

Feature

Tasmania is home to Australia's oldest synagogue

By FRANCES KRAFT
Staff Reporter

HOBART, Tasmania — Despite its tiny population, the Jewish community of Hobart — the capital of Australia's only island state — offers a choice of Shabbat worship services. Every second Saturday there is a short "progressive" service; following it is the regular weekly Orthodox service.

Caroline Heard, president of the Hobart Hebrew Congregation until last month, deserves credit for the harmonious arrangement, according to Pnina Clark, who with her husband, David, serves as Hobart's de facto Chabad emissary.

Their synagogue is the oldest in Australia, with backless wooden benches — once reserved for convicts shipped from Britain in the 1800s — supplementing more comfortable high-backed wooden pews. In all, there are 150 seats downstairs, and 45 in the women's gallery.

A well-preserved structure fronted with tall trapezoid-shaped windows, the synagogue was built 160 years ago in neo-classical Egyptian style, even incorporating palm-tree-shaped columns.

"We've gone from candlepower to gas to electric," Heard told a small group of visitors on a mild Tasmanian spring day last November.

Pointing out the elaborate chandelier over the bimah, she told of the synagogue's July 4, 1845, consecration in Hobart Town, as the city was then known. "It was the middle of winter. It would have been cold and dark... I reckon they used a heck of a lot of candles that day."

Heard, a native of Plymouth, England, who moved to Australia in 1971, has spent the last dozen or so years in Hobart but is moving to Melbourne this month. The 160th anniversary concert she organized at the synagogue last November featured a rearrangement of the music composed by Catholic bandmaster Jacob Reichenberg for the building's opening.

Because the governor of Van Diemen's Land — the name by which Tasmania was originally known — would not grant land for a non-Christian institution, Judah Solomon, a local

Jewish merchant and pardoned convict, donated his garden. His stately home, known as Temple House, still stands next to the synagogue and is owned by state police.

From the time the synagogue's foundation stone was laid in August 1843, it took two years — and help from Sir Moses Montefiore — to complete the building. The famed British Jewish philanthropist raised money for the congregation when locals ran low on funds.

Donors and the amounts they provided, in British pounds, are listed on the back wall in gold script. Prominently displayed on a side wall is the prayer for the Royal Family.

In recounting the synagogue's early history, Heard notes an unusual halachic issue — whether or not convicts could be honoured with aliyot or included in a minyan, the traditional prayer quorum. After consultation with the chief rabbi of England, it was determined that they could be counted in the minyan but not called to the Torah, she said.

Hobart's current Jewish population comprises an eclectic group, many of whom are married to non-Jews. There is at least one Israeli, an Algerian couple, university students from elsewhere, and a woman who was a classmate of Anne Frank's as a child. Their class picture is on display at the synagogue, which has about 50 individual members.

A Chabad rabbi comes in for the High Holy Days, life-cycle events and the occasional service. Progressive rabbis also visit, on an irregular basis.

According to Australia's last census in 2001, Tasmania has about 165 Jews. There were more than 400 in Hobart alone in 1848, but most of the original Jewish families either left Judaism or left the city, said David Clark.

After World War II, he noted, the community was "repopulated" by European immigrants.

As Orthodox Jews, the Clarks are a minority within a minority on the scenic island whose license plates bear the slogan "Tasmania — Your Natural State." Launceston, about 200 kilometres to the north of Hobart, has a Chabad House.

The couple lives on a hilly street lined with prewar houses fronted by flowering gardens. They have hosted many Jewish backpackers looking for a kosher meal or a place to sleep. In fact, their home is listed in the phone book as the Jewish Centre. Pnina runs a small Hebrew school and began her first Jewish playgroup last fall.

It is only "by default," according to Pnina, that they are Chabad emissaries. Their presence in Hobart predates their affiliation with Chabad in the early 1980s.

David was born and raised in Hobart. Pnina emigrated from Hungary at age 8 with her family in the late 1950s. She is the daughter of the late Rabbi Jacob Joseph Schick, a former congregational rabbi in Melbourne.

In Tasmania, it's harder being observant. Kosher food is scarce, and Jewish day schools

don't exist. When their children reached high school age, the Clarks sent them to Melbourne, where they eventually settled, to continue their education.

"Anything kosher, we get from Melbourne," said Pnina. "I closed down my milchik sink until Shavuot."

Among the more memorable moments of Jewish life in Hobart, David recalls the time he was called on to help move about 50 bodies from the site of the colonial Jewish cemetery, which was sold decades ago, and reinter them in the Jewish section of Hobart's community cemetery.

"With six skeletons in the car, I was hoping I wouldn't get pulled [over] for any reason," he said.

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Caroline Heard

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CHOCOLATE SEDER: Grade 6 students at the Paul Penna Downtown Jewish Day School celebrated with family members at their recent chocolate seder, part of the school's Passover family education program.

Enjoys lifestyle in Hobart

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David and Pnina both perform chevra kadishah duties, preparing Jewish bodies for burial. "It's difficult here, because often you know them," Pnina said.

Pnina, who has a master's degree in psychology, also finds time to counsel pregnant women and women in crisis, working with a group of Christian women.

"I believe it's important for us to do things for the general community," she said. "The Jewish community doesn't need me full time."

Although it would be nice to have more Jewish amenities, David said he likes the lifestyle in Hobart.

"In about 10 minutes, you can be in the bush, away from all the houses. You can't do that in many cities."

Family Moments

only from



Mazel Tov to



Mazel tov to Joseph & Edie Cladman on their 60th wedding anniversary. **Wishing you continued good health and happiness. Love Shelley, Wendy and Chana.**



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