

Judaism in Australia

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Chapter 2 - The Jewish Community in Australia

The Jews are the oldest non-Anglo-Celtic group in Australia (apart from the Aborigines), with a number, estimated at between six and fourteen, arriving on the First Fleet. The first Jewish free settlers arrived in 1809. The first Jewish free settlers arrived in 1809. The earliest synagogue was founded in 1828-30 in Sydney. By the late nineteenth century there were synagogues in all significant Australian cities, including rural centres where Jewish life has since ceased to exist. In 1933 there were four synagogues in Sydney and six or more in Melbourne.

Most early Jewish settlers in Australia were English-speaking Jews from Britain (rather than Yiddish-speaking Jews from eastern Europe), making acceptance by the wider community much easier. Australia manifested little anti-semitism of the European type, and some Jews rose to the highest places in the land. The most famous Australian Jews of this period were Sir John Monash (1865 - 1931), who commanded Australian troops in the First World War, and Sir Isaac Isaacs (1855-1948), Australia's first native-born Governor-General. There was, however, some social anti-semitism, and Jews (in common with other groups) were depicted in negative stereotypes in the popular press of the day.

All of the early synagogues in Australia were, in their orientation, what is known as Anglo-Orthodox, that is, followers of the British United Synagogue headed by the British Chief

Rabbi. This strand in Judaism was religiously Orthodox (rather than Reform) but highly acculturated and patriotic to its host country. It was not 'Strictly Orthodox', however, and dispensed with many of the customs found in traditional eastern Europe. After the First World War, both Reform (Liberal) and Strictly Orthodox synagogues were founded in Australia. The Conservative movement is, however, unrepresented in Australia.

Non-religious forms of Jewish identity also began to proliferate during the inter-war period, such as the Zionist movement, Yiddish cultural activities, Jewish sporting clubs and left-wing Jewish groups. This increased diversity in Jewish life in Australia was facilitated by the arrival of about 10,000 German and Austrian Jewish refugees in 1933-40 (especially 1938-40) and of about 25,000 Holocaust survivors, chiefly from Poland and Hungary, between 1946 and 1957. Two most important developments took place in the 1940s. The first was the formation of the Jewish community's roof bodies. At the State level these include the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies and the Victorian Jewish Board of Deputies (since 1988 called the Jewish Community Council of Victoria), both founded during the Second World War, and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, founded in 1944, which represents the Jewish community's viewpoint at a national level. Secondly, in 1949 the first full-time Jewish day school, Mount Scopus College, was formed in Melbourne. There are today eighteen full-time Jewish day schools in Australia.

The Australian Jewish community is currently one of the best-organised Diaspora communities in the world and is frequently at the forefront of ethnic and multicultural affairs in Australia. On a religious level, there are about sixty-five synagogues in Australia, including thirty-two in Melbourne, representing a range of Jewish

religious practice from Strict Orthodoxy to Reform (known in Australia as Liberal or Progressive Judaism). Politically, the Jewish community is strongly united on a limited number of goals on which there is consensus or near-consensus, especially support for Israel, fighting anti-semitism and endorsing multiculturalism, and stemming assimilation through Jewish day-school education. It has been fairly successful in achieving these goals, probably because it is unusually united and also because the quality of its secular leadership has been very high. The contemporary world Jewish situation, formed chiefly by the Holocaust and the re-emergence of the State of Israel, has produced a near-universal consensus on similar goals throughout the Jewish world.