



Australia's oldest synagogue

By Rob Ditessa

This year marks the 175th anniversary of the synagogue in Argyle Street, in Hobart. It is the oldest synagogue in Australia, and its story is intertwined with the history of European settlement on the Apple Isle.

As president of the board that manages the daily concerns of the synagogue and its congregation, Jeff Schneider is in the place of worship frequently enough, with his mind set to do a task. Yet, he says he often finds his eyes gravitating to the original benches used by the convicts. The Hobart Synagogue is the only one in the world with seats that were allotted specifically for convicts, who attended services escorted by armed guards. ‘The benches are very worn, crude and uncomfortable. They are very primitive, low to the floor with no back. The benches reflect how difficult it was for the convicts.’

His thoughts also turn to the whole community, including the early free settlers, and he reflects that despite being so far from home, they had the dedication to keep their beliefs, customs and rituals, and to build this synagogue that so many generations have used. There were six Jewish people on the *Calcutta*, the ship that brought the first convicts to establish the Hobart prison settlement. In 1848, the Jewish population in Van Diemen’s Land (as Tasmania was then known) was 435. Starting in the late 19th century, almost every mention of the congregation notes the small numbers. In 1918, on the diamond jubilee of the laying

of the foundation stone, the congregation’s secretary, Nat Edwards, wrote that it was probably the smallest congregation in the world.

‘The congregation has not even had a rabbi since the 1950s, but yet we have managed to keep an active group. It is a testament of several generations’ dedication to not only Judaism, but also to living in this lovely island state. The synagogue is at its centre,’ says Schneider.

In the synagogue, the seats carry numbers on the back. Schneider explains that these remain from the time when a member would pledge funds towards hiring a seat, entitling them to sit in the corresponding number. ‘Now, the concept of assigned seating is foreign,’ he adds.

The building itself was designed in the Egyptian Revival style by James Thomson. In her scholarly article, historian Diana Muir Appelbaum points out that in 1843, Hobart was ‘the site of an active penal colony and naval base, was in regular contact with the metropole, and populated by well-educated officers and gentlemen. Among these was the official Colonial Architect John Lee Archer, whose possible influence on the choice of Egyptian style for early Australian synagogues has previously gone unremarked. From 1836 to 1838, Archer built St George’s Anglican Church, a Greek temple



Inside Hobart Synagogue

Hobart Synagogue's chandelier

An impressive chandelier lights the Bimah, which Schneider explains is the pulpit with the Ark that holds the Torah Scrolls. Made of parchment paper, they comprise the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, and include all Jewish law and tradition. Today, there is one chandelier, and it is powered by electricity. A report from the day of the consecration says, 'The ceiling of the synagogue is enriched with an appropriate cornice, and five centre ornaments composed of the leaves and flowers of the Palin, Loins, mid Papyrus, (a style of ornament which pervades all the decorations). Hanging from those ornaments are five elegant chandeliers, containing 80 candles, in addition to which branch lights are placed at convenient distances around the walls. The floors are covered with rich carpet and matting; in fact, no expense appears to have been spared in perfecting the building'. (*The Courier*, Hobart, Wednesday 9 July 1845.)

with trapezoidal, Egyptianising windows. The architect of the Hobart Synagogue, James Thomson, a convicted jewel thief, served his time working under Archer as a draftsman. Thomson's Hobart Synagogue is beautifully proportioned. The doorway features canted sides, Egyptian column capitals and a cavetto cornice. The Egyptian theme is carried inside to the Torah Ark with lotus-leaf capitals and coved cornice'.

She concludes that the synagogues with Egyptian style elements, from the first in Germany in 1798 to the last in England in 1928, were statements of identity. 'These buildings were expressions of a Jewish desire to advertise and concretise Jewish origins in ancient Israel.'

Schneider explains that prior to the synagogue's consecration, services were held in various locations, including the mansion of businessman Judah Solomon,



Hobart Synagogue

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Czech memorial scroll

According to Schneider, 'In memory of those who perished during the Holocaust, we have on display a memorial Sefer Torah, which came to us from the former Czechoslovakia. It is one of 1564 scrolls seized from desecrated synagogues in that country by the Nazis, and gathered in the Prague Jewish Museum. After the war, the scrolls were eventually stored in a disused synagogue in the suburbs of Prague and were there neglected. In 1963, they were purchased from the Czech Government and transported to the Westminster Synagogue in London. Most were repaired and can now be found all over the world, more often than not in small communities that find it difficult to buy new scrolls due to lack of funds. It was not feasible to fully restore our possibly fire-damaged scroll, and so it is not used in worship. Instead, it is housed in a display case in memory of the millions of Jews who died during the Holocaust. The scroll is from the Czech town Heřmanův Městec, and it is on permanent loan from the Memorial Scrolls Trust'.



Czech memorial scroll at Hobart Synagogue

and the Rose and Crown Inn, owned by convict Israel Hyams. Records suggest a Yom Kippur service was held there in 1839. In the late 1830s, prominent business personalities, Louis Nathan and Samuel Moses, had set the example of observing Shabbat and rituals. In 1842, a meeting at the home of Isaac Friedman, the first Hungarian free settler in Australia, resolved to build a synagogue. When the faithful requested a grant of land for the construction, Governor John Franklin denied it, saying that the law permitted grants only for Christians. Judah Solomon donated a parcel from his block and the community accepted a tender costing £717. They conducted a fundraising subscription locally and internationally. Schneider explains that when the subscription for funds to build did not raise enough to meet the cost of the tender, the organisers appealed to Sir Moses Montefiore, the President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, in London. He responded generously. A plaque lists this donation and others from around the world. The synagogue's foundation was laid by Louis Nathan on Wednesday 9 August 1843, and consecrated on 4 July 1845.

In that same year, Aaron Mendoza, a Sephardi (of the Iberian diaspora) Jew, applied to marry a fellow convict, Ann Stewart. Their application was approved, but they married only well after Mendoza completed his prison term. Historians Susan Ballyn and Lucy Frost write, 'On 10 September 1854, Aaron Mendoza, "Dealer", married Ann Stewart "Spinster", in Hobart's Argyle Street Synagogue, "according to the rites and ceremonies of the Jews". The groom signed his name, while the bride made a mark. Although no children of Aaron and Ann Mendoza have been identified, Tasmania may

well be home of Sephardi convicts, as well as Sephardi free settlers who arrived during the colonial period and later. But their presence is difficult to chart: names have changed down the generations, and not necessarily is an individual aware of his or her ancestral heritage'.²

Intertwined with its history, many Jewish notables have served Tasmania's community. Schneider recounts that Abraham Rheuben, a successful produce merchant, served as a Hobart alderman for several years, and how his obituary noted that he 'devoted much of his time to the service of his fellow citizens'. Phineas Moss lectured at Mechanics' Institutes across the state on astronomy and mathematics. Samuel Benjamin, Judah Solomon's grandson, served as alderman on the Hobart council, and headed several benevolent institutions. Reuben Benjamin ran a confectionery store on Liverpool Street that his obituary described as the 'shop of everyone's childhood'.

As the visitor departs the heritage-listed synagogue and turns to take one last look, they will notice above the entrance an inscription written in Hebrew. It is from Shemot (Exodus, 20:24) and says, 'Wherever I cause My name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you'. ◯

Images supplied by Jeff Schneider.

References

- 1 Diana Muir Appelbaum, 'Jewish Identity and Egyptian Revival Architecture.' *Journal of Jewish Identities*, Issue 5, Number 2, July 2012, pages. 1–25
- 2 Susan Ballyn and Lucy Frost, 'Sephardi convicts in Van Diemen's Land.' *A few from afar: Jewish lives in Tasmania from 1804*, edited by Peter and Ann Elias