

## History of The Leo Baeck Centre

The Leo Baeck Centre for Progressive Judaism (LBC) was founded in 1949 as Temple Beth Israel Eastern Suburbs Group. Initially, the congregation provided a Liberal Jewish (Progressive) Sunday School in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne and also offered a range of social and adult educational activities. Religious services have been held since March 1950. After first using the homes of members and hired premises, the congregation acquired its own premises in Camberwell as early as 1951. Since 1971, LBC has operated from premises in Harp Road, East Kew. However, the story of events before, during and after the move provides an interesting saga.

The first attempt to form a Liberal or Progressive congregation in Melbourne was actually as early as 1884 when the Temple of Israel was formed. Led by the colourful and controversial Rev Dr Dattner Jacobson, a former minister of the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation, it held services in the Protestant Hall, Collins Street, before disappearing from the scene after only a few months. Between the 1870s and 1910, Isaac Jacobs, a much respected member of the early Melbourne Jewish community, wrote a number of pamphlets on synagogue reform and was even responsible for the introduction of some minor liberalisations into services at the St. Kilda Hebrew Congregation where he was a long-serving member of the Board of Management and the President on two occasions. It is suspected that, prior to his death during World War I, he was making attempts to form another Liberal or Reform Congregation in Melbourne.

A permanent Liberal presence in this city began with the formation of the Beth Israel Synagogue, now Temple Beth Israel, for the High Holydays of 1929. The foundation of the congregation is usually attributed to Mrs Ada Phillips and, despite the zeal and enthusiasm of its founders, it failed to grow to any viable strength until the arrival of Rabbi Dr Herman Sanger in 1936, along with other central European Jews with an established Reform background. It is believed that the ultra left-wing religious leanings of Dr Sanger's three American predecessors meant that the Beth Israel Congregation was originally too radical for the tastes of Australians, and it was left to Dr Sanger, a German born, Oxford University trained, fifth-generation rabbi, to re-shape the congregation along with a mixture of British Liberal and German Reform ideals.

Until the building of Melbourne's first permanent Liberal synagogue in Alma Road, St. Kilda in 1939, Beth Israel Synagogue met in a number of hired halls, mainly in the St. Kilda area. However, for a few months in 1932, services were held in a church hall in East Melbourne, thus constituting the first Liberal services to be conducted east of the CBD.

Census figures show that there were a few Jews in the Hawthorn, Kew and Camberwell regions as early as the 1870's and the number of Jews in the eastern suburbs continued to grow until, by the end of World War II, there were well over a thousand Jews residing east of the Yarra. Because there were no synagogues or any other religious or communal infrastructure in the region, those who settled here in earlier times, tended to be non-religious and it was not until the 1940's that both the Orthodox and Liberal hierarchies made any attempts to form permanent congregations in the district.

In early 1948, Dr Sanger had established a committee of Temple Beth Israel, known as the Temple Extension Committee which soon led to the establishment of congregations in both the eastern suburbs and later, in Murrumbeena, the latter eventually evolving into the Bentleigh Progressive Congregation. At a meeting of the Temple Extension Committee, held on 28th November 1949, the following significant motion was passed: 'That the Eastern Suburbs Committee of the Temple be

established. Its purpose was to be formulation of plans for religious, cultural and social activities under the auspices of Temple Beth Israel in the Eastern Suburbs. The meeting of Monday 28 November 1949 to be regarded as the Constituent Meeting of the Eastern Suburbs Group.'

The new entity was known as TBI (Temple Beth Israel) Eastern Suburbs Group, then TBI Camberwell Congregation, TBI Eastern Suburbs Congregation, TBI Leo Baeck Centre and, finally the Leo Baeck Centre for Progressive Judaism. The congregation has grown from strength to strength since its formation in 1949!

A preparatory committee of the Eastern Suburbs Group soon evolved into a Board of Management with Mr Benn Selby (father of Mrs Robyn Levi, wife of Rabbi Dr John Levi) as its first President. The second President, Mr Harry Messer, was still actively involved in the congregation at the time these notes were written in 2004. The following two generations of Harry's family are also vital members of the community and continue to play an enormous part in the ongoing life of the congregation.

Many of the early activities of the congregation, particularly those of a cultural, social and fund-raising nature, were organised by the Eastern Suburbs Group Women's Guild which, in the early days was just as important to the life of the congregation as the Board itself. Early meetings of the Guild were held at the home of Mr and Mrs Peter Arnhold in St. Helens Road, Hawthorn, and Mrs Ilsa Arnhold was its first President.

The first religious service was held at the home of Mr and Mrs Isaacs on Friday 10th March 1950. The service was led by Rabbi Dr Sanger and Cantor Claude Schwartz; the organist was Mr Paul Arndt and the service was fully choral, as were all services during the first 30 or 40 years of congregation life. The service was held in a music room designed to fit 50 but, somehow, well over 100 people were squeezed in while others stood in adjoining rooms and many were reluctantly turned away. Another service was held at the same venue before regular monthly, Friday night services were conducted at the Camberwell Football Club pavilion in Camberwell Road, Camberwell. Those who remember the elegant and dignified Dr Sanger will find it hard to picture him in a hall which was distinctive for its smell of beer, sweat and football liniment! Over the years, Friday night services grew from monthly for fortnightly and, in July 1961, to weekly.

A Friday night Torah Service was introduced to services at the Football Club venue and these were to remain a feature of services within the congregation until the 1980's. This was mainly due to the congregation's inability to get a minyan on Shabbat morning, during the days when Saturday morning was regarded as the prime shopping time, particularly for those working during the week. Prior to the introduction of Friday night shopping in the early 1970's, there were several unsuccessful attempts to introduce Saturday morning services but it was not until the late 1970s that the Shabbat morning service became a regular feature at LBC. Ironically, it is now more difficult to get a minyan on a Friday night and such services have now reverted to being on a monthly basis.

Until 1958 all B'nei Mitzvah of the congregation were conducted at TBI and the first few Bar and Bat Mitzvot at the Eastern Suburbs Congregation were actually held during Friday night services which, as already explained, were then the main services of this congregation. Today, Shabbat morning B'nei Mitzvah constitute an important part of the congregation's ongoing activities.

Until 1962, no separate High Holy Day services were held in the eastern suburbs and members of all three Melbourne Liberal congregations attended joint High Holyday services, firstly at the St. Kilda Town Hall, then the Melbourne Town Hall and then at TBI. However, since 1963 the Eastern Suburbs

congregation/LBC has built up an enviable reputation for beautiful, meaningful, fully choral High Holyday services. Over the years, these have been held at various venues such as the Hawthorn Town Hall, Kew Town Hall, Camberwell Civic Centre, Box Hill Town Hall, Carey Grammar School and Leonda Reception Centre.

The progressiveness of the congregation in its early days is highlighted by the fact that it was able to purchase its own premises at 15 Royal Crescent, Camberwell, by as early as 1951. Named Herman Sanger House, the delightful Queen Anne-style house was dedicated as a War Memorial Centre by Dr Sanger on 15 September 1951. (The wooden plaque that was affixed to the building on that day is now to be found at the back of the synagogue in Harp Road.) One of the larger rooms was used as a sanctuary and there was also a roomy Board Room (a euphemism for a reception and meeting room), a number of classrooms and a caretaker's flat. However, these premises soon proved too small for the congregation and on Friday 28 February 1958, the congregation held its first service at its new home in Lorne Grove, just one street east of Royal Crescent.

Number 15 Lorne Grove was a beautiful old Victorian mansion with large grounds of about a hectare. While the existing home was originally used for all the functions of an active congregation, one of the main reasons for selecting this particular site was its large size and the potential to construct a purpose-built centre on the block.

Plans for a synagogue seating 320, a hall, meeting rooms, many class rooms, a scout hall, a kindergarten and a car park were drawn up in 1964. Unfortunately one of the neighbours at Lorne Grove was a member of an obscure Christian sect and she convinced a number of the other neighbours that a synagogue should not be built at Lorne Grove. Although the official reason for the objections was always noise levels from activities and car congestion in the residential street, it has always been suspected that the religion of the main objector was a catalyst for her obstructions - not that she could be described as anti-Semitic but, rather, anti-any-religion-but-her-own.

During the next four years, attempts to obtain a building permit from the Camberwell City Council continued. It was always hoped that the new building would eventually be built and, thus, little maintenance was carried out on the existing property and so, in 1967 the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works and the Department of Health declared that the building was no longer suitable for the large number of children (about 175) then attending the Sunday School and so this was transferred to outside the premises, in the first instance the Doncaster Primary School. By August-September 1969, all activities at Lorne Grove, including religious services, had been transferred to other premises.

In the meantime, in early 1966 a block of land was purchased running from Elgar Road to Rose Street, Doncaster, and plans were drawn up for a synagogue and community centre. Yet again, there were objections to the Doncaster building but the plans were finally approved. A building appeal was commenced but, while many people conceded that Doncaster would be a centre of Jewish population in the future, most contemporary members of the congregation were reluctant to donate to an appeal that would move their synagogue further from their own homes. (History has shown that Doncaster did become a large Jewish centre in the 1970s and 80s, later bolstered by South African migration during the late 1980s and early 90s but that by the turn of the century, the number of Jews in the area was declining).

A joint meeting of the Eastern Suburbs and St. Kilda Boards on 19 June 1968 and an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Eastern Suburbs Congregation, held at Lorne Grove on 18 August 1968,

paved the way for the scraping of plans to build at Doncaster. This eventually led to the purchase of the present property at Harp Road and the laying of the foundation stone on the building site by Rabbi Dr Herman Sanger and Rabbi John Levi on Sunday 13 September 1970, a day when the 21st birthday of the congregation was also celebrated, albeit a little earlier than the actual date in November.

However, at this time, the TBI Eastern Suburbs Congregation, as it was then known, was without a permanent home. Although activities were dispersed to various private homes and halls, the congregation continued to function and, under the circumstances, function very well. The congregation asked the City of Camberwell to assist with accommodation for services and, ironically, they again offered the use of the Camberwell Football Club pavilion. Psychologically, it would have been a bad move for the congregation to be perceived as going backwards and so the offer was rejected. A similar request to the City of Kew resulted in the congregation being offered a short-term sole occupancy of South Esk, another gracious Victorian mansion in Charles Street, Kew, that was about to be demolished to make way for the present Kew Library. Services were held there from September 1969 until June 1970. However, Harp Road was then still just a building site and so the congregation took up the kind offer of the East Kew Methodist Church to use their church hall in Strathalbyn Street. The Eastern Suburbs Congregation had free use of the hall as the Church refused to charge rent to another religious organisation! (Since the formation of the Uniting Church, the East Kew Methodist Church properties have been sold and converted into accommodation units).

Rabbi Dr Leo Baeck (1873-1956) was one of the greatest Jews of the 20th Century. A German Liberal Rabbi and famous scholar, he refused to leave Nazi Germany, even though given many opportunities of doing so. He remained at his post as official head of German Jewry until sent to Theresienstadt Concentration Camp. There he continued to teach and inspire others. After the war, he left Germany and spent the rest of his life in England, where he took up the post of President of the World Union of Progressive Judaism. Rabbi Baeck was very much a mentor of Rabbi Dr Sanger and, at the suggestion of the latter, the TBI Eastern Suburbs Congregation decided to name its new Harp Road premises the Leo Baeck Centre and that name soon spread to encompass the congregation itself.

The first service at LBC was conducted by Rabbi John Levi on 7 May 1971, and the building was dedicated on Sunday 4 July 1971 with the following ministers officiating: Rabbi Dr Herman Sanger, Rabbi John Levi, Rev Claude Schwartz and Rabbi Daniel Sherbok, the latter a young rabbi from America who was then working at LBC. At this time, all congregational activities were reconsolidated at the Harp Road premises.

During the first two years at the LBC, an experiment was conducted whereby the Erev Rosh Hashanah and all day services on Yom Kippur were held at LBC, whilst the Rosh Hashanah morning and Kol Nidrei services (where there are higher attendances) were conducted at the Kew City Hall. Unfortunately, the lack of room at LBC and the growing size of the congregation soon ended the noble experiment.

Over the thirty plus years since the dedication of LBC, two properties have been purchased east of the original building, leading to the building of, firstly, the fine courtyard and, then, the Arthur & Lilly Law Hall, both of which have added to the facilities now available to members. Over the years, a number of improvements have also taken place within the sanctuary itself. So far, this brief history has mainly concentrated on buildings and activities but what of the rabbinical leadership of the congregation? In the early days, the congregation relied on rabbis and lay leaders from Temple Beth Israel itself. These included Dr Sanger, Cantor Claude Schwartz (who as Rev Claude Schwartz, later

became a minister of the congregation), Rabbi George Ruben, Cantor Frank Durra and a number of lay readers including Mr Bernard Cohen (father of the man who later became Governor-General of Australia, Sir Zelman Cohen) and Mr John Levi, who as Rabbi Dr John Levi has played a significant and ongoing part in the history of the congregation as both minister and mentor and it was this that led to he and his wife, Robyn, being made Honorary Life Members of LBC in 2000.

The first step toward rabbinic independence occurred in 1957, just prior to the move from Royal Crescent to Lorne Grove, when TBI appointed the Hungarian-born Israeli citizen, Rabbi Dr Adalbert Tennen as suburban Rabbi. He was responsible for the two 'suburban' congregations at Camberwell and Ormond. In August 1963 Rev Erich Cahn took up the post of Minister of the Eastern Suburbs Congregation and in the forty plus years since then, the congregation has had a minister for most of that time, although in periods when there has not been a rabbi, the congregation has build up an enviable reputation for the excellent teams of lay readers and leaders. Since 1963, the ministers of the congregation have been Rev Erich Cahn; Rev Claude Schwartz; Rabbi John Levi; Rabbi Brian Fox; Rabbi Seth Phillips; Rabbi Elihu Shagrin; Rabbi Michael Torop; Rabbi Betsy Torop; and Rabbi Jonathan Keren Black. All of these ministers have contributed to the leadership and teaching of the congregation and to the beauty of our services and have left some mark in the community. Their work has, over the years, been supplemented by a number of visiting rabbis and student rabbis who have worked within the congregation.

The *minhag* (order of service) at LBC has followed the general trends of many similarly progressive congregations around the world. Whereas earlier services contained a large percentage of English and only a little Hebrew and many of the traditional practices were not adopted, over the years there has been a move towards a more traditional service and theology. However, one of the greatest changes has been in the area of acceptance of equal rights for both men and women. The congregation has always seen families sitting together and women have always been able to take their place on the Board of Management. However, over the years the congregation has gradually made the following changes; the acceptance of women cantors and later, women rabbis; the inclusion of women when counting a *minyan*; the calling-up of women; gender inclusive language when talking about humanity (rather than mankind) and, later, gender inclusive language when referring to God.

Until the foundation of the King David School in the late 1960's, Liberal Jewish education in Melbourne was mainly centred around active Sunday Schools at the three congregations. The Eastern Suburbs Sunday School served up to 175 students at a given time. The Sunday School continues to this day but is now primarily concerned with giving a Jewish education to those children who do not attend a Jewish day school. As the focus has changed, so the number of students has inevitably decreased.

Albert Isaacs  
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