Jewish Settlement on the Goldfields of Victoria

1851 was a turning point in the history of the Port Phillip district. In July 1851 the district separated from the Colony of New South Wales and became the Colony of Victoria.

78,235 free settlers were living in the District, 23,143 were living in Melbourne. In May 1851 gold was reported in Ophir, NSW. A feared mass exodus from the Port Phillip District led to setting up a 16 person 'Gold Committee' which offered a reward of 200 pounds for any discovery within 200 miles of Melbourne. Two Jewish citizens were appointed to the 'Gold Committee' namely, Asher Hyman Hart and his cousin, Henri John Hart. In July 1851 gold was discovered at Clunes and Anderson's Creek followed by finds at Castlemaine, Buninyong, Daylesford, Ballarat, Creswick, Bendigo and Beechworth.

Jewish citizens were to play a part in the events of the next decade and transformed Jewish settlement in the young colony. The Gold Rush increased Victoria's general population between 1851 and 1861 from 77,300 to 537,000 and during this period the Jewish population increased from 364 to 2,903 (1857 males and 1046 females).

There was a serious shortage of Jewish females among the new settlers and the Jewish Emigration Committee in London was formed to send young women to Victoria. The Jewish Ladies Benevolent Loan and Visiting Society linked with the Carolyn Chisholm to arrange the migration of a small number of young women. They departed England on April 1854, with a supply of Kosher meat.

A decade later in 1861 there were 600 Jewish males and 250 Jewish females on the goldfields living predominantly in Ballarat (163 males and 78 females) and Bendigo (140 males and 68 females). The area prospered and gold production over the decade reached 25 million ozs and produced one third of the world's gold.

Evidence from the local press and travellers indicates that Jews were largely storekeepers, publicans and watchmakers although naturalisation records indicate that some were prospecting and mining.

The Jewish life in Ballarat

All Jewish communities at their inception usually establish a place of prayer, a cemetery, or section of an established cemetery, and a society to look after the needy. The Ballarat Jewish community is an excellent example of this pattern. Like many other early communities it has an interesting history of internal conflicts over religious matters and issues pertaining to Halachah (Jewish Law). The writings of Nathan F Spielvogel, a founder of the community, richly illustrate the life and times of these first settlers. *Formula for Survival: The Saga of the Ballarat Hebrew Congregation*, by Newman Rosenthal, provides a detailed history of the community.

Over the years the Jews of Ballarat have played an important role in the civic life of the city. Charles Dyte and Emanuel Steinfield have represented Ballarat in the Victorian Parliament. Five Jews have occupied the mayoral chair in the Municipal Council and six have been Masters of Masonic Lodges. A unique collection of alluvial gold and nuggets found by a Polish born Jew, Paul Simon, are housed in the "Jessica and Paul Simon Gold Pavilion" at the Gold Museum in Ballarat.

The First Synagogue - 1855

The first religious service was held on the New Year and Day of Atonement in 1853 in the dining room of the Clarendon Hotel in Lydiard Street South owned by Henry Harris.

The first synagogue was a wooden building consecrated on 12 November 1855 in Barkly Street, Ballarat East. It held 200 people. Services were conducted by Rev David Isaacs, formerly of Geelong and Henry Harris was the first President. The old Ballarat cemetery opened in 1856 and the first Jewish burial was on 9 May 1857. The Ballarat Jewish Philanthropic Society was formed in 1856 and Simon Hamburger was the first President. It provided financial relief to stranded newcomers and interest free loans.

A New Synagogue for Ballarat - 1859

The old wooden synagogue was closed down involuntarily with the last service held Pesach 1859. The Municipality wanted the site for its Municipal Chambers. The congregation protested but after four years of debate 250 pounds was paid as compensation and a new plot of land was granted situated on the corner of Princes and Barkly Streets. For 18 months services were held in private homes until the new synagogue was consecrated on 17 March 1861. There were 72 financial members. Rev David Isaacs was engaged but resigned in 1863. In February 1864 Rev Samuel Herman was appointed by the Chief Rabbi in Great Britain and he became the chairman of the first Beth Din (Jewish Rabbinical Court) outside London in the British Empire.

Renovations to the Synagogue - 1867, 1881, 1974
Renovations took place in 1867. Painted clouds and

an all-seeing eye were painted above the Ark. In the porch outside was a lantern decorated with figures of nude ladies. These were later removed. More extensive renovations were made in 1881 and its name, 'Sh'erit Yisroel' - A Remnant of Israel, was gilded over the entrance. In 1884 George Abraham presented a stained glass window which still remains over the Ark. It was taken from a very old Irish mansion.The Shule was once more re-dedicated after further renovations in 1903. In 1974, the first two stages of a renovation plan were completed and the synagogue hall was named in the memory of Paul Simon, the husband of Jessica Stone, a descendant of a pioneer family. Simon had organised an appeal to restore the building and grounds before his death.

Eureka Stockade of 1854

In 1854 Peter Lalor, an Irish born engineer, led the Reform League to protest against corruption surrounding the monthly license fees. The surface gold was being worked out and tensions rose. At the end of 1854, 1000 men assembled at the Eureka Stockade to defend 'their rights and liberties'. Troops were called in and 22 defenders were killed, including Edward 'Teddy' Thonen, a 24 year old German speaking Jew.

Manasha (Yorky) Flatau, a Jew, born in Poland in 1818 and arriving in Ballarat in 1853, was arrested on 26 October 1854 on suspicion of being connected with the Bentley Eureka Hotel riots and fire. He was later freed.

Other Jews have played a part in the story of the Eureka Stockade, which has become a formative event in national mythology. On December 6, a meeting of miners passed motions advocating a policy of land reform and more say in administration. Three Jewish citizens, W. Levy, Henry Harris and Charles Dyte helped draft the resolutions at Eureka.

Hebrew Day School opened in 1870

With State aid for private schools the community employed L. White as Hebrew teacher and Morris Myer, general teacher, both worked under the supervision of Rev I. M. Goldreich. This was the second Jewish day school in the Colony of Victoria. State aid was abolished in 1873 and the school was forced to close. In November 1874, H. M. Solomon was appointed headmaster of a Hebrew school operating after school hours and Sunday mornings.

Jewish population declines

The Jewish population peaked at 355 in 1881 but by 1961, the community had slowly declined to 51 persons. Rev Z. Mandlebaum served as the last full-time Minister from 1927 till his death in 1941.

Many Victorians are descendants of those who lived used by visiting groups from Melbourne and the all their lived in Ballarat. The synagogue is still High Holiday services are conducted every year. A Board of Management is responsible for its upkeep.

BENDIGO (formerly known as SANDHURST)

The settlement of Jews in Sandhurst (Bendigo) on the goldfields has a similar history to Ballarat. Though no history book has been written about the settlement of Jews in this city, L.E. Fredman has written about the early beginnings in an article in the *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal, Vol IV, Part IV, 1956.*

Records indicate that the first religious services were held in 1854 on the premises of the 'Cape of Good Hope', a store owned by a Mr Helbrun.

A weatherboard synagogue was built on a piece of land granted by the government and consecrated in July 1856. This was replaced in 1872 by a very distinctive fortress like solid brick synagogue capable of seating 500 people. It was sold and demolished in the 1920's. Its funds were held in trust and finally donated to the Montefiore Homes for the Aged in 1955.

A long list of ministers and readers served the congregation including Hungarian born Rev. Isaac Friedman, Rev. Isaac Stone, Isidore Myers, D.H. Harris, Rev Joseph David Goldstein (1887-1904) and Rev. I. A. Bernstein (shared with Ballarat). The Jewish population reached 208 in 1861 and by 1921 declined to 35.

Among the Jewish personalities over the years were Cohn (brewer), Lazarus (mining), Edward Marks (who lectured in chemistry at the Sandhurst School of Mines), Harry Marks (auctioneer) and Charles Cohen (solicitor), both active in the civic life of the district, Lewis Lewis (who lived to 105 years), and businessman Abraham Samuel Gordon.

A very well known Australian business person was Sidney Myer (Simcha Myer Baevski). He was a Jewish immigrant from Russia, who arrived in 1898 and later established the famous department store, the Myer Emporium, in Bourke St Melbourne.