeded him to the headship, which he retained until his death in 1923. Louis Pulver was a tall, black-bearded, energetic man (with large feet!) His energy and stamina are evident from the photos of him accompanied by a young Joel Fredman riding a tricycle from Sydney to Melbourne and back. Yet energy and stamina can both be sapped by illness. Still in his early 40s, Pulver became unwell and was lovingly tended to by his sister (though, perhaps strangely, it is not her name on his death certificate but that of the secretary of Sydney Hospital). He died on 4 November 1897, of 'tubercular disease of the kidneys'.[33] He had been in Sydney

Louis Pulver, Jewish Herald obituary, 12 November 1897.

Hospital for two months. Rev. J.H. Landau conducted his funeral. Landau and also Rev. P. Philippstein had (with Miranda Pulver) been at his bedside when he died. The death certificate calls him 'school teacher'... true, but what an understatement.[34]

ENDNOTES

1.   There is a photo of this board up to 1944-5704 in *AJHS Journal*, vol. 2, part 8, 1947, p. 426, accompanied by an editorial note which states: 'The winners since 1944 are as follows: 1945, Maurice Golomb and Estelle Michelin; 1947, Louis Steinhof and Judith Porush. The Prize was not awarded in 1946'. The honour board itself is now missing. Efforts are being made to find the names of prize-winners from 1948 onwards.

2.   1842-1909, a South Australian nun engaged in educational and charitable work under the aegis of the Sisters of St. Joseph. Beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1995, she was canonized in 2010. During a period when Mary MacKillop was excommunicated, the Solomon family supported her. I was on the organizing committee for the Pope's 'MacKillop' visit to Australia.

3.   Mrs Judith Joseph of Birmingham secured the marriage certificate.

4.   L.M. Goldman, *The Jews in Victoria in the Nineteenth Century* (Melbourne: privately published, 1954), p.98. Information about the Hadkins name was provided by Chaim Freedman of Israel.

5.   Information about the Pulvers' children was provided by Katrina and Jenny Cowen of Melbourne, descendants of the Solomon family, and by Liz James of Melbourne.

6.   The manuscript is in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York. See also Charles Duschinsky, *The Rabbinate of the Great Synagogue, London from 1756-1842* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1921); my copy formerly belonged to Rev. Morris

Rosenbaum (see note 22 below) and has his handwritten marginal notes.

7.   Information from Jennifer Silverston of the Cheltenham Hebrew Congregation.

8.   Ibid.

9.   Ibid.

10. L. Herman, *The Cape Town Hebrew Congregation 1841-1941: A Centenary History* (Cape Town: privately published, 1941), ch.2. The synagogue was in a house at the corner of Bouquet and St. John's Streets; the minister occupied the rest of the house.

11. Goldman, op. cit., index references to Isaac Pulver.

12. Louis Pulver bought the books from a pawnbroker and sold them to the Melbourne Public Library for £75: see articles by I. Porush, 'The Colourful Dr David Hailperin and his Books', *AJHS Journal*, vol.9 part 6 (1984) pp. 417-433, and M.Z. Forbes, *AJHS Journal* 'David Hailperin: The Strange Rabbi-Doctor and his Times,' vol. 9, part 7 (1984), pp.533-4.

13. M. Gordon, *Jews in Van Diemen's Land* (Melbourne: Ponsford Newman & Benson, 1965); and P. & E. Elias (eds.), *A Few From Afar: Jewish Lives in Tasmania from 1804* (Hobart: Hobart Hebrew Cong., 2003). A photograph of Isaac Pulver's gravestone was secured by David Clark of Hobart.

14. *Jewish Herald*, 12 November 1897.

15. M.H. Cohen, 'Louis Pulver Anniversary', *Great Synagogue Journal*, December 1947.

16. Goldman, op. cit., passim. See also M.C. Davis, *History of the East Melbourne Hebrew Congregation 'Mickva Yisrael' 1857-1977* (Melbourne: East Melbourne Hebrew Cong., n.d.), passim.

17. Goldman, op. cit., p.264.

18. Cited by M.A. Cohen, *Hebrew Standard of Australasia*, 12 November 1897.

19. Ibid.

20. Suzanne D. Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora: Two Centuries of Jewish Settlement in Australia* (Sydney: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2001), p.100.

21. Goldman, op. cit., passim.

22. Pulver's publications are listed in S. Liberman, *A Bibliography of Australian Judaica* (Sydney: Mandelbaum Trust, 1987 ed.): see Pulver in Index.

23. See Mary Lazarus, edited by Jennifer McNaughton, 'Moses Angel and the Jews' Free School', *AJHS Journal*, vol.20, part (2011), pp.215-255.

24. My copy is the 1905 edition printed by the *Hebrew Standard*, 491 George Street. Sydney.

25. Rosenbaum was a scholar, historian, genealogist, writer and Masonic authority.

26. Pulver, *First Bible Stories for Little People*, 1905 ed., p.iii.

27. Ibid., p.ix.

28. *Jewish Herald*, 19 November 1897.

29. M.H. Kellerman, *New South Wales Board of Jewish Education History 1909-1979 with Background Summary 1863-1909* (Sydney: NSW Board of Jewish Education, 1980), passim. Kellerman was a leading worker for the Education Board and AJHS, and a Masonic

authority and historian. He was a professional educator specializing in distance education. See also D.J. Benjamin, 'Essays in the History of Jewish Education in New South Wales', *AJHS Journal*, vol. 4, part 2 (1955), pp. 29-53 and part 3 (1955), pp. 116-129. Benjamin was also a leading worker for the Education Board and AJHS and served for a time as Secretary of the Great Synagogue. By profession he was a barrister.
30.   *Jewish Herald*, 12 November 1897.
31.   As cited in Isidor Solomon, 'The Pulvers', *AJHS Journal*, vol 3, part 1 (1949), p.36.
32.   M.H. Cohen, *Great Synagogue Journal*, December 1947.
33.   The death certificate was secured by Joe Kensell.
34.   Ibid.