A Tribute to Australian Jewry
Part one

As Israel celebrates her 60th anniversary of modern statehood, it's fitting for all Australians to pause and pay tribute to the physical sons of Abraham who have travelled to these southern shores and made the land Down Under their home.

In this first part of our three part series, we will present the initial arrival of the Jewish people from the First Fleet in 1788 until the Federation of our country on 1st January 1901.

The First Fleet to Federation (1788-1901)

You may be surprised to learn that other than Israel, Australia is the only country in which Jews played an integral part from the very first day.

Whether they arrived as convicts (from 1788), free settlers (from 1821), immigrants (from the 1830s), refugee survivors of the Holocaust (after World War II), or whether they were born here, today's Australian Jewish population of approximately 120,000[1] is owed a debt of gratitude by their 21 million fellow compatriots.

The reason is simple: Jews have contributed greatly to Australia's rich and colourful history.[2] Although they have always been a minority of the population – less than one per cent – Jews have nonetheless played a significant role in the upbuilding of Australia. Whether through the arts, sciences, industry and commerce, the armed forces, religion or on the land, Australia's Jewish sons have contributed greatly to our heritage.

Although they were few in number, *the Jews helped to transform a colony into a country!*

Convicts & early settlers

At least sixteen Jewish convicts arrived with the 738 First Fleet transportees on 26th January 1788. By 1830, nearly 400 Jewish convicts had been transported[3] and they continued to arrive on almost every convict ship until transportation ceased in the mid-19th century.

The first free Jewish settlers started to arrive in 1821 and within just twenty years, 1082 Jews had chosen to settle in Australia.

In 1831, Rabbi Aaron Levy sailed from England to settle a divorce between a convict and his wife (who had remained behind in the Old Country). The rabbi established a temporary synagogue for the young Jewish community above a shop in George Street. The prayers were recited by Australia's only acknowledged Levite, Joseph Marcus, a convict who had

arrived in 1792 and who had officiated at Jewish funerals from 1817 to 1825.

Construction began on Australia's oldest synagogue in Hobart in 1843 and the first service took place two years later.[4] In 1844, Sydney's first purpose-built synagogue was constructed in York Street and in 1878, Sydney's Great Synagogue was consecrated. Its imposing structure remains a historic feature of the cityscape and was restored for the bicentennial in 1988.

From Jewish Convict to "First Lady"

Esther Abrahams[5] (1771-1846) was tried in London's Old Bailey on 30th August 1786 for stealing lace to the value of 50 shillings. The fifteen year old was found guilty and imprisoned in Newgate Gaol where she gave birth to an illegitimate daughter, Roseanna, on 18th March 1787. Both mother and daughter were transported to Australia with the First Fleet[6] later that year.

During the long and treacherous voyage, Esther – with babe in arms – became the mistress of Lieutenant George Johnston. Esther eventually gave birth to Lieutenant Johnston's seven children. During their early years in Australia, their home was

likely a humble wattle and daub cottage built by convicts.

On 26th January 1808, Lieutenant Johnston led the Rum Rebellion[7] during which the Governor of New South Wales, Captain William Bligh (of Mutiny on the Bounty fame) was arrested and deposed. With the new Lieutenant Governor Johnston in charge, his long-term consort Esther Abrahams became the colony's "First Lady"! On 12th November 1814, Johnston and Esther finally married.

As an entitlement of his rank, Lieutenant Governor Johnston received huge land grants and he named a Sydney suburb after his birthplace of Annandale in Scotland.

When Johnston died in 1823, his son Robert disputed the inheritance of his property, Annandale, which culminated in a sensational trial. Robert was to inherit Annandale after his mother's death, but in March 1829, Robert proceeded to have Esther declared insane. Esther put up a strong fight, producing many witnesses to prove that she was in fact lucid, but Robert won the case and consequently his father's estate.

Esther lived with her other son, David, for another fifteen years before passing away. She was buried beside her husband in the family vault on the Annandale property. Her grandson later described her as "always a stirring industrious woman".

Although various geographical features (such as George's River) keep her husband's name in public memory, until six years ago there were few memorials testifying to Esther's life. But today, if you visit Bicentennial Park in Annandale, fronting Sydney Harbour near the ANZAC Bridge you will find the Esther Abrahams Pavilion which was dedicated in her honour in 2002. A portrait of Esther also hangs in the Sydney Jewish Museum.

Incredible Identities

Throughout our nation's history, Jews have been involved in all facets of Australian life. Records provide evidence of pugilists like Samuel Lyons and Moses Moses[8], publicans, politicians[9], policemen such as Australia's first constable PC John Harris (a reformed convict)[10] as well as philanthropists.[11]

Here are just a few incredible identities:

• Consider the Jewish bushranger Edward David, whose brother founded a newspaper that still operates today: John Davies (note the name change!) was a powerful figure in Tasmanian politics and the founder of the Hobart Mercury.[12]

• Samuel Lyons is remembered as "the man they couldn't hang" – because the rope broke three times! Astonishingly, the rope was tested with weights after the vain attempts to execute him and was found to be more than adequate! His uncanny escape from death three times was therefore acknowledged by some as divine intervention. Samuel's death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, but this sentence was later changed as well, which adds to the phenomenon of Samuel's place in Australian folklore.[13]

• Another larger than life character, who is universally acknowledged as the inspiration for the character of Fagin in Charles Dickens' novel Oliver Twist[14], is Isaac "Ikey" Solomon, who went from convict to free man to convict again in Hobart.

The Victorian Gold Rush

Jewish settlement in Victoria took off in 1839 with the arrival of the immigrant ship, Hope. Asher Hymen Hart established a Jewish community in 1841 which later became known as the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation. The East Melbourne Hebrew Congregation (founded in 1855) and the St Kilda Hebrew Congregation (founded in 1871) were later established to meet increasing demand.

The Victorian Gold Rush of the 1850s attracted more Jewish immigrants; they usually worked not as fossickers, but as storekeepers, hawkers and businessmen on the goldfields. Many prominent Australian families, such as that of Sidney Myer (which is no longer Jewish), can trace their ancestry to these early years.

With the expansion of regional centres due to agricultural and mining booms, synagogues were built in country areas. But after prolonged droughts and the depletion of rich ore bodies, the population of country towns declined and synagogues were closed. The only rural synagogues that continue to function in country areas today are located in Newcastle (New South Wales) and Ballarat (Victoria).

We may pause here to ask the legitimate question: did any anti-Semitism exist in Australia's history?

Social historian Professor William D Williamstein responds: "Such popular prejudice as existed against Jews in Australian society never took any official or legal form, and was generally confined to small groups of extremists and unrepresentative fringe groups."[15]

The Australia-Israel Link

Now we arrive at one of the proudest historical moments for Australians who love Israel and the Jewish people.

Our New South Wales voluntary representative, Maxwell Aaron Hall, has an ancestral link with Australia's rabbinical past: Max's great grandfather, Rabbi Aaron Alexander Levi, served the Sydney Jewish community from 1851 to 1883.

If you also have an Australian Jewish heritage, please write to us with the details. We thank you in anticipation!
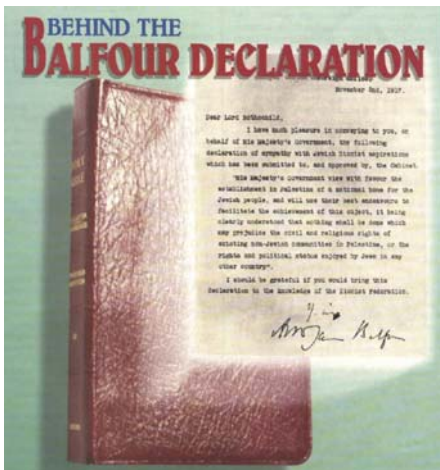
In 1917, our Light Horse (mounted infantry) regiments played a crucial role in helping to liberate Israel from the Ottoman Turks. Just 800 Light Horsemen charged Beersheva, the city of biblical patriarchs, liberating it from Turkish rule and opening the way to returning Jerusalem to the Jewish people.

After the historic victory, General Edmund Allenby dismounted and led his horse into Jerusalem, in deference to the knowledge that his Saviour and Israel's Messiah will return to God's Holy City in triumph, riding on a white charger (Rev 19:11-16).

On 2nd November of that same year, Alfred James Balfour wrote to Lord Rothschild on behalf of His Majesty's government, declaring that there should be a "national home for the Jewish people" – this became known as the history-making Balfour Declaration.

The First World War prepared the Land for the Jewish people!

The Second World War prepared the Jewish people for the Land!

The Stuff of Australian Legend

Australians have good reason to celebrate Israel's 60th birthday and to pay tribute to her people.

As Marianne Dacy from the University of Sydney's rightly contends: "Jews participate in every facet of civic, economic and social life" and "many of Australia's prominent doctors, lawyers, musicians and mathematicians are Jewish."[16] Moreover, Jews have played foundational roles in establishing and sustaining our Federal and State governments.[17]

To study the lives of our earliest Jewish settlers is to study memorable characters: gripping adventurers in courage, intrigue, vision and hard work. Many such lives and their legacies have become the stuff of Australian legend.

We pay tribute to the contribution that our Jewish friends have made in helping to transform a colony into a country!

A Birthday Blessing

Jews all over the world have celebrated this year – with energy, passion and renewed determination.

In May, the streets of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Israel's other cities flooded with Jews – men, women and children, soldiers, students, workers. They praised God that after sixty years, they still possess not only their lives, but also their ancestral home. The loss of their loved ones through war and terror is made more bearable through the knowledge that their

sacrifice had not been in vain: Israel is not merely hanging on – she is strong. She has used her brains for medical and scientific discoveries which she has then shared with the world. She has used her sweat to reclaim the deserts with fresh produce which she exports worldwide. She is a tiny nation surrounded by a sea of hostile enemies who constantly attempt to destroy her – yet she survives and even thrives in her Promised Land.

Because God's hand is on her, Israel is a modern day miracle.

Jews in the Diaspora – including here in Australia – have shared the joy of their Israeli brothers and sisters this year. Many Jewish organisations have held special birthday dinners and celebratory events. Hundreds of Israeli speakers, singers and entertainers have travelled thousands of kilometres to feature as guests of honour at special events worldwide.

Christians who love and support Israel and the Jewish people – based on their love for God and His Word – have celebrated as well. We're witnessing the prophecies of the Bible come to life on a worldwide scale, as Israel's enemies relentlessly throw their bodies and weapons and words at her – yet because God is in control, Israel continues to survive.

As we consider the role that the Jewish people have played in the history of our own beloved nation, please join with us in praying for the Jewish people and by celebrating Israel's 60th birthday. Let's also continue to glorify God both for His faithfulness to Israel, as well as for His provision for all mankind (both Jews and gentiles) through His Son, our Messiah, Yeshua.

Opening Our Hearts and Homes

One of the ways in which we can demonstrate our love, support and appreciation for the Jewish people is

through hosting Israeli backpackers who travel to Australia each year in search of relaxation and adventure.

Deane and Margaret Woods welcome Israeli backpackers to their home with a sign in Hebrew. Loosely translated, it reflects a typical Australian greeting: "Welcome, mates!"

The dining table is set for the Shabbat (Sabbath) meal in the Woods' home. What a blessing it is to share Shabbat with the Jews!

Hosting Israeli backpackers creates long-lasting ties of friendship and opens innumerable opportunities to lovingly present the Gospel. To learn how you can share your support and love for the Jewish people by hosting these remarkable young people in your home, please contact our office.

With love in Yeshua's Name,

Deane and Margaret Woods

Endnotes

(1) Estimates vary from the official Census figures of 102,912 in 1996 to 120,000. The variants are explained by whether one is simply referring to those Jews who are in Australia on the night of the Census, or taking into account those who were overseas at that particular time. See the Christian Research Association article on this matter: www.cra.org/pages/00000228.ogi. Similar figures are cited in http://wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Australia

(2) For a brief history of Australian Jewry, refer to: Suzanne D Rutland, *The Jews in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, *passim*.; also by the same author, Edge of the Diaspora: *Two Centuries of Jewish Settlement in Australia*, Second Revised edition, Brandl & Schlessinger Pty Ltd, Reprinted in 2001, *passim*; John S Levi & GFJ Bergman, *Australian Genesis: Jewish Convicts and Settlers 1788-1860*, Melbourne University Press, 2002, *passim*; Louise Rosenberg, *Of Folktales and Jewish Folk in Australian History*, Printworthy 2004, pp. 7-34; Helen Bersten, *Jewish Sydney: The First Hundred Years 1788-1888*, Paper Tiger Printing, Reprint 2000, pp 4-43; Geoffrey Brahm Levy and Philip Mendes, Editors, Jews and Australian Politics, Sussex Academic Press, 2004, esp. pp. 11-46; Paul R. Bartrop, *Australia and The Holocaust 1933-1945*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 1994, *passim*; Rabbi Raymond Apple, *The Jewish Way: Jews and Judaism in Australia*, Copyright: The Great Synagogue, Sydney, 2002, pp. 5-70, esp. pp. 11-32

(3) Helen Bersten, *Jewish Sydney: The First Hundred Years 1788-1888*, p.5. There can be no certainty of all their numbers and names, because not all admitted to being Jewish

(4) In the 2001 Census, only 163 Tasmanians identified themselves as Jewish and the Hobart Hebrew Congregation numbered no more than 70

(5) The writer is indebted to public domain material for much of the biographical data cited here. See http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Convicts_on_the_ First Fleet. The source is hereby acknowledged

(6) The First Fleet refers to the 11 ships which sailed from Great Britain on 13th May 1787 to establish the first European colony in New South Wales. It was a convict settlement which the beginning of transportation to Australia. The fleet was led by Captain (later Admiral) Arthur Phillip

(7) The Rum Rebellion, also known as the Rum Puncheon Rebellion, was the only successful armed takeover of government in Australia's recorded history. The Governor of New South Wales, William Bligh, was deposed by the New South Wales Corps (nicknamed "The Rum Core" because they were in control of distributing spirits), under the command of Major George Johnson, on 26th January 1808 – exactly twenty years to the day since the founding of the first European settlement. The colony was later ruled by the military with the senior military officer stationed in Sydney acting as the Lieutenant-Governor until the arrival from Britain of Major-General Lachlan Macquarie in 1810

(8) *Australian Genesis*, pp. 79, 143-44

(9) *Jews and Australian Politics*, passim

(10) *Ibid*, pp. 40-51

(11) Rutland, op. cit., 31, 103-05, 267, 354-56, 380-81

(12) John S Levi and GFJ Bergman, *Australian Genesis: Jewish Convicts and Settlers 1788-1860*, pp. 242-259

(13) *Ibid*., pp. 62-68

(14) *Ibid*., pp. 217-241

(15) WD Rubinstein, *The Jews in Australia: A Thematic History. Volume Two 1945 to the Present* (Melbourne, William Heinemann, 1991), p. 379

(16) Cited from an article *Brief History of Australian Jewry*, 17 September, 2007, p. 2. Http://judaica.library.usyd.edu.au/histories/History

(17) For a complete list of Australian Jewish politicians, refer to Hilary Rubinstein's useful roster of Jewish parliamentarians in Australia from 1849 to the present, and Levy's and Mendes' compendium, in their *Jews and Australian Politics*, pp. 245-253. Geoffrey Brahm Levy and Philip Mendes, Editors, *Jews and Australian Politics*, Sussex Academic Press, 2004. Rubenstein's impressive list totals 90