The Sephardi Presence in Australia

This article is based largely on Aaron Aaron's book "The Sephardim in Australia and New Zealand", first published in 1979 [1]. Mr Aaron was for many years the President of the Sephardi Association of NSW. The term "Sephardim" is used to refer to Jews who trace their background to both Spain/Portugal and to the Orient and Middle East.

Sephardim have often felt isolated, lonely and out of place in the predominantly Ashkenazi Jewish community in Australia. They were a minority within a minority with very different traditions and customs to their Ashkenazi brethren. (The term "Ashkenazim" is used to refer to Jews of Eastern or Western European background.) The Ashkenazim seemed, to a certain extent, to view them as second class, very distant cousins. Sephardim were and still are very sensitive to this condescending attitude. The Sephardim feel that their culture is more closely connected to the traditional Jewish lifestyle at the time of the dispersion two thousand years ago.

In the 1950's, Jews from Arab and Asian countries or of Sephardi background were sometimes denied entry to Australia on the basis of their colour or race. The Australian government insisted this was not on the basis of religion although there seemed to be some hypocrisy here. The criteria under the 'White Australia' immigration policy included a requirement that a person "must be 75% European by descent, by lifestyle and predominantly European in appearance". The Sephardim felt that the Ashkenazi community did not support their appeal to the government to let Sephardim immigrate to Australia. There are many different groups amongst the Sephardim, with different customs, religious traditions and procedures, national backgrounds and different attitudes towards assimilation within the wider Jewish community. Generally, the Sephardim have a great respect for tradition. Unlike the Ashkenazim, the Sephardim do not have Liberal, Conservative or Orthodox movement as such.

History of the Sephardim in Australia

The activities of Sephardim and the contributions they made to Australia, as individuals or as a group, not only among the wide Australian Community, but also within the Jewish community is not generally recognised. Sometimes it is difficult to differentiate Sephardi from Ashkenazi names. However people whose first names were similar to their surname were usually Sephardim such as Myer Myer, Saul Saul etc.

There were certainly Sephardim on the First Fleet. Among the English convicts were Jews of both Sephardi and Ashkenazi backgrounds. In 1834, ten convicts escaped from Port Arthur and two of them may have been Sephardim.

A number of prominent ("aristocratic") Sephardi Jews immigrated to the Antipodes from England in the 1830's became influential in politics, commerce, agriculture. For example, Joseph Barrow Montefiore went from N.S.W. to New Zealand in 1830 and he was followed by a number of other Sephardi Jews who became involved in agriculture, commerce, etc. Over time and mostly by the turn of the century, these Sephardim effectively lost their own identify as they were absorbed into the general Jewish community or assimilated out of the Jewish communities altogether and many of their records have disappeared.

Since World War II there has been a new wave of immigration of Sephardim to Australia. Associations were formed in N.S.W. and Victoria and later on a Federal organisation was established. Some associations became affiliated with Federal and State Jewish organisations but retain an identity in their own right up to the present time.

1492 - Conversos and the Sea

In the years before the expulsion of the Spanish Jews in 1492 many became Conversos, that is, they converted to Christianity forcibly or willingly in order to escape the Spanish Inquisition. (The word Marranos which is used as alternative to Conversos is actually a derogatory term). However, many still valued and were associated with Judaism and some of them also practised Judaism secretly.

Conversos have had a long association with the sea, astronomy, navigation etc. For example, five Conversos joined Columbus. Many were intrepid travellers and fluent in many languages.

For the Conversos the sea was a way of escape from the Inquisition of 1492, but as a result of this need they developed significant navigational skills. The Dutch East India Company, which was influential in South East Asia around the end of the 17th Century, was about 25% owned by Jews and they had a significant influence on the policies of the company, for example, sending Abel Tasman to Australia in 1642.

Among the first European voyagers to Australia was the Converso Lope De Vega who commanded the Santa Yzabel.

New South Wales

Of the early Jewish free settlers in NSW between 1788 and 1830, about 25% were of Sephardic background. When in 1791 the Sephardi Solomon Bookerah died, it was the first time a Jew was specifically mentioned as such in any legal register.

In 1830 a group of wealthy and well-connected Sephardi Jews arrived in Australia from the U.K. Among them were Joseph Barrow Montefiore, George Mocatta, David Furtado and their families who were soon associated with many new commercial and agricultural ventures, and held legal and political positions as did other Sephardim. For example, Saul Samuel was the first Jewish Minister of the Crown and the first Jewish magistrate of N.S.W. Jacob Montefiore became a close and influential friend of the

powerful Henry Parkes. He was one of the most prominent Jews of the second half of the nineteenth century in Australia.

After the Second World War there was significant immigration of Sephardim from India, Singapore, Egypt, Iraq, and other Asian and Arab countries. The first Sephardi service was held in 1947, however there were divisions among the congregants as to how the service should be run based on different traditions in their countries of origin.

Max Freedman, the then head of the Zionist Federation, and Rabbi Israel Porush, played an important role in helping to organise a Sephardi community and in 1951 the N.S.W Sephardi Association was formed and in 1954 it became affiliated with the World Sephardi Federation. Both Solomon Gaon, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of England) and Denzil Montefiore, the head of the World Sephardi Federation, helped by providing some finance for some buildings as did Nissem Gaon and Sam Marshall. Ecclesiastical authority lay with the Bevis-Marks (Spanish and Portugese) Synagogue, London and also with the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel.

The Association became a member of the Board of Deputies in 1953 but resigned over the immigration issue several years later. Sir William Ashton and Sidney Einfeld helped a great deal in bringing Sephardi Jews to Australia which was in contrast to the very reluctant lobbying by the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ). This contrasted with the support given by the ECAJ to Jewish immigration from the Iron Curtain countries.

In 1959 land was purchased for a synagogue. A further building, a ladies gallery and a school/youth centre were later constructed and a ladies auxiliary and a youth auxiliary were formed. In 1959 there was a split in the community over trusteeship of the land and another group called "The Eastern Jewish Association" gained admission to the Board of Deputies as well. In 1975 Saul Saul became President of the Council of Orthodox Synagogues in New South Wales, which the first time a Sephardi had held this position.

The Sephardi community had appealed directly to the Ashkenazi community to contribute to their building appeal. This was a "dismal failure". They did not even raise enough money from this appeal to the Ashkenazim to "pay for their

The Montefiore Family

Jacob Montefiore arrived in Australia in 1829 and was one of the eleven Commissioners appointed by King William II for the Colonisation of South Australia. Montefiore Hill overlooks Adelaide from the North and perpetuates Jacob's memory.

The Montefiore family was prominent in many of the new British colonies, Sir Moses Montefiore caming to Australia as an agent of the Rothschilds in 1843 and 1852.

Joseph Barrow Montefiore, younger brother of Jacob, was one of the founders of the Bank of Adelaide and closely associated with the pastoral industry of N.S.W. and S.A.

• Sir Moses Montefiore
From *Three Centuries of Anglo-Jewish History* (Jewish Historical Society of England 1961 ed. V.D.Lipman) supplied by Australian Jewish Historical Society.

Sir Moses contributed generously to the building of the Hobart Synagogue. The first stone was laid in 1843 and the synagogue was in Egyptian style. The Sassoon family of Calcutta made a donation of a Torah circled in a silver hand-beaten case in the a Sephardi tradition. In 1855 Sir Moses Montefiore presented a Torah which is now used in the Perth synagogue.

He was "truly an Australian pioneer". He was born in the West Indies (which is probably why his interest in colonial development and agriculture grew) and was one of the twelve "Jew brokers" in London but he found this unrewarding. He was also related to the Rothschilds. He applied to the authorities to develop 5000 acres in Australia and finally obtained approval.

stamps, brochure etc" though 5000 circulars had been mailed.

A meeting in Sydney of Sephardim from South East Asia was organised by the Ashkenazi community but they did not even invite the NSW Sephardi Association to attend, and this again led to the disaffiliation of the Sephardi Association from the Board of Deputies in 1972 and a lot of resentment.

Victoria

In Victoria, Sephardim played an important part in the development of Melbourne and surrounding country towns. Joseph Barrow Montefiore was involved with the first land sales in Geelong and other Jews, including Sephardim, were involved with the second Melbourne land sale.

Many Sephardim were involved in the development of Victoria as a separate colony, including the founding of banks. Many Sephardim purchased crown land. Some became Members of Parliament. Sephardim had a significant role in the development of Ballarat. Charles Dyte, a Sephardi was involved in the Eureka Stockade rebellion. A committee, in which Sephardim played a part, was formed to build a synagogue in Melbourne in 1853. Following a formal request by applicants including H. Pirani and Edward Cohen, separate services according to Sephardi tradition were conducted there which were the first and the only separate Sephardi services held in Australia in the 1800's. In a letter of 1846 to the Jewish paper, J. Belisario wanted it recognised that "the Spanish and Portugese congregation of Melbourne is subject to its own ecclesiastical and civil authorities and no other" - i.e. not to the head of the United Congregations of the British Empire. He wrote that "this much is now stated to afford a perfect future understanding of the matter." In 1860 a Hebrew school was established and many Sephardim were involved in its establishment.

A separate Sephardi service was held in "New Exhibition Street". This may have been an attempt to form a Sephardi synagogue as they applied to the Bevis-Marks synagogue in London (which was the authoritative Sephardi synagogue for the British Empire) for help in establishing a Sephardi community.

Ballarat Synagogue opened in 1861 and Charles Dyte laid the foundation stone. A Sephardi tried to introduce additional "Sephardi verses" into the

Adon Olam but this was not allowed as the synagogue had adopted the "Minhag Polin" (Minhag of Polish Jews) strictly.

In 1873 Sephardi services were still being held in the schoolroom of the Melbourne Synagogue and this was almost for the last time as they were unable to form a minyan (10 men constitute a minyan or quorum) and had to call in "extras"!

By the end of the nineteenth century Sephardim had gradually integrated into the Ashkenazi community and hence this unique community of Sephardim in Victoria came to an end... for a while.

In Melbourne after World War II - the Sephardi Association of Victoria was formed in November 1965 with Maurice Levy and Max Menahem as its initiators as they were impressed by the progress in Sydney. Mr. Menahem said "I spent many lonely years attending synagogue services conducted by the vast Ashkenazi population of Melbourne." It first constitution was based on the Singapore synagogue constitution as Mr Menahem had been a member of the Jewish Welfare Board in Singapore. Services held, on a rotating basis, at the homes of three families (the Mazza, Menahem and Levy families). The first president was Mr. M.Tueta with K.Bekhore and A.Jawary as vice-presidents. Fifty people attended the first meeting with Rabbi Lubofsky as guest speaker and John Mazza as Secretary.

In 1973, encouraged by the then President of the World Sephardi Federation, Mr Denzil Montefiore, a Darling Road property was purchased, where the first Sephardi synagogue was built. So the Montefiore family continued its influence in Australia. The Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, opened the Synagogue in 1977. However, recently (1990) a new property was purchased in Hotham Street, with a view to relocating the synagogue to East St. Kilda.

The Sephardi Federation of Australia was formed in 1971 and in 1972 the Association sent its first delegate to the then Victorian Jewish Board of Deputies and along with its NSW counterpart, to the Zionist Federation of Australia. In 1975, having gained world recognition, the

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Some Prominent Sephardim in Early Victoria

Edward Cohen and Charles Dyte played a very important role in politics. Charles Dyte was involved in the Eureka Stockade incident. He became Mayor of Ballarat. and laid the foundation stone for the Ballarat synagogue. F. J. Pirani was a mathematics master at Wesley College - maybe that's why there are so many Jewish students there now!

Solomon Joseph (perhaps a Sephardi) owned the first "permanent" Jewish weekly newspaper - "The Australian Israelite" started in 1871.

Chief Sephardi Rabbi of England and the Commonwealth (Haham Gaon) visited Melbourne.

South Australia

In the 1890's Sephardim occupied prominent positions in commercial and political life, one of them was the Honourable Maurice Salom, a member of one of the old Sephardi families from the United Kingdom, who was a member of the South Australian Parliament.

In 1900, following pogroms in Central Europe, there was an attempt to bring some 100 Jewish families to Adelaide but this did not go ahead because of the unemployment situation - the Jewish community voted after consulting with the Hon V. Solomon, a leading State politician against it.

The Sephardim gradually became absorbed into the general Ashkenazi community. Since 1956 there has been a significant immigration of Jews from Egypt to Adelaide, some of whom became very active in the Adelaide Jewish community. Although many individuals became successful and made major contributions in their own name to this small Jewish community, they did not form an organised Sephardi community, perhaps because of the relative "liberalisation" that they had experienced in Egypt. The Sephardi and Ashkenazi minhag (style of prayer) was combined in the synagogue.

Queensland

George Mocatta was a great pastoral pioneer of Queensland, who helped to open up the Moreton Bay area. He undertook an overland cattle trip from central N.S.W. to Moreton Bay around 1840. He left the area in 1855 and transferred most property to Montefiore, Graham and Company. Frederick Montefiore helped develop the Brisbane region in the 1850's.

Toowong cemetery has a number of Sephardi names listed in its burial book e.g. Ben Susan, Elias.

After World War II some Sephardim settled in Brisbane but were absorbed in the general Jewish community, being few in number.

Western Australia

Just before, during and after World War II a number of Sephardim from Singapore, Burma, Egypt, U.K. and India immigrated to Western Australia. Perth is closer to Singapore than it is to Canberra, Melbourne or Sydney.

By 1948 there were about seventy Sephardim in Perth and there was talk of opening their own synagogue but this fell through. In the 1960's a number of additional Sephardi families immigrated to Perth and they were a driving force in a new synagogue, school, aged home and other local Jewish projects which they also helped fund.

The N.S.W. Sephardi Association tried to help start a W.A. Sephardi Association but this failed and the Sephardim of W.A. started to lose their own distinct separate identity.

Ron Raab is the Secretary of the Sephardi Association of Victoria and has been active in the campaign for the freedom of Syrian Jewry and Jews still living in other Arab countries. He is also the delegate of the Sephardi Association to the Jewish Community Council (JCCV), the State Zionist Council, the Zionist Federation and past member of the overseas Jewry subcommittee of the JCCV.

The present Sephardi synagogue in East Malvern is inadequate to the current needs of their community. The new synagogue has been carefully designed by prominent Jewish architect, Ben Alexander, in consultation with the Sephardi Association and Melbourne rabbis to ensure the requirements of the Sephardi community are met both traditionally and religiously. The building program has already commenced with the purchase of land in Hotham street, East St.Kilda. An appeal has been launched to provide funding for this unique project. Write to the Sephardic Association of Victoria Inc, P.O. Box 42 St.Kilda 3182 for further information.