

## My Jewish Carlton

This article may seem untimely or uncalled for, but I have only recently seen the video *Bitter Herbs and Honey* by Monique Schwarz, made in 1996. This film purported to be a picture of Jewish Carlton in the 1930s and 1940s, but having been a resident there during those years I found it very disappointing. Although there were some interesting interviews and information, the film did not capture the atmosphere of the times, or give a complete picture of what that life was like. I felt I needed to put *my* memories on paper before they faded away completely.

My family arrived in Melbourne from Palestine in 1927, and after a short stay with the legendary Feiglin family in Shepparton, a country fruit-growing town, we came to Carlton where we lived till December 1935, first in Palmerston Street, right next to the Carlton Synagogue with its large *sukkah*, where we used to eat by lantern light during the Sukkot festival. For a short time we lived in Princes Street, and finally in Elgin Street. I attended Lee Street School, both “little” and “big,” that is, from grades one to eight.

In the 1930s Jewish life centered in Lygon Street at the intersection with Elgin Street. Here we could shop even on Sunday mornings at Smorgon’s Butcher Shop, Bolton’s Grocery and Liebe’s Shoe Store. Among other nearby businesses were a Jewish barbershop, shoe repair (Mr. Miletzky) and tailoring services. The Markov Pharmacy was also close-by in Elgin Street, opposite the law offices of the late Aleck Sacks, which were close to the Court House on Drummond Street. Altshuler’s Jewish Book Shop was in Rathdowne Street near the corner of Elgin Street, and the Carlton Synagogue was just a block away in Palmerston Street. Mr. Kantor had a bookshop in town.

Then there was a Jewish bakery (I think by the name of Glick) and in the next group of shops was Lachman’s Greengrocery and Berenholz’s Shoe Repair. A shul built by the

Stone family in memory of one of the senior family members was in Pitt Street, a short side street linking Rathdowne with the parallel Canning Street. Rabbi Gurewitz and his family lived in this area, closer to North Carlton, and he made an impressive figure as he walked along Rathdowne to and from the synagogue on Shabbat with his sons. And how could anyone forget the sight of Reverend Adler, marching along with his etrog and *lulav*, the Four Species, held high and a train of small street urchins following behind.

The *mikveh* (ritual bath) that served the community was situated in the City Baths, which lay between Carlton and the city, I think on Swanston Street.

Needless to say, all this commercial life and social interaction were conducted in Yiddish, which perforce became the mother tongue of the children of the immigrants, though here and there some families continued to speak Polish, Russian and the few who spoke Hebrew. These families had come from towns in Palestine – Safed, Rosh Pina, Yesod Hama’ala, Metulla and other *moshavim* (agricultural cooperatives) – who left, like my parents, because of the difficult conditions there in the late twenties. They formed the nucleus of the Zionist movement in Melbourne, which started with the Ivriah Club in the early 1930s, when it was situated in Neil Street. I have photos of some of those gatherings. Also in Neil Street near the corner of Lygon was Kanatopsky’s Grocery, whose tall, cheerful son Abe delivered orders on Sunday mornings.

The Ivriah had an active program for the young and old, and the redoubtable Anya Ginsberg used to organize concerts and events for the Jewish festivals. I remember myself appearing in one of these concerts, at the age of three or four, with a doll in my arms, singing in Hebrew, “*Yesh li buba, v’hi yaffa...*” (I have a doll, and she is beautiful, etc). Mrs. Ginsberg continued these activities well into the 1940s, including street parades on the occasion of the establishment of the State of Israel. As I left Melbourne in August 1948 to make *aliyah*, I don’t know how long she carried on this work. At all the events which she organised were Israeli products, *totzeret haaretz*, for sale, the most popular items at that time

being made of olive wood. Of course she was not the only leading member of the Ivriah; there were several members of the large Saks family as well, but I cannot recall them all.

After a short time the Ivriah moved to larger quarters in Drummond Street, in the area mentioned above, near the Courthouse and opposite Cohen's Kosher Restaurant. These clubrooms became a hive of activity. Zionist functions such as lectures, discussions and meetings were held there all the time, and I recall attending a memorial evening dedicated to Yosef Trumpeldor, the heroic one-armed soldier who died defending the Tel Hai settlement in 1920. This was presented under the auspices of the New Zionist Organization (followers of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, founder of the Betar Movement), which was headed by Mr. Yehuda Honig, who was a Hebrew teacher and prepared my brother Alec (Yehiel) for his bar mitzvah.

WIZO, the Women's International Zionist Organization, was also housed there, and carried on its various fundraising activities such as Bring and Buy teas, bazaars, Popular Child competitions, raffles, etc. My mother belonged to the Kinneret group, whose name came from the Hebrew for the Sea of Galilee. The Jewish National Fund (JNF) also worked out of these rooms, and carried out door-to-door fundraising campaigns. The little blue *pushkes* (collection boxes) were emptied and the monies counted at the Ivriah. They organized other fundraising events, held picnics, and their annual Purim ball was a great occasion for which people made an effort to dress up in original homemade costumes. I recall that the printing plant of the *Australian Jewish News*, run at that time by the Rubinstein family, was also in this area. Besides the *Jewish News*, my parents also read the American Yiddish weekly *Der Forwards*, which was passed round in their circle of friends.

Mrs. Segal, who could seat sixty people in her specially arranged home, did catering for *simchas* (celebrations) and my brother celebrated his bar mitzvah there. In later years she moved to St. Kilda and was the venue for the celebration of my 21st birthday.

Modern Hebrew classes were held at the Ivriah Club on Sunday mornings, as well as at the Faraday Street School on weekday afternoons. This school was situated on the corner of

Faraday and Rathdowne Streets, opposite the gardens of the Exhibition Hall. The classes were arranged under the auspices of the United Jewish Board of Education, whose principal was Neuman Rosenthal, with Rabbi Israel Brodie taking an active part.

Rabbi Brodie, who went on to London to become the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, was the first president of the Zionist Federation of Australia, founded in 1927. There were no Jewish day schools before the founding of the Mt. Scopus College in 1948, so the network of the Board of Education was very important. I well remember the arguments for and against the idea of the school which were voiced at that time. Fortunately the “pros” won the day, and eventually Mt. Scopus became one of the leading schools in the state of Victoria, and other Jewish schools and kindergartens soon appeared on the scene. The first principal was Abe Feiglin.

Mention must be made of the King David Scouts, among whose founders were my brother Alec Shapiro and the late Izzie Rischin. This group was created specifically for Carlton and neighboring suburbs, since another Scout group already existed in St. Kilda. They participated in the International Jamboree of 1935 at Frankston, just south of Melbourne, and I have a photo of my mother and me going to visit on Visitors Day.

The Ivriah was also home to Habonim, which was founded in the early 1940s by Dr. David Tabor, a young physicist from Cambridge. Several groups according to age were formed and they held camps and had a Hachshara farm for agricultural training purposes. So it is not true as claimed in *Bitter Herbs and Honey* that Zionist activity began only after 1948.

On the corner of Kay and Canning Streets, opposite the home of the *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) Rev. Yoffe and his family, was another social centre in Carlton, Monash House. General Sir John Monash was one of the outstanding Jews in public life. Although an engineer with a doctorate by profession who contributed greatly to large civil construction projects in Victoria, he was an officer in the militia and eventually appointed commander of the Australian and New Zealand Forces (ANZACS) during World War I because of his

organisational and tactical abilities. Monash was born in Melbourne in 1865, the son of German Jewish immigrants from Prussia who came to Melbourne in the early 1860s, having previously been printers of Hebrew books. He was a practicing Jew all his life and a Zionist, who was the honorary president of the aforementioned Zionist Federation of Australia. He died in 1931, and Monash House (I don't know if it still exists) and today Monash University perpetuate his name.

It served as the centre for the community's more secular activities like AJAX, the organization of Jewish ex-servicemen of World War I, and Hakoah, the sports association. My mother used to take me for evening gym classes and there would be exhibition performances every year. Dances, balls and other social activities took place there, but the main activity was the Victorian Jewish Competitions held annually in music, elocution (Hebrew and English), amateur theatre, and debating. I have three silver medals, second prize, for my efforts in the piano (1933, 1934) and Hebrew recitation (1938) events. The competitions were immensely popular and people were seen there who never appeared at any other Jewish function.

We returned in 1936 from an unsuccessful attempt to settle in Palestine and lived in North Carlton on Amess Street. We liked to pronounce it with a short "a" instead of Aymess so that it sounded like the Yiddish word for "truth." Here again there was a similar concentration of Jewish enterprises – Pahoff's Dairy, Polonsky's Butcher Shop, a bakery where my father bought fresh rolls and onion *platzlech* each morning. On Thursday mornings before school, I had to take the Shabbat chicken to the *shochet* at Porush's Chicken Shop. There was a second bakery, Ernst's, at the corner of Lygon and Richardson Streets, near the tram stop, and a barbershop where I went with my father to have my haircut.

Dr. Sternfeld lived at the corner of Rathdowne and Richardson Streets and Dr. Mushin was in Lygon Street. Dr. Jona did not live in the area, but was a popular obstetrician and was also much involved in Zionist circles. As for dentistry, Mrs. Saks, mother of Izzie and Hala,

had brought with her an old-fashioned pedal drill which looked rather fearsome, but other modern dentists soon appeared in the neighborhood.

I continued at Lee Street School except for a year at Princes Hill, a neighboring suburb, while our old building was rebuilt and modernized. Here too was a strong Jewish presence and most of us went on to University High School for secondary education. This school in Parkville lay on the further side of the University, which was still Carlton. We usually walked across the campus or the short way through Tinpot Alley, the northern boundary. Boys from the wealthier suburbs went to Wesley College and girls went to MacRobertson High, which was known as the Chocolate Frog school because of the popular frog-shaped sweet produced by MacRobertson's chocolate factory. The Jewish presence at Uni High was very pronounced, so much so that on Jewish holidays the classes were quite depleted. I recall that at Lee Street, Jewish children were exempted from the religious instruction classes, as a matter of course, and were envied by their classmates.

As the new arrivals of the 1930s and 1940s settled down and acclimatized, new businesses were established and existing ones expanded. Many found employment in the Jewish clothing factories of the old-timers, and professional newcomers – teachers, musicians, writers and artists – also eventually found their niches. They reinforced the Yiddish-speaking population. True they looked and dressed differently, spoke English with atrocious accents, and were an embarrassment to the “established” Jews, but they were *landsleit*, relatives from the “old country.” They were hard workers and anxious to do well, and though most were poor in material goods, they brought with them a strong Yiddish and Hebrew culture, which enriched the community.

The children of these immigrants eventually went on to university and graduated as doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc. Some of the Jewish students were very active in the socialist and communist clubs of the university or The Shop, as it was affectionately called, but other enterprising students organized the Jewish Student Study Group which had Jewish and Zionist

content expressed in seminars, lectures, summer camps, etc. A goodly proportion of those who returned to Israel or made *aliyah* were the children and grandchildren of those immigrants from the 1930s. Genes will out.

The Kadima, built in the 1930s in Lygon Street, opposite the cemetery, was primarily for the Bundists, but was also a cultural centre for the whole community, not only for North Carlton. I had my first taste of theatre there as a teenager, seeing Goldfarden's musical, *HaMachshefa* (The Witch) and also Strindberg's *The Father* in Yiddish. Mr. Braisblatt was the moving force behind the theatrical troupe. There was also a library, a choir, and rooms for other organizations. In the 1940s I heard Bronislaw Huberman, the celebrated violinist, and also the popular European vocal quartet, the Comedy Harmonists. Their concert was serious and the audience was polite, but when they started singing Yiddish songs as encores, the audience went into ecstasy and wouldn't let them go.

There was no formal synagogue in North Carlton, but services were held in the Talmud Torah on Rathdowne Street and in one or two *shtieblach* (small synagogue) in private homes. Somewhere nearby was Mr. Haber's grocery.

As mentioned earlier, my brother and I left North Carlton for Israel in August 1948, not in any formal or organized framework. The Carlton suburbs were being taken over by Italian immigrants as the Jewish population gradually moved across the river to the better suburbs. In the course of time, about thirty years later, Carlton took on a new lease of life, because of its proximity to the city centre and the university. The small working-class and lower middle-class houses set in wide well-kept streets were much sought after. With renovation and remodeling inside, and their "iron lace" decorations repaired and repainted, they fetched fantastic prices. The movement to St. Kilda, Caulfield, Toorak, etc., led of course to new enterprises and new commercial centers. New suburbs were developed, Jewish kindergartens and schools proliferated, and the picture today is far different from that which I knew.

I hope I haven't offended anyone, or their descendants, by forgetting them in this account. Any omission is not intentional, but sixty years have passed since I walked those streets, years which I have spent in Jerusalem and during which ties to Carlton have weakened. I wanted to recall the variety, creativity and strength of the old suburbs, which pulsed with Jewish activity and where courageous people rebuilt and bettered their lives in a strange land and in difficult times. I wanted to portray how that panorama looked to me as a child, and I know I certainly did not appreciate it then as I can now in retrospect. In spite of the passage of time and changing circumstances, those scenes are still fresh in my mind. The larger picture remains true and lives on in my imagination, so wherever I am, I can visit there whenever I wish.

Written in 2006