

Changing Jewish Communities

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The Jewish Community of Australia and Its Challenges

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- *The Australian Jewish community numbers between 100,000 and 120,000. The majority of Australian Jews were born in other countries, with the United Kingdom, Poland, the Former Soviet Union, and South Africa being the most significant of many and diverse sources of immigration. Estimates of the number of Australian Jews who have emigrated to Israel, despite the absence of serious "push" factors, are high, as are percentages of Jewish children attending Jewish day schools.*
- *The internal challenges for the community include preserving Jewish identity in a society that offers numerous choices for an individual's self-identification, understanding and addressing the particular needs of newer arrivals and their place in the broader Jewish community, and providing for the financial and other requirements of an aging population and of Australian Jews who suffer from social disadvantage.*
- *The external challenges the community faces include confronting anti-Semitism, protection from terrorism, and maintaining a satisfactory relationship with government.*

In the first fleet of British ships that established the Penal Colony of New South Wales in January 1788, the human cargo of prisoners sentenced to servitude included some eight to fourteen Jews. From relatively early in the history of the Colony, convicts, including Jewish ones, were expected to attend religious services of their own faith. In synagogues in the former colony of Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania), physical reminders of convict days remain in the form of structures permitting convicts to be physically chained by their leg to the pews.

Early correspondence from Australian Jewish free settlers to the Beth Din (rabbinical court) in London included questions as to the proper place in the prayer quorum (*minyán*) of Jewish convicts and their entitlements to participate in aspects of religious services.¹ From these inauspicious beginnings, a Jewish community of between 100,000 and 120,000 is flourishing today.²

An Overall Success Story

Australia's open, democratic society has not just permitted Australian Jews to make interventions and express opinions on matters both specific to it and of general import; it has actively encouraged the Jewish community to take part. In terms of participation in the broader society and contribution to world Jewish affairs, Australian Jewry's achievements are major.³

In the majority Christian society, the broad principle of access and equity in government relations with minority groups has led to the development of state support for Jewish day schools, as well as for other culturally specific social services. An initially informal, and subsequently formal, policy promoting multiculturalism has militated against anti-Semitism and in favor of Australian Jews, including observant, Orthodox Jews, living openly without harassment or discrimination.⁴

Australian Jewry's strong and vocal support for Israel has both facilitated and benefits from the positive Israeli-Australian official relationship, which can be traced to the period of Israel's rebirth as a state in the wake of World War II.⁵

In international Jewish affairs, Australians have played prominent roles in a number of Jewish organizations including the World Jewish Congress and Keren Hayesod. Australian Jews have been involved at the founding stages of bodies such as the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany, the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, the Euro-Asia Jewish Congress, and the Commonwealth Jewish Council.

Australian governments, in large part because of the effectiveness of Australian Jewish advocacy, have played a prominent role in international efforts on Soviet Jewry, in overturning the United Nations resolution equating Zionism and racism, and in promoting the dialogue of civilizations in the Asia-Pacific region.

Australian Jewry has largely been a success story. However, certain areas of advocacy may not have succeeded, and serious social problems afflict parts of the Jewish community. There are other endeavors where the community could have done better.

One context for the overall success has been an Australia that has transformed from one, then a series of penal colonies, joining with free settlements to federate as the Commonwealth of Australia. There has also been a demographic transformation from a

militantly "white," Anglo-Celt outpost to an ethnically and religiously diverse society with a global outlook.

Just as Australia has changed, the Jewish population has come, often in waves of immigration, from all parts of the world. The result is a community that has continued to grow in size, constantly challenged to meet the needs of newcomers and transform outlooks and institutions to reflect its changed composition.⁶

The Community's Challenges

The contemporary challenges for the Australian Jewish community can be broadly classified as understanding and managing its current composition and needs; maintaining and improving its relationships with other sectors of Australia's population; and assessing and enacting the most constructive role for Australian Jewry in global affairs.

The internal challenges include maintaining Jewish identity in a society that offers numerous choices for an individual's self-identification; understanding and addressing the particular needs of newer arrivals and their place in the broader Jewish community; and providing for the financial and other requirements of an aging population and of Australian Jews who suffer from social disadvantage.

The external challenges the community faces include some in common with other Jewish communities, such as confronting anti-Semitism, protection from terrorism, and maintaining a satisfactory relationship with government. Relationships with the most important of the many ethnic and religious groups that form the Australian mosaic have become an important priority for the Jewish community, as has establishing a comfortable place in civil society in general.

Internationally, Australian Jews are increasingly aware of Australia's significance in Asian and international affairs in general and also feel comfortable participating in most international Jewish endeavors. Although Australia's geographic position may make the Jewish community's involvement in international Jewish affairs relatively complex, this mirrors the broader Australian challenge and is by no means perceived as insurmountable.

A Rich Mosaic

The Australian Jewish community is drawn from a number of diverse sources. Although precise details are not available, a study of the 1986 Commonwealth Census indicated that the majority of Jews in Australia were born elsewhere. The major sources of immigration at that time were Eastern Europe (mainly Poland and the Former Soviet

Union), Western and Central Europe (mainly Hungary and Germany), the United Kingdom, South Africa, and Israel. Since that time, immigration would most likely place South Africa and Israel above the UK. Immigrants from the Middle East, Asia, the Americas, and Africa have continued to arrive but in total represent less than 7 percent of Australian Jewry.⁷

From 1933 to 1961, the Australian Jewish population was almost trebled by immigration from Europe (with far smaller immigration from North Africa and Asia).⁸ The relatively socially and politically conservative, largely Anglo-Jewish community was mixed with highly diverse groups of European Jews. This eventually resulted in the establishment of synagogues with considerable variations in practice, complementing the traditional mode of synagogue and worship, Jewish day schools, community advocacy organizations, welfare societies geared toward settlement and integration of immigrants, and a strong commitment to Israel.⁹

From the 1970s onward, three sources of Jewish immigration have profoundly affected the composition of the Australian Jewish community. Jews from the former Soviet Union arrived under a variety of programs, including a Special Humanitarian Programme that recognized that they were not refugees but were suffering persecution. Jews from South Africa arrived in small numbers after the Sharpeville massacre in 1961, in larger numbers after the Soweto uprising in 1976, and in even greater numbers during the 1990s as apartheid was ending. Finally, Jews came from Israel who, like the South Africans, were part of Australia's general immigration intake that favors English speakers with specific skills.

The Jews from the former Soviet Union generally had very little or no Jewish literacy. The Jewish community invested considerable political and financial resources in facilitating their arrival and trying to prevent the development of a subclass dependent on government support or communal charity. Jewish day schools provided free or heavily subsidized entry, and various community organizations developed initiatives to provide connections between the new arrivals and the established community.

The integration of this group of immigrants is a work in progress. A recent article by Inna Zaitseva has prompted both a debate and a reevaluation of how the community has, should have, and can in future deal with keeping the bulk of Jews from the former Soviet Union within the community.¹⁰

The South African Jewish immigration brought a significant number of religiously literate Jews to Australia, including many with professional qualifications or developed and adaptable business skills. Whereas the Soviet Jews had little opportunity to learn Jewish history, religion, and culture, many of the South Africans had attended Jewish day schools and been active in many aspects of Jewish communal life.¹¹

Although South African Jews came from a community with some significant differences from Australian Jewry, mostly they have had a far easier time integrating. One major factor is proficiency in English, Australia being a functionally monolingual society. Many

South African Jewish immigrants also had the advantage of an education that was on a par with that in Australia. Although some professionals found it necessary to requalify, in most cases they could gain entry into their profession soon after arriving in Australia.

Whereas the Jews from the Soviet Union had had little opportunity to gain Jewish education, many South Africans had attended Jewish day schools and found it natural both to enroll their children in such schools and become involved in their management. The South African Jewish immigration included Orthodox and Progressive rabbis, Jewish educators, and committed communal benefactors, all of which has assisted in integration.

Whereas Jews in South Africa were highly conscious of their Jewish identity, given the political and social implications of membership of one or other "race," in Australia it is far easier for any person to have an "unhyphenated" identity. This has been an important motivator in developing Jewish day schools that do not simply mirror other schools but try to give students a firm grounding in Jewish religion and culture. Although Jewish students of South African origin have formed a significant component of these schools, the success or otherwise of the integration will be both reflected in, and affected by, where the next generation of this immigration choose to educate their children.

Philosophically, integrating Jews from Israel has presented considerable challenges to the Australian Jewish community. It has a very strong connection to Israel that is ideological, idealistic, and emotional. Estimates of Australian Jews who have made *aliyah* (emigrated to Israel) vary but are generally put at about 10 percent of the Jewish population. This is a high figure given the lack of any "push" factor from a peaceful, relatively tolerant society.¹²

For immigrants from Israel who neither had family ties in Australia nor were comfortable in a synagogue environment, the Jewish community was unlikely to be particularly enticing. There are few barriers to assimilation into mainstream society, and while the broader Jewish community does not exclude them from public celebrations or commemorations of the Shoah, the emphasis by the elected leadership of communal organizations on the ideal of *aliyah* can potentially be off-putting.

Two crucial links between the Israeli immigration and the rest of the Jewish community have been Israelis who affiliated with community organizations and institutions such as the Jewish day schools, and government-funded Hebrew-language media. The Hebrew-language radio broadcasts on the government-funded Special Broadcasting Service began as part of an integrated "Jewish-languages" program with Hebrew, Yiddish, and English segments. The Hebrew broadcasts have developed individual and idiosyncratic identities but remain committed to keeping listeners informed of community events.

Coping with Today's Issues

Regardless of length of time in Australia or ethnic, cultural, or religious identifications, certain challenges confront the Jewish community as a whole. These include developing institutions and organizations that can address changing social needs of the community, understanding and responding to threats to Australian Jews, and maintaining effective means of advocacy for the community's specific concerns.

One significant internal challenge is providing for the needs of a population that is aging, with a growing proportion of elderly, both frail and nonfrail, and a correspondingly smaller proportion of income earners.¹³

The Jewish communities in the main centers of Jewish population have developed networks of institutions such as synagogues, day schools, retirement villages, hospital crisis centers, sport facilities, and museums, and are constantly reassessing the priorities for allocating limited financial resources. Sydney (together with Canberra) and Perth have developed Joint Community Appeals in an effort to help plan for future needs as well as immediate requirements. The idea of forming a body to better plan for Melbourne Jewry's future regularly arises both nationally and in that city.¹⁴

Another concern that has resulted in allocating considerable financial and human resources is the community's security from acts of terrorism and anti-Semitism. The organizations that have dealt with these issues on a political level have generally had a relatively small number of active volunteers and an even smaller number of professionals. Communal security, however, has involved literally hundreds of volunteers and a number of professional coordinators, who supplement professional security guards at synagogue services and communal gatherings. Jewish organizations spend millions of dollars annually to employ security guards, maintain security installations such as cameras and perimeter walls, and ensure that volunteers have appropriate training.¹⁵

Although this is motivated by a view that no gathering of Jewish people should lack adequate protection from terrorists, it is also based on the historical experience of Australian and, particularly, Sydney Jews. This has involved bomb attacks on the Israeli consulate in Sydney and the predominantly-Jewish Hakoah social club in Sydney's Bondi Beach in December 1982, fires set at one-quarter of all Sydney synagogues in early 1991, and an average of 302 incidents of anti-Jewish violence, vandalism, and harassment reported to the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ) in each year from 1990 to 2005.¹⁶ In July and August 2006, an unprecedented number of reports of vandalism, assault, harassment, and threats were received by the ECAJ, with 141 incidents logged in July alone.¹⁷

Since September 2001, the Australian government, reflecting a broad concern among the Australian public, has greatly increased support for agencies dealing with intelligence, counterterrorism, and policing functions, as well as changing legislation to

facilitate protecting Australia from terrorism. A number of Australians have been sentenced or are currently facing charges of intending to commit acts of terrorism or cooperating with international terrorists. The first person sentenced, Jack Roche, was convicted of planning an attack on at least one Israeli target in Australia.¹⁸

The Jewish community has played an active public role in urging the government both to protect Australians from terrorism and protect the culture of civil liberties that has defined modern Australia. The Jewish community in Australia has also developed credibility for its public interventions on human rights, with a number of identifiably Jewish Australians playing leading roles on matters of social justice for some years.

Expertise and authority in public commentary on anti-Semitism are based on familiarity with both anti-Semitism and the political subcultures, including that of an organized far-Right fringe and anti-Jewish religious groups. The Jewish community has not only been in the forefront of combating racists' activities in Australia as a matter of morality and principle. It also understands, based on data gathered by the community over a long period, that when racism against other minorities such as Asian, Indigenous, or Arab/Muslim Australians has increased there has been a concomitant increase in incidents of anti-Jewish vandalism, violence, and intimidation.¹⁹

In 1995, the Australian government passed legislation that gave legal recourse to victims of racism. The Jewish community has successfully prosecuted a number of complaints that indicate the range of anti-Semitism in Australia.²⁰ The first successful complaint (settled by conciliation) resulted in a determination that an Australian Arabic-language newspaper had breached the legislation by reprinting an item from a Gulf-state newspaper claiming that Israel's political actions were guided by *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*.²¹

Subsequent cases determined that material on the Internet sourced to Australians was subject to Australian legislation; that the central planks of Holocaust denial were anti-Semitic and that anti-Semitism is considered in breach of antiracist laws; and that anti-Semitic material in political publications is not exempt from the law.²² A case currently awaiting adjudication will determine whether religious belief provides a defense for anti-Semitism.²³

Life in a Diverse Society

As one community in a culturally diverse society, Australian Jewry has worked hard in the past twenty years to develop good relations with other ethnic and religious groups. Jewish community activists and leaders have been central to developing broad coalitions such as the state-based Ethnic Communities' Councils and their national umbrella, the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia, while also engaging bilaterally with ethnic groups from countries as diverse as Sudan, Poland,

Bangladesh, Ukraine, and Bosnia, as well as with Indigenous Australians.

One of the challenges the Jewish community faces is to help build a tolerant society that values cultural diversity and religious freedom when anti-Semitism comes from within groups that themselves may be targeted by racists and subject to vilification. Anti-Jewish hatred being preached and promoted within sections of Australia's Muslim population has become a serious public concern in recent years. The Jewish community has sought to respond to Muslim anti-Semitism through public exposure,²⁴ joint condemnations of its manifestations with Muslim and Christian leaders,²⁵ and by exposing Muslim Australians to positive images of Jews.

Australian Jewry is also distinguished by the formal dialogues that have been established at the highest national level with Christian and Muslim groups. In addition to formal dialogues with the Australian Catholic Bishops' Committee, the Anglican Church, the Uniting Church in Australia, and the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, there has been regular interaction with Lutheran and Orthodox church leaders, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and Bahais. This has fostered communication, cooperation on matters of mutual concern, and the potential for positively influencing perceptions of Jews by mentors of these denominations in Australia and indirectly in their international dimensions.²⁶ Australian Jews, with their historical consciousness of international responsibility, are aware of the impact of domestic interfaith activity.

Before the establishment of Israel, Australian Jews urged the Australian government to support the Zionist endeavor, combat anti-Semitism in Europe, and aid Jewish refugees. Australian Jewry is proud that Australia's most distinguished military figure, Sir John Monash, was the first honorary president of the Zionist Federation of Australia and was forthright in criticizing unacceptable British practices in the Mandate period.

More recently, Australian Jewry successfully petitioned the government to be in the vanguard of international efforts to help oppressed Jews in the Soviet Union,²⁷ to lead the move to repeal the UN resolution equating Zionism with racism, and to advocate for the human rights of Syrian Jewry.²⁸ Since 2000, the Australian government has included Jewish community leaders in delegations to important intergovernmental conferences, including the four Stockholm Forums on human rights issues, the UN World Conference against Racism,²⁹ and the Asia Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogues in Indonesia and the Philippines.

The sophisticated relationship that has developed between Australian Jewry and the Australian government is also reflected in Australia's generally sympathetic understanding of Israel's concerns at the United Nations and other multilateral forums.

To maintain this position, and to minimize damage to Australian Jews' relationship with Israel that could result from a barrage of anti-Israeli defamation in the media, Australian Jews also work to promote explanations of Israel's political actions and understanding of the history of the region, Israel's conflicts, and the reality of contemporary Israel.³⁰ As Australian media, as well as other spheres relevant to policy development such as

academia, become increasingly globalized and hence potentially less sympathetic to Jews and Israel than has developed in the Australian context, the Australian Jewish community faces challenges in this area.

As Australia is home to the only substantial Jewish community in the Asia-Pacific region, Australian Jews also perceive that they have a measure of responsibility in this region. The Asia-Pacific Jewish Association, chaired by the ECAJ, and the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, which includes Asian and Pacific national Jewish peak bodies, have sought to maintain links with small and isolated Jewish communities.

The Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, in partnership with the American Jewish Committee, has conducted research and policy initiatives aimed at enhancing relations between Asian states and the Jewish world. Relations between Australian Jews and religious and cultural figures in the Asia-Pacific region have been facilitated by the Australian government³¹ and by Australian-based organizations that promote interfaith dialogue.³²

In earlier ages Australia, including Australian Jewry, as part of the British Empire, was an alien European outpost on the fringe of Asia and the border of the Pacific Ocean. Just as Australia has become an important regional political player in Asia and the Pacific and a participant in multilateral forums, Australian Jewry has developed a sense of global responsibility. Just as Australia has undergone a demographic transformation in the wake of mass postwar immigration, Australian Jewry continues to undergo a process of transformation and reinvention.

Although the challenges are numerous, Australian Jewry's record for more than two centuries suggests that the community will continue to be one of the Jewish world's greatest success stories.

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Notes

1. For a survey of the earliest days of Jewish settlement in Australia, see John S. Levi and George Bergman, *Australian Genesis: Jewish Convicts and Settlers 1788-1850* (Sydney: Rigby, 1974).

2. Religion is not a compulsory question in the government census conducted every five years. For a summary of the discussion of the size of Australia's Jewish community, see Suzanne D. Rutland, *Jewish Life Down Under: The Flowering of Australian Jewry* (Jerusalem: Institute of the World Jewish Congress, 2001), 38.

3. In a survey "100 Most Influential Australians" that covered the period 1788-2006, the weekly magazine *The Bulletin* included at least eleven Australian Jews, including former politician and leader of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, Sydney Einfeld, banker Allan Moss, military leader John Monash, business leader Frank Lowy, political theorist Dennis Altman, philosopher Peter Singer, and retailer and philanthropist Sidney Myer (*The Bulletin*, 4 July 2006).

4. A historical overview of the development of this policy can be found in *Australian Multiculturalism for a New Century: Towards Inclusiveness*, report by the National Multicultural Advisory Council, April 1999

(Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia Ausinfo, 1999).

5. Rodney Gouttman, "First Principles: H.V. Evatt and the Jewish Homeland," in W. D. Rubinstein, ed., *Jews in the Sixth Continent* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

6. Hilary L. Rubinstein, "From Jewish Non-Distinctiveness to Group Invisibility: Australian Jewish Identity and Responses, 1830-1950," in *ibid.*

7. Sol Encel, "The Australian Jewish Population: How Many Are We?" in *The Guide to Jewish Life in Australia and New Zealand* (Sydney: Australian Jewish News, 1993).

8. Rutland, *Jewish Life*, 6-8, usefully summarizes the nature and impact of Jewish immigration to Australia in the twentieth century.

9. Alan P. Crown, "Demography, Politics and Love of Zion: The Australian Jewish Community and the Yishuv, 1850-1948," in Rubinstein, *Jews in the Sixth Continent*.

10. Inna Zaitseva, "Badlands: The Marginalisation of Russian Jews in Australia," *Australian Jewish News*, 16 June 2006, and responses in subsequent issues.

11. "The South African Move to Australia" is discussed in Steve Israel, "Contemporary Jewish Demography," reprinted for Jewish Zionist Education, Jewish Agency for Israel, www.jafi.org.il/education/100/CONCEPTS/demography/dem3.html.

12. Rutland, *Jewish Life*, 19-23, 30-31.

13. W. D. Rubinstein, *Judaism in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Services, 1995), 27-29.

14. Suzanne D. Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora* (Sydney: Collins Australia, 1988).

15. Martin Daly, "Walking in the Shadow of Hate," *The Age*, 14 June 2004.

16. Jeremy Jones, "Australia," in Richard S. Levy, ed., *Antisemitism: A Historical Encyclopaedia of Persecution* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO Press, 2005).

17. Diana Bagnall, "Hate Wave," *The Bulletin*, 29 August 2006.

18. See Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, International Terrorism: The Threat to Australia, www.dfat.gov.au/publications/terrorism/chapter6.html.

19. Jeremy Jones, *Report on Antisemitism in Australia 2005* (Sydney: Executive Council of Australian Jewry, 2005).

20. The Racial Hatred Act (Cth) 1995, amended to The Racial Discrimination Act (Cth) 1975 to give recourse to victims of racist acts.

21. For a report on the complaint and the outcome, see Jeremy Jones, "Erasing Hatred," *Australia/Israel Review*, 25 July-7 August 1997.

22. For reports on the cases in which these determinations were made, see www.ecaj.org.au/race_hatred.htm.

23. The case of Jeremy Jones v Bible Believers Church had its final hearing in the Federal Court in June 2006 with judgment due in October 2006.

24. For recent examples, see issues of *Australia/Israel Review* for 4 April 2006 and 6 June 2006.

25. A typical example is the statement by the Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews, "No Room for 'Hate Literature' in Australia," 21 July 2005, in Jones, *Report on Antisemitism*.

26. For a recent summary of the formal interfaith dialogues conducted nationally by the Australian Jewish community, see *Annual Report of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry 2005* (Sydney: Executive Council of Australian Jewry, 2005).

27. Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora*, 386-88.

28. Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Development and Trade of the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, *A Revision of Australian Efforts to Promote and Protect Human Rights, December 1992* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Services, 1992).

29. Jeremy Jones "Durban Daze," *The Review*, October 2001, 32, 21-22.

30. The organization in the vanguard of these efforts is the Australia/ Israel & Jewish Affairs Council (see www.aijac.org.au).

31. The Australian government's view of its Asian role was articulated by Foreign Minister Alexander Downer MP, "Carry On the Battle to Conquer Tyranny," *The Australian*, 13 June 2006. The Australian government has also been a cosponsor of the two Asia Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogues (Yogyakarta, Indonesia, November 2004 and Cebu, the Philippines, March 2006) and included Australian Jews as delegates. As the first dialogue took place during Chanukah, a rare if not unique public lighting of a menorah took place in Muslim Indonesia. As the second dialogue took place during Purim, the Scroll of Esther was read by Jewish delegates to an interfaith audience in Christian Philippines.

32. International Outlook, based in Melbourne, and the Griffith University Multi-Faith Centre in Brisbane, have both hosted international conferences in conjunction with UNESCO. These have promoted interaction between religious leaders, academics, and civic figures from Asia and the Pacific, including Australian Jews.

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