

Jewish Archives and the history of the Jewish community in Aotearoa New Zealand

Contributed by Michael Clements.

The New Zealand Jewish Archives, incorporating Wellington Jewish Archives, is situated in several rooms at the back of the Jewish Community Centre, 80 Webb Street, Wellington, New Zealand. NZJA is collecting and filing all documents, photographs, memorabilia, Judaica, books, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings, oral recordings and video tapes about Jewish life in New Zealand. The organisation was conceived in the early 1980's but, as more people have come to know about it, the collection has grown tremendously – especially over the last few years.

Two Judaica exhibitions have been held, the first in 1990 to celebrate the first Jewish service (1890) and the second in 1993 for the 150th Anniversary of the founding of the Wellington Hebrew Congregation. It was during the latter time that the wonderful book "A Standard for the People" edited by Stephen Levine was conceived and subsequently published in 1995. The price is US\$100 (which includes postage and packing). There are copies still available.

Notes on Jewish Participation in New Zealand History

New Zealand history involves Jewish participation from early settlement times. Jewish traders were recorded here as early as 1829, and these were probably sealers and whalers. There were a number of Jewish shareholders in the New Zealand Company which was set up by Edward Gibbon Wakefield in London, England to settle the country, the most prominent one being Director Sir Isaac Lyon Goldsmid, Baronet (the first Jew given a knighthood). The passenger lists of the N.Z. Company's first four ships which anchored in the harbour (near the city now known as Wellington) between 22nd January and 28th February 1840 revealed the names of some Jews on the barque "Oriental". These included Abraham Hort, Solomon Levy and Benjamin Levy. From then on a small number of Jews arrived by their own choice.

The first Jewish marriage in Wellington was consecrated on 1st June 1842. The Bolton Street Cemetery, which was opened in 1843, contains the graves of a number of Wellington pioneer Jews. Also in 1843 the grand patriarch and recognised founder of the Wellington Jewish community, Abraham Hort Senior arrived with his wife and four daughters. He had come with the sanction of the Chief Rabbi of the Great Synagogue, London. Abraham Hort brought with him in a religious capacity one David Isaacs who acted as a Shochet, Mohel and Chazan. This man also played an important part in the other Jewish Communities of Nelson and Dunedin. On 7th January 1843 the first Jewish service was held in Wellington and a little later a Brit Milah was held with a full Minyan.

Meanwhile, the Government of New South Wales (Australia) appointed a Captain William Hobson as Lieutenant – Governor of New Zealand. Within a few days of landing in New Zealand (at Kororareka, further up in the North Island in the Bay of Islands), he had arranged for the Maori chiefs to meet with him. In a document known as The Treaty of Waitangi (February 6th 1840), the Chiefs added their marks to the document to cede sovereign rights to Her Majesty Queen Victoria of England. However Hobson soon abandoned this settlement in favour of a spot on the Waitemata Harbour which he named Auckland (now New Zealand's largest city). A number of Jews prudently then hastened to Auckland and started in business. Among them was David Nathan who set up a store joining those belonging to Joel Polack, John Montefiore, David Keesing and Israel Joseph. Nathan returned to Kororareka to settle some of his affairs and while there, on Sunday 31st October 1841, took part in the first Jewish marriage service held in New Zealand by getting married to Rosetta Aarons.

Most of the early settlers in Wellington and Auckland were traders of some kind or other and a number achieved prominence as they worked to help the two young towns develop. David Nathan soon established Jewish worship in Auckland and also helped acquire a cemetery. In 1848, out of a total population at that time of just over 16,000, there were 61 Jews in New Zealand of whom 33 resided in Auckland and 28 in Wellington. Nathaniel Levin, who had established the firm of Levin and Company on Wellington's Lambton Quay, was one of the first to send wool from New Zealand. His son William Hort Levin was prominent in the commercial affairs of early Wellington, and the town of Levin, (about 1½ hours drive on the main road north) is named after him.

A number of early Jews in both places were well known owners of hotels, and others were in the auctioneer business. Sir Julius Vogel (1835-1899), whose economic genius and daring Public works policy of the 1870's sped up the development of New Zealand, was twice Premier. The third daughter of Abraham Hort, Margaret, married Sir Francis Dillon Bell, and one of their sons Francis Henry Dillon Bell, became one of New Zealand's most famous statesmen, becoming Mayor of Wellington and Prime Minister for a time. Asher Asher, Charles Davis, Henry Keesing and David Nathan served as commissioners on the original Auckland Harbour Board. In Wellington Hort was instrumental in the formation of the Wellington Fire Brigade. The first Mayor of Auckland was Philip Phillips. After having prayed in private homes for a number of years the title deeds for the first Synagogue on The Terrace were received in 1868 and the Beth El Synagogue of Wellington was consecrated in 1870.

Similarly the Auckland Jews had been in a small building and on 9th November 1885 the ceremony of opening the Auckland Synagogue was held. A new era began for the South Island when gold was discovered in commercial quantities in 1861 and Jews followed this news. Prior to this the settlements of the provinces of Otago and Canterbury were mainly pastoral. A few years later further gold was discovered on the West Coast and in Nelson. Among the Scots at Dunedin only five families ventured to live there: Woolf Harris, George Casper, Hyam Nathan, Joseph Fogel and Adolf Bing. . In 1862 there were sufficient Jews to warrant the establishment of a formal congregation, and the Dunedin Jewish Congregation was born. Soon after that they procured a cemetery and sought to engage a minister. They engaged none other than David M. Isaacs whom Hort over twenty years previously had brought with him from England. In 1868 a synagogue was built in Dunedin on the corner of Moray Place and View Street.

This most southern Jewish congregation in the world sold this first building and then built an imposing edifice in Morah Place opposite. One of their most famous sons was David Theomin whose stately home "Olveston" was left to the nation by his daughter Dorothy when she died in 1966. As soon as the first settler in Christchurch Louis Edward Nathan could muster a sufficient number of Jews he founded the Canterbury Hebrew Congregation. It did not seem right to include the name Christchurch in the name of a synagogue. Mark Marks acted as first officiating minister and, receiving a government grant for both a cemetery as well as a synagogue, the congregation built a wooden edifice on a block of land between Worcester and Gloucester Streets on the site where the next synagogue was also

built in 1881. In 1865 about thirty-five heads of families attended the general meeting of the Canterbury Hebrew Congregation.

By 1870 the gold rush on the West Coast had ended and the Jews of Hokitika came to Christchurch bringing with them their minister the Rev. Isaac Zachariah. In 1875 a respected Jew Judah Myers who had established a career as a crockery merchant in Motueka, (out of Nelson), shifted to Wellington. His son Michael (1873-1950) later attained the highest judicial post in the country becoming Chief Justice of New Zealand. The Wellington community then appointed in 1862 Benjamin Aaron Selig as Reader and Shochet, but his connection with the community was severed in 1866 and Jacob Frankel came up from Dunedin and it was his enthusiasm and zeal that was instrumental in the building of the first Synagogue.

The first three incumbents (the Rev. A.S. Levy, the Rev A. Myers of Hobart and Benjamin Levy) did not remain long. It was not until Joseph E. Nathan went to London in 1876 that the community appointed another. The Rev. Herman Van Staveren (1849-1930) was selected and this distinguished gentleman served the congregation with distinction for over fifty years. His wife gave birth to four sons and nine daughters. The Government selected him as the first chairman of the Wellington Hospital Board and he topped the polls annually in the Hospital Board elections. He helped found the Jewish Philanthropic Society and Chevra Kadisha and started the Hebrew School. In the late 1920's the old wooden building was becoming too small for the growing congregation in the capital city and so it was decided to rebuild it in brick on the same site. This building was consecrated in September 1929. Between 1959 and 1966 a building fund was inaugurated to provide better facilities, but in 1963 the Ministry of Works indicated that they would require the site on The Terrace for motorway development.

Then, property was acquired a little at a time, and planning proceeded on the present spot at 74 – 80 Webb Street. In 1974, Rabbi Abraham Rosenfeld laid the foundation stone of the Jewish Community Centre (which also then incorporated the Jewish Social Club). The Deckston Home, which is currently situated in the Hutt Valley, is a Kosher home for the frail elderly. It is managed by the Wellington Jewish Care of the Aged Society, which is expanding its role to provide support to elderly Jewish people in their own homes. In 1864 the Auckland congregation under the leadership of David Nathan and the members of the Keesing family appointed their first minister the Rev Moses Elkin who gave ten years service. The next choice of spiritual leader was the Rev. Samuel Aaron Goldstein who, with dignity and

scholarship, served for over 50 years as Minister of the Auckland Hebrew Congregation.

The second synagogue was situated in Princes Street and the third (and existing) Beth Yisroel in Grey Street. This same centrally located building incorporates another smaller shul, Auckland Hebrew Congregation office, the Synagogue Guild shop, Alexander Astor Hall, Hebrew school rooms, a library and Bnei Akiva rooms. Nowadays, Kadima Kindergarten and College give excellent service to the education needs of Auckland's Jewish children, and Shalom Court provides care for the elderly. New Zealand has a strong commitment to Israel and is considered to have given the most emigrants to that country in proportion to its population than any other country in the world. In 1959 Rabbi John Levi came over to Wellington from Melbourne to investigate the possibility of starting a new Liberal congregation.

A number of Jews in the Capital were interested and, soon after, Temple Sinai was started. In 1997 the members agreed to rename the Congregation the Wellington Progressive Jewish Congregation Inc. which still meets at 147 Ghuznee Street. Auckland's Progressive Temple, Beth Shalom, is situated at 180 Manukau Road, Epsom, Auckland. Despite its small numbers New Zealand Jewry has always given a strong commitment to non-Jewish causes which continues to this day. There has been prominent activity in industry and commerce, in the arts and journalism, local and central politics and in law and accountancy. City Mayors have included Sir Dove-Meyer Robinson (Auckland), Mr Ian Lawrence (Wellington) and Eve Poole (Invercargill). Initially the first flush of immigrants came mainly from the United Kingdom and, prior and after the two World Wars, from Europe. In the 1970's and 80's, when the Russian Government relaxed restrictions, several hundred families were brought to New Zealand.

Recently some Israelis and a considerable number of South Africans have settled in New Zealand. The total Jewish population of New Zealand is estimated at around 5,000 (at the time of writing) with most being in Auckland and Wellington.