

WAS IT EVER SO?

ANTI-SEMITISM IN AUSTRALIA 1860–1950?

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In her award-winning book, *Reading the Holocaust*, Inga Clendinnen insists that 'Australian anti-Semitism is a pathology of the periphery'.¹ Though this remains a popular view, this article will discuss the validity of this assertion for the years 1860–1950. It will be argued that while in this epoch the problem of anti-Semitism in Australia never approached the virulence experienced elsewhere, the fear that this odious prejudice could break out at any time also had a profound and defining effect on the behaviour of Australia's Jews. Though commentators have mentioned this phenomenon in passing, they rarely explain it and merely compare it to scenarios overseas, leaving one to conclude that Australia has always been a safe haven for Jews.² To leave the observation there is to provide few insights into the history of anti-Semitism in Australia and its impact on the public persona of Australian Jewry both on the individual and the communal levels.

AN ANTIPODEAN LIBERAL POLITY?

Australian historian Tim Rowse has written that:

Australian history falls within that period of the rise of European lib-

eralism and the struggle by the emergent working classes to advance that liberalism in a democratic direction ...³

He points out that Australia is one of the few nations in the world whose path along the way to liberal democracy has generally been linear and relatively non-violent.⁴ However, in the period of 1860 to 1950 the impact of the Protestant/Catholic divide was profoundly socially significant, the impact of the *White Australia Policy* culturally indelible, and the clash between Labor and Capital of immense political consequence.⁵ Then there was also the vexed 'Aboriginal Question'. From a discrete Jewish perspective, the issue was whether along her liberalist journey Australia had shed any 'old world' Judeophobia introduced in the process of Europeanisation of the land.⁶

If one is looking for historical bookends of the periods 1860's and 1950's, at least from the point of view of the eastern Australian, possibly at one extremity there is the exhaustion of the Gold Rush and the commencement of a hardening of Australian Anglo monoculturalism, and at the other, the beginning of the end of that hegemony under the effects of post-war reconstruction into a more pluralist vision of the nation.⁷

The Jewish presence in Australia began with the initial convict migrations, and free settlement subsequently established Jewish communal life.⁸ Colonial Jewry tended to take its religious cues from the 'mother country', England, a practice which had greatly declined by the early 1950s. That said, religious observance before World War Two had become increasingly attenuated. Geographical dispersion, the tyranny of distance, apathy, and the forces of assimilation all played their role.

Australian Jews not only prided themselves on their loyalty to Empire, King and Country, but were ever prepared to express it, and no less in wartime.⁹ On one hand, their social views were little different from those of their Gentile fellow citizens. On the other hand, from a communal perspective, their public loyalty was more intense, the motivation for which stemmed from three basic but linked causes. The first derived from the fact of being a miniscule minority in an ocean of others. Jewish history had taught them not to take the pacific nature of their Australian environment for granted. Second, was from gratitude for being able to live in a state of freedom denied many of their brethren elsewhere. Finally, as a prophylaxis against any current underlying anti-Semitism.

Until World War Two Australian Jewry was predominantly Anglo in custom and motivation. Non-Anglo, or 'foreign' Jews who arrived in Australia were required to assimilate immediately. During World War Two and certainly after, these 'foreign' Jews commenced a successful challenge to the Anglo dominance in communal affairs. Indeed, three seminal events contributed to this communal

change of mind—the formation of the *Executive Council of Australian Jewry* which gave Jews a national voice,¹⁰ the Holocaust, and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. In combination, they helped to forge a more assertive attitude in dealing with political authorities in matters of self interest. This was dramatically displayed in the years 1949–52, when the Jewish community emerged from the closet to publicly oppose the policy of the Robert Menzies led Liberal-Country Party Coalition Government to permit mass German migration to Australia.¹¹

MODELLING ANTI-SEMITISM

Though anti-Jewish hatred dates back to Biblical times, the actual term 'anti-Semitism' was devised by the German anti-Jewish provocateur, Wilhem Marr in 1879 to describe the violent anti-Jewish hostilities in his country. It very soon became the singular term to cover all aspects of anti-Jewish hatred.

Herbert A. Strauss has said that three models of enquiry used in the social sciences can be applied to researching the problem of anti-Semitism. The first is the cultural-anthropological approach, which can be used to probe the degree to which cultural stereotypes persist among various strata of a particular social structure. Then there is psychologically oriented research, to help discover what motivates hatred of Jewish people. Finally, building on the previous two, is an exploration of the historical circumstances which have led to wider social and political expressions of this prejudice.¹² Simon N. Herman reminds us that often a missing element in the study of anti-Semitism is its effect upon Jewish attitudes and behaviour both

towards the Gentiles among whom they live and within their own community.¹³ Further, Todd M. Endelman also notes that when examining the problem of anti-Semitism in a particular place, frequently absent is a discussion of its influence on 'the Jews themselves – their occupations, religious practices, social habits, and intellectual and cultural predilections'.¹⁴

The denigration of Judaism and the persecution of Jews over centuries of Western Christendom has been well documented.¹⁵ Even after the European Enlightenment took hold, and when the political and social hegemony of Christianity was replaced by secularism, much anti-Semitism was decanted into Left and Right political and cultural versions. The eminent historian J. L. Talmon recalls that when Jews were emancipated into Gentile society allegedly on an equal basis, the 'Jewish Problem' became even more difficult and complex, since Jews were then excoriated by both the Left and the Right:

... We are thus faced with a striking paradox: to the Conservatives the Jews are the symbol, beneficiary, finally the maker of the capitalist revolution, which was in their eyes a kind of preparation for the Socialist revolution; to the Socialists - the embodiment and pillar of that capitalism, which the revolution was rising to destroy.¹⁶

In various ways Jews were stereotyped as uncouth, immoral, insufferable, incapable of ethical behavior, and as a group, a danger to civil society. Ronald B. Sobel has argued that anti-Semitism is resilient because it is a 'disease and a virus embedded in the bloodstream of Western civilisa-

tion'.¹⁷ By that he means it is not manifest at every moment, but Jews have remained the ever present 'outsider', to be used as a scapegoat for any perceived fundamental social, cultural, and even political wrong or difficulty. These observations are pertinent if only because 'Western Civilization' is the very construct to which Australia has always claimed cultural allegiance.

THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

John Levi has shown that anti-Jewish stereotypes arrived in Australia with the convicts, and were often garnished by the mainstream colonial press,¹⁸ thereby setting a media precedent which persisted throughout the period in question,¹⁹ and even to the present day. Negative cultural connotations of the word 'Jew' encouraged many Jews to avoid it as a descriptive term for themselves, and 'Hebrew Congregations' became the preferred name for their faith collectives.²⁰ Even in the liberally founded Province of South Australia which was characterised by inter-faith cooperation,²¹ Israel Getzler has stressed that Jews still had to campaign assiduously to win approval for the social and political rights accorded them.²²

When free settlement sparked Jewish communal life, later to be strengthened by the immigrations of the Gold Rush, it came with a level of wariness towards the Gentile. In part this was undoubtedly affected by its 'Exilic' condition as verified by historical experience, and in part by the fact of being a small and nervous minority. From the beginning of Jewish communal life there was an anxious looking over the shoulder to assure that nothing be done

which might upset their fellow citizens lest the fires of anti-Semitism be ignited.

Some Jewish scribes have argued that the esteem in which men such as General Sir John Monash and Sir Isaac Isaacs were generally held was a great social prophylactic against anti-Semitism in Australia. Indeed, another person of similar standing, Sir Zelman Cowen, tells the story—the truth of which he cannot verify—that in 1931 John Scullin, the Labor Prime Minister, presented the British authorities with only the above two names as candidates for the post of Governor General of Australia.²³ However, there is little evidence to suggest these gentlemen's fine reputation actually diminished the degree of social and cultural anti-Semitism even in their lifetime, let alone after. Monash himself suffered its sting before reaching the apex of his military career on the Western Front in World War One.²⁴ Jews were excluded from certain clubs, organisations, and stock exchanges. No doubt, this situation was one reason behind Isaacs's strong opposition to political Zionism.²⁵

That Jews have scaled the heights of many of the nation's elites even in the presence of cultural or social anti-Semitism, is not an unknown phenomenon in the West. Their very success has been a cause of jealousy that has fanned Jewish conspiracy theory. On the other hand there is the propensity of Jewish spokespeople during and since the time under examination, to proclaim how much Jews have contributed to all facets of Australian society. Though this claim can be empirically proved, the need to give it such a loud voice was, and still is, as much directed at Jews themselves as at Gentiles. It constitutes the raw evidence of worthy

citizenship that would protect against current and future anti-Jewish stereotyping.

As previously mentioned, there was always present a concern that Jews should say or do nothing in their business dealings, public life, or congregationally that might offend non-Jews, thus putting their social standing in jeopardy. Such concern was evident when, in 1921, the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation refused to bury a baptised Jew in the hallowed local Jewish cemetery,²⁶ and in Melbourne during World War Two when there was a communal controversy whether Jewish ex-servicemen should be buried in separate allotments or alongside their non-Jewish comrades.²⁷ In both cases there was a worry that misunderstandings might stir the anti-Semitic pot.

Anecdotes abound about Jewish exclusion from employment in particular professional offices, government departments, clubs, and large retail stores like David Jones in Sydney. There is no way to ascertain whether this was a prevailing attitude, as those likely to infringe in this way were unlikely to openly advertise their prejudices. On the other hand, the lack of proof does not mean it did not happen, and that when it did, it was not common knowledge. Anti-Semitism was indeed part of the mix of reasons for the great opposition in the early 1940s to the appointment of the late eminent legal academic, Professor Julius Stone, to the Law School of Sydney University.²⁸ However, victimisation in the area of employment on the basis of religion was never a Jewish monopoly, and compared to the bitter Protestant/Catholic divide, possibly paled into insignificance.²⁹

Hilary Rubinstein³⁰ and Suzanne Rutland³¹ have provided lists of agents of anti-Semitism—individuals, organisations, and media, both fringe and mainstream, in the period under discussion. Unhappily, individuals include such cultural luminaries as Marcus Clarke, Arthur Adams, Henry Lawson, P.R. 'Inky' Stephensen, and the Lindsay brothers.

Leftwing versions of old Christian anti-Jewish stereotypes entered the fledgling Australian labor movement, particularly strongly in the 1890s, under the influence of a transplanted British socialism and American populist and radical literature.³² Labor politician and activist, Frank Anstey, took up these themes in his caricature of the Jew as the arch bloodsucking capitalist in his two tracts, *The Kingdom of Shylock* published in 1917, and *Money Power* published in 1923.³³ Anti-Jewish animus also became standard in the early 1930s rhetoric of Jack T. Lang, when Labor Premier of New South Wales, and later as maverick federal politician in the 1940s.³⁴

Xenophobic nationalists and racists on the nationalist and racist Right also had their versions of the evil Jew. Such views were regularly featured in *The Bulletin* with its emblematic fat capitalist *John Bull Cohen*, *Smith's Weekly*, and *The Truth*. In 1934, the imported Social Credit Movement began in Australia its main publication, *The New Times* which circulated excerpts from the notorious anti-Jewish fake, *The Politics of the Elders of Zion*.³⁵ This organisation spawned the *Australian League of Rights*, whose local guru and leader Eric Butler published his own version of that heinous polemic in Melbourne in 1946.³⁶ In the later half of the 1930's there was a spread of pro-Nazi propa-

ganda, while in 1940,³⁷ just after the outbreak of World War Two, the small *Australia First Party* was formed with a decidedly anti-Jewish plank.³⁸

Jewish insecurity was no better displayed than in the patriotic rhetoric of Jewish religious and lay leaders during both world wars. Their preaching on fidelity to King, Country, and Empire, on some occasions was overreaching.³⁹ They sought to urge the maximum possible number of Jews into uniform. Performance to the highest level of bravery was demanded—if only to disprove current anti-Jewish stereotypes. Jewish support for the national war effort had to be total to demonstrate their worthiness as citizens. Not to do so, it was feared, would arouse latent anti-Semitism.⁴⁰ There were a few Jewish recruits in World War One who denied their religious affiliation because they feared anti-Semitism in the ranks. During World War Two anti-Semitic literature circulated at military bases in Victoria.⁴¹

Nothing, however, was felt likely to arouse anti-Jewish feelings more than the prospect of mass Jewish immigration to Australia. And this, in turn, aroused anxieties within Australia's small and edgy Jewish communities. The first incident of note occurred in 1891, when the mere rumour of the possibility that a large number of Jews fleeing the pogroms of the Russian Empire might seek refuge in Australia was enough to set alarm bells ringing.⁴² In the aftermath of the Gold Rush, colonial xenophobia was fired by a vision of hordes of non-assimilable foreigners from the north swamping Australia and undermining its British way of life. With Federation, this xenophobia became entrenched in the *White Australia Policy*. That selfsame 1891

rumour sent a shiver down the back of a nervous, miniscule, and fragile Anglo-Australian Jewry. It was feared that such *en masse* immigration might well cause a gross anti-Semitic reaction that would prove detrimental to local Jewry. Any concerns for their desperate brethren were weakened by this fear. Australian policy was to reject any proposal to create enclaves of 'foreigners' anywhere in the nation, and this no less for Jews. For example, Labor Prime Minister, John Curtin, in 1944 when the evils of Nazism were already well-known, refused to accept a plan to settle large numbers of refugees in the Kimberley region of Western Australia despite the fact that the Premier of the state and other non-Jewish leaders supported the scheme.⁴³ Following the death of Curtin, the acting Prime Minister, Frank Forde, stated that this decision was taken on the recommendation of a bureaucratic committee on immigration that 'opposed segregated settlements of Alien communities'.⁴⁴

Indeed, the question of Australia taking large numbers of refugees became most poignant in the 1930s, when the Nazi juggernaut with its vicious anti-Jewish program began to roll and thousands of distressed Jews applied to enter Australia. Paul Bartrop has detailed official attitudes, particularly the all-important bureaucratic response to the entrée of these 'foreign' Jews, and the reactions of the Jewish community. He maps the negative outlook within the Ministry of the Interior—the department that had carriage of immigration—which on occasions bordered on anti-Semitism.⁴⁵ The fact was that as a group, only the Jews were singled out in the application forms to enter Australia. The so-called 'Jewish clauses'⁴⁶ —Forms

Nos.40 and 47—were a useful bureaucratic tool to determine which Jews were from Europe's east and west. If Jewish immigrants were to come, those from the latter were preferred because they were considered able to assimilate much more quickly. When these clauses were finally revoked only in 1953, bureaucrats were beside themselves as to how they would now be able to prevent those Jews they saw as unacceptable from arriving to settle.⁴⁷ It must be remembered that in July 1938, at the Evian Conference in France dealing with the burgeoning number of refugees from Nazism, the Australian representative's rationale for his country's refusal to accept any of them was that Australia did not have a racial problem and didn't want to introduce one.⁴⁸ It was a policy soon to be slightly eased under pressure from Great Britain and the United States of America, when permission was reluctantly given for 15,000 to enter, with some 8,000 actually doing so just before the outbreak of World War Two. Only some 5,000 of them were Jews.⁴⁹

Anglo Australian Jewry's apprehension that the presence of these Jewish émigrés might arouse anti-Semitism led to its demand that they quickly lose their outward signs of difference. English, not foreign tongues were to be used in public, and social and religious behaviour was not to attract the attention of the Gentile population. They were continually berated not to provide ammunition for those disposed towards anti-Semitism.⁵⁰

On the back of the Great Depression it was not difficult to mount an argument against the influx of 'foreign' Jews, whatever their reason for coming. David Mossenson speaks of anti-Semitism as being mild in Western Australia, and yet

causing much angst in its tiny Jewish community during an influx of 'foreign' Jews from 1937 to 1940, and during the post-World War Two years from 1947 to 1957.⁵¹ Freda Searle recalls the street and schoolyard anti-Semitism of the 1930s in the Melbourne suburb of Carlton where 'foreign' Jews tended to settle.⁵² Such sentiments still circulated there during World War Two.⁵³ The usual Jewish response was one of forbearance, one that had an extensive longevity. In 1871, the Reverend Rintel castigated his fellow Melbourne Jews for their unwillingness to challenge the anti-Semitism evident in their day.⁵⁴ John Levi recounts that a Jewish communal leader in 1907 was appalled by the sight of Jewish boys playing marbles in public on Sunday because it might upset their Christian neighbours.⁵⁵ Once World War Two broke out, Anglo-Jewish leaders felt unnecessarily compelled to advise their 'foreign' brethren to fully back the war effort as if they, who had already tasted Hitler's lash, did not understand where their duty lay.

Even with World War Two over and the Holocaust stamped on the world's psyche, barriers were still placed in the path of Jewish Displaced Persons (DPs) restricting the numbers who could seek refuge in Australia. That said, it is still a fact that Australia took in more per head of population than any other country other than Israel. Only a few years after the war, a poll was taken of local attitudes to people from other lands. It revealed that Germans against whom Australians had so recently fought were far more preferable to Jews who were rated only one level above the bottom category, 'blacks'.⁵⁶ Andrew Markus has written that it seems that the revelation of near genocide of

European Jewry had done nothing or very little to soften the attitude of the general community towards them.⁵⁷ A Jewish quota of 25% was applied to ships commandeered by the International Refugee Organisation to bring DPs from camps in war-torn Europe to Australia.⁵⁸

Some members of Australia's fledgling diplomatic corps also attempted to slow down, even to prevent, Jewish DP immigration. The anti-Semitic Australian Consul General in Shanghai, O.W.C. Fuhrman, specifically denied Jewish DP entry permits to Australia.⁵⁹ It is somewhat ironic that this gentleman was selected as Australia's first diplomatic emissary to the new Jewish State of Israel in 1950, and from there carried on his Judeophobia that included his desire to prevent DP emigration from Israel on grounds that the migrants might be communist agents.⁶⁰ As well, a dispatch from the Australian Mission in Delhi caused the Department of Immigration to deny entry to Australia of 'Jews of Middle East Origin' on the basis that they were likely to be 'colored'.⁶¹ Doubtless, the fact that the Jews of Palestine were proving increasingly troublesome to the British administration there exacerbated the hostile feelings of some acute Anglophile Australians towards Jews. It certainly upset the prominent Catholic political journalist and radio commentator. D.G.M. Jackson, a traditional Christian anti-Semite, who feared that Jewish success would usurp Christian influence in the Holy Land.⁶²

Support of political Zionism, the ideology which sought an autonomous Jewish homeland in Palestine, also caused divisions within the Australian Jewish corpus. Spiritual Zionism, the longing for the Zion and Jerusalem, had always played a central

role in Jewish religious liturgy. Anglo-Jewry, however, had no interest in beating a path to the harsh environs of the physical Zion. Political Zionism, however, did draw support from among the 'foreign' Jews. Anglo-Jews feared political Zionism might have their national allegiance to Australia questioned, and that they would be pinned with the white feather of treason—dual loyalty.⁶³ In the wake of the Holocaust this schism mended.

Even at the time when the full extent of the Holocaust was being revealed to the world, there were those Jews who feared that any social or cultural creation of a discrete Jewish nature might possibly incite anti-Semitism. The decision during World War Two to create a Jewish Red Cross group created controversy in the community for this reason.⁶⁴ In 1945, an editorial in the *Australian Jewish News* warned against the formation of a Jewish day school in Melbourne:

... There is anti-Semitism in Australia, and quite a lot. But it is partly imported merchandise, which goes together with Fascism, partly home made. But we can be assured that we will just strengthen these tendencies by bringing up our children in a "foreign" way which is so suspect in the average Australian.⁶⁵

Even the formation in Melbourne of Mount Scopus College which opened in 1949, caused the ageing and indomitable long-serving leader of Anglo-Jewry in that city, Rabbi Jacob Danglow of the St Kilda Synagogue, much heartache lest it might provide a pretext for some premier private schools to bar Jewish enrolment.⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

To date there has been no full-blown historical analysis of anti-Semitism in Australia which combines both qualitative and quantitative aspects. That social and cultural anti-Semitism existed in the period 1860–1950 is a fact. The question is whether it was of a nature meriting real concern. Anti-Semitism can be real, imagined or believed potential. These different aspects of the same problem have affected both individual and communal Jewish responses. The mere tabulation of anti-Semitic incidents alone tells us little about their emotional impact on Jewish lives. Relying on empirical data alone tells us little about how the ordinary Jew coped with anti-Semitism.

Whether as a result of actual incidents or the fear of its occurrence, anti-Semitism stamped Anglo-Australian Jewry in at least two connected ways. It affected their social behaviour and communal practice. And it also influenced how they related to 'foreign' Jews who settled in their midst. It was asserted that nothing should be seen, said, or done, that might incur the displeasure of the Gentile community to such a degree that it might arouse anti-Semitism and therefore put the social standing of Anglo-Australian Jewry in peril.

Jews have long had to wear the oft heard criticism of being over-sensitive to the possibility of anti-Semitism. They are accused of often seeing dangers that are not there. However, their Exilic history has taught them the fundamental lesson that their domicile in places considered safe for extensive periods of time cannot be guaranteed or taken for granted. No doubt, this 'wariness gene' also affected

Anglo-Australian Jewry. Not that anti-Semitism in Australia between 1860 and 1950 even approached the levels reached in Europe, England, and the United States of America. Nonetheless, communally, Anglo-Australian Jewry was ever looking over its shoulder to see 'what the Goyim (Gentiles) might think'.

During this period, Australian Jewry was a miniscule and nationally scattered minority, never reaching a size that posed a threat to anyone. On the other hand, despite the fact that Australia did progress down the liberal democratic path relatively peacefully, any anti-Semitism, real or imagined, placed Jews on edge. It forced advocacy in their interest to be conducted privately through personal contacts. This remained basically so until 1949 when the private path failed and with the Holocaust in mind, and somewhat buoyed by the establishment of the State of Israel, a more assertive Australian Jewry threw off the shackles of the past to publicly contest the perceived threat of mass German immigration.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁶⁰ *ibid.*, ‘*A communist threat or an excuse for anti-semitism*’, *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol. 6, 2002, pp. 80–87.
- ⁶¹ *ibid.*, ‘*A Jew and coloured too!*’ *op. cit.*, pp. 75–91.
- ⁶² *ibid.*, ‘*First principles: H. V. Evatt and the Jewish homeland*’, in W. D. Rubinstein, (ed.) *Jews in the Sixth Continent*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1987, pp. 291–93.

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⁶³ For a study of Zionism in Australia, A. D. Crown, 'Demography, politics and love of Zion: The Australian Jewish community and the Yishuv, 1850–1948', in W. D. Rubinstein, (ed.) *Jews in the Sixth Continent*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1987.

⁶⁴ *Australian Jewish News*, 20 September 1939, p. 3 letter from Julia Rapke. The Jewish unit in question was the Judean Red Cross.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 23 March 1945, p. 2.

⁶⁶ R. A. B. Benjamin, *A Full House*, Melbourne, Makor, 2000, p. 73. For background, S. Rutland, *op. cit.* ., pp. 346–49.