

# The Values of Australian Jewry

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Sydney Jewish Museum  
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Ladies and Gentlemen:

We meet today at the Sydney Jewish Museum. This is a place that is central to the development of the life of Sydney's Jewish community.

The Museum is housed in the Maccabean Hall, which was inaugurated by General Sir John Monash on Armistice Day, 1923, as a permanent memorial to commemorate the Jewish men who served in the First World War, and to honour the memory of those who made the supreme sacrifice in that conflict. As such, it says something about the way in which Australian Jewry conceived of themselves as playing their part in the formative era of the Australian nation. We all know the significance of the Anzac myth for the formation of a distinctive Australian national identity, and so it is significant that Jews were keen to affirm their participation in this. As was typical of the day, they did so by building a community hall that could be used for social purposes and civic occasions. So the Hall came to be important in the social life of Sydney Jewry for at least half a century, until it was converted into a museum.

The Sydney Jewish Museum was opened here in 1992 by Rear Admiral Peter Sinclair. The stated aims of the museum are:

- To commemorate the lives of the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, honour the Survivors and pay tribute to the Righteous Among the Nations;
- To ensure through education, academic research and the display of artefacts and memorabilia, that the Holocaust and its uniqueness in history is never forgotten and that it is recognised as a crime against humanity with contemporary and universal significance;
- To explore and illustrate the depth of the Jewish religion, tradition and culture, Australian Jewish history and the contribution of Jews to Australian society.

It will be apparent from that this statement that the Museum is primarily concerned with the Holocaust, both in the sense of commemorating the past; and as a vehicle for educating future generations about its historical uniqueness and enduring universal significance. It has as a further aim the mission of introducing Jewish religion, tradition, and culture to a gentile audience; recording the history of the Jews in Australia, since the arrival of sixteen Jews in the First Fleet, and illustrating the contribution that Australian Jewry has made to Australian society.

In this context, it is notable that my book has very little to say about the Museum's first two aims. And this is, in itself striking. It is almost unheard of for a work of Australian Jewish history not to address the Holocaust, because the persecution of Jews under the Nazis is absolutely central to the development of today's Jewish community in Sydney. The community really only takes shape with the arrival of refugees both in the years leading up to the Second World War, and in its aftermath.

The people in this book, however, belong to an earlier era in Australian Jewish history, the era of Anglo-Jewry that was, for a long time, associated with the Great Synagogue. My forebears were not strictly Anglo-Jewry. They came to Australia from Partitioned Poland in the nineteenth century (when the Polish state did not exist, having been carved up between Russia, Prussia/Germany, and Austria). But when they came to Australia, they integrated themselves into the Anglo-Jewish tradition of the Great Synagogue and the social world that revolved for many years around the Maccabean Hall.

*The Aunt's Mirrors* is my tribute to these people and the values of their shared form of life that gave meaning to the individual lives of seven generations of my family in Australia. Today, I should like to begin by saying something about kind of book that I have written, and the structure of the book.

Then I should like to discuss one observation about what the book discloses about nineteenth-century Australian Jewish history, and another observation about twentieth-century Australian Jewish history.

I should then like to offer two observations about how I think about the shared form of life in which these people participated: first, the values that these ordinary people shared; and, secondly, the way in which their individual lives gained meaningfulness by participating in this shared form of life, what I shall call the sublime perspective.

Finally, I shall conclude with a few personal remarks about my personal relationship with the book that I have written.

## 1. Structure of the book

I have designated *The Aunt's Mirrors* a 'family memoir'. It is a memoir in the sense that it is not a formal history of the subject, but a set of recollections; an informal account that does not aim at objectivity. But whereas memoirs are usually recollections about the life of an individual, these are recollections of the collective life of a family. It is an account of the life of my family, and it is an account based on the researches of my aunt and great-aunt, rather than my own researches.

The book is also unusual in its structure. It consists of seven chapters (most of my books are structured according to this good biblical number). Each chapter is named after one of the mirrors in my aunt's house: the black-framed mirror, the etched mirror, the gilt mirror, the armoire mirror, the chimneypiece mirror, the dressing-room mirror and the courtyard mirror.

Each chapter begins with a description of the mirror, and this leads on to a discussion of one of the branches of my family: my maternal grandmother's maternal family (the Lyons and Loewenthal families), who came to Australia in the 1850s and lived in Grafton; my grandmother's paternal family (the Brukarz family), who came to Australia in the 1880s and living in Rylstone; my maternal grandfather's paternal family (the Lasker family), who came to the Victorian goldfields in the 1850s; my grandfather's maternal family (the Ferdinando family), who might be traced back to Abraham Israel Ferdinando Carvajal, a prominent Sephardi Jew in London at the time of the English civil war; and my maternal great-grandparents (Beryl and Baron Brukarz), who were both born in Australia, their two daughters, and five grandchildren, who all lived in Sydney.

But the discussion of my aunt and great's aunt's researches into each of these branches of the family is not really concerned with the minutiae of genealogy. I use each of these discussions to investigate one of the values that seems to have been important to the people in the book: the holiness of family life, the meaningfulness of objects, the reconciliation with the raging of family ghosts, the possibilities of reclaiming the past, and the love of ordinary people in all of their simple ordinariness.

So, as David Gonski observes in the foreword, it is a book that can be read on many levels. What matters to me about the book is the fact that it brings together these different aspects: objects, people, and values.

## 2. 19<sup>th</sup> century family values

I have the good fortune to teach at Pembroke College, Cambridge, each year, where one of my colleagues is Professor Jonathan Steinberg. He is the author of the celebrated *Bismarck: A Life*, which Henry Kissinger said is "the best study of its subject in the English language". Professor Steinberg is an expert on modern European history and came to Australia as an expert witness, providing evidence about Nazi atrocities, at the first Commonwealth war crimes trial held at Adelaide. He is also the son of the revered Rabbi Milton Steinberg, a major figure in the history of conservative Judaism and author of the novel, *As a Driven Leaf*.

I mention Professor Steinberg, because he read my memoir and made an interesting comment about it. What struck him about *The Aunt's Mirrors* was how bourgeois the people in it were. It is notable that as soon as these immigrants arrive, they integrate themselves into the life of the towns in which they live. They are immediately at home in middle-class circles within this pioneer society.

What interested Professor Steinberg about this story is that we are evidently not dealing with the usual Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe, who were living in shtetls in the nineteenth century. Those Jews were peasants. They did not belong to the middle class. Such people, when they immigrated, would arrive in the new country without substantial means. They would work for a time as part of the working class in their adopted country, and gradually make good. But that is not the story of the people in this book. They arrived in Australia with the assets and mores of the middle classes; they hit the ground running. There was no period of transition.

It was unusual for Jews to migrate from Eastern Europe so early in the nineteenth century, and even more unusual for them to immigrate to Australia. All of this affirmed, for Professor Steinberg, that we are dealing with an unusual category of bourgeois Jews.

I admit that his thoughts had not occurred to me, and I could not provide much further insight to him. I have read that my great-great-great-grandfather's sister married into a prominent Jewish family, and her husband's decision to immigrate to Australia prompted her siblings to follow suit. However, I know nothing of my great-great-great-grandfather's life before he came to Australia.

The only story that I do know about the decision to migrate from Partitioned Poland to Australia concerns Joshua and Esther Dora Brukarz in the 1880s. Esther Dora claimed that her family left Poland because of the pogroms. This was all she told her granddaughter. She said it upset her to talk about their life in the Old World. This might have been because the life was so hard, but also because it involved talking about her late husband, and talking about him distressed her in her widowhood.

At any rate, the story about the pogroms was handed down to me, and it was about the only story that was handed down about the decision to migrate. But if Professor Steinberg is right, the story does not exemplify the history. These people were not the typical late nineteenth-century peasants tormented by pogroms. They were affluent middle-class people with the foresight to leave before the pogroms really got going, and the means to set themselves up in business immediately upon arrival, as well as the bourgeois values that enabled them to integrate into the Victorian society of the colonies of the British Empire.

So I am forced to acknowledge that the story that has been passed down about what mattered, fleeing the pogroms, somewhat distorts our history. It is interesting that my forebears chose to focus on this aspect of our history. It also forces me to acknowledge the limits of what I can know about the past, because I know that the stories are not an accurate reflection of it. But the stories do present what mattered to these people, and my book is more concerned with what mattered to them than with what actually happened to them.

That much is a comment about the pioneer generation who immigrated to Australia, and how they became integrated into Australian society in the nineteenth century. I should now like to offer another observation of the values of the family in the twentieth century.

### 3. 20<sup>th</sup> century family values

Any student of Jewish history knows that it is a history that is structured around major catastrophes: in antiquity, the destruction of Solomon's Temple and the Babylonian exile, the destruction of Herod's Temple in Jerusalem and the end of the ancient Jewish state; in the mediaeval era, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, which brought to an end the golden age of Sephardi Jewry; and, in modern European history, the pogroms and Russian persecution that brought to an end the centuries of Ashkenazi life in the Polish lands. In the twentieth century, there are two developments that define the Jewish experience: the history of German anti-Semitism that culminated in the Holocaust, and the Zionist movement that culminated in the establishment of the State of Israel in Palestine. I should

like to offer an observation about the values of the people in this book in relation to the Holocaust and the Zionist movement.

First, it is notable that the people in this book demonstrate an early commitment to political Zionism. My great-great-grandfather, Joshua Brukarz, served on the committee of the New South Wales Zionist League in 1903, two years after its formation in 1901. The League was the first Zionist organisation to operate in Sydney. In the following years, it was joined by numerous other organisations, including WIZO (the Women's International Zionist Organisation), in which Joshua's granddaughter and my grandmother, Joan, was actively involved for many years.

It is notable that the commitment to Zionism tended to take the form of fundraising. Joan was, for many years, identified with the WIZO Melbourne Cup sweep, which raised funds for women and children in Israel. Her husband, Noel, was involved with fundraising for Israel, in 1967, before turning his attention to fundraising for the local Jewish community, through his work in helping to establish the Jewish Communal Appeal. So it is notable that the commitment to Zionism was more financial than political. This reflects the fact that these were lower middle-class people whose lives revolved around finding ways to make money through commerce, and they applied these skills to the causes that mattered to them, in the way that professional classes might apply their professional skills through political involvement.

The second observation that I should like to make concerns the Holocaust. On the one hand, it is notable that these people were not personally affected by the Holocaust. In terms of the Australian Jewish community today, this makes them unusual. Most Jews in Australia today can trace their origins in Australia to the post-war migration. It is also notable that they do not appear to have taken an active interest in the plight of European refugees. They appear to have reflected the prevalent attitude before the Second World War that Australian Jewry did not have a problem with anti-Semitism, and it did not want to import one with European refugees.

The commitment to international Jewry took the form of helping them to establish the fledgling State of Israel: persecuted Jews should have asylum in Palestine; not here, and our commitment to them is expressed through our fundraising for them (rather than through our political representations on their behalf).

As I say, it seems appropriate to me that I should reflect on how this book fits in with Australian Jewish History, when I am speaking at the Australian Jewish Museum. But I now change gear and discuss philosophical rather than historical considerations: I should like to say something about the form of life that seems to be central to the meaningfulness of the lives documented in this book.

#### 4. Ordinary people and their values

So why should you read this book? At no point does the book claim that the lives of the people in it are remarkable. They are ordinary people, and I try to preserve their ordinariness. If they are your ancestors, or you knew them or their descendants personally,

then, perhaps, they are interesting to you as objects of family history or genealogy. We might also consider them as exemplars of their kind. In this case, they matter to us not so much on account of the importance of their own lives, but for what they disclose about the way in which their kind of people lived their lives. That would be the purpose of a social history. But it is not exactly my purpose. What I am interested in doing is building up a picture of a particular form of life in which seven generations of an ordinary Australian family participated.

What do I mean by a form of life? I mean to try and build up a picture not of individual lives, but of something shared by all of these lives; something in which they all participated. And it is something that was brought out from Partitioned Poland to Australia, and continued here. It is something malleable: the people who participate in the form of life live their lives in a particular way that is, in some important sense, constant over time; but they are nevertheless able to adapt and change aspects of how they live their particular lives.

The hallmark of a form of life is value. It has to do with what makes life valuable. Our lives gain meaning in all sorts of ways. We live in a world that encourages us to ask what will make our own individual lives meaningful, and then to pursue these things. Participating in a form of life makes a individual life meaningful, but not by adding personal meaning to the individual's life. The life gains a different sort of meaning: shared or collective meaning.

In *The Aunt's Mirrors*, I endeavour to chronicle the history of the shared form of life in which seven generations of an ordinary Australian family participated, and why participating in this form of life gave meaning to their individual lives. An important aspect of this is the sense of 'belonging' that comes from living in a shared way.

It is shared values that allow people to feel that they belong. As I have mentioned, the chapters discuss different ways in which shared values crop up in the lives of these people. At the core of their form of life is their Jewish identity. This provides them with a shared religion and a shared sense of how to live their individual lives that makes their individual lives valuable as part of a community.

## 5. The sublime perspective

Drawing on the work of the English philosopher, Roger Scruton, I talk about the idea of the 'sublime perspective' from which the lives of the people in this book form part of something timeless. According to Judaism, this timeless thing is the eternal covenant between God and Israel. The lives of individual Jews gain meaning from being part of this covenant. As Scruton points out, it is at this point that rituals and rites of passage become important. For it is through rituals and rites of passage that the transcendental makes itself manifest in the world.

For Jews, the most important instance of this is *bris milah*, or, the covenant of circumcision. As is widely known, Jews are commanded to circumcise their sons on the eighth day of their life. This rite of passage commemorates the covenant between God and Abraham which is the origin of the Jewish people. But it also does more than that. It affirms the child as part of the life of the tribe. Of course the baby boy's life has individual meaning. But he also has

meaning as part of the life of a family and the life of a people; his birth is not only a momentous event in his own individual life, but also in the life of the family and the life of the Jewish people. The *bris* affirms all of this. To say that the boy had a *bris* is not the same as saying that the boy was circumcised. Circumcision is merely a surgical procedure. It either has value for personal hygiene, or it does not. But when the surgical procedure of circumcision is performed as a *bris*, it becomes a rite of passage. And the rite of passage has a special meaningfulness both for the individual and the tribe that a mere surgical procedure cannot have (unless it is performed as a rite of passage).

These ideas were particularly resonant for Noel Pearson. Having come to Sydney to talk about the book, he acknowledged the traditional custodians of the land on which the city is built, and observed that “Upon such occasions I am transported back to the time when the places of this continent was to its ancient custodians what Jerusalem was and is to the children of Israel. I want to first say that I am a student of Jewish history and a great admirer of the Jewish people.”

Mr Pearson went on to talk about what he thought the Aboriginal people could learn from the Jewish people:

“I feel that the future of our people, our anxiety to maintain our culture and language, religion and traditions, can seek no better guidance than from the people of the Jewish community. I’ve always been struck by how it is that you’ve dealt with persecution and discrimination and never let it become your burden. I’m struck by how it is that you have such fidelity to the past without succumbing to victimhood, and I think there are important lessons for our people in working out how it is that we might properly acclimatise to the wider society around us but keep the communal hearth of our culture and identity burning. You as a people have shown that it’s possible to maintain that hearth’s fire for millennia. And notwithstanding the great Diasporas to which your people, by no choice of your own, through history have embarked. Nevertheless participating in societies in which you’ve become members, whilst at the same time maintaining those things that give utmost meaning to your lives.”

He was then kind enough to talk about the significance of my memoir in this context, remarking that “I find it is fundamentally a work of philosophy, and there is great philosophical guidance and some riveting passages in this book at least from my perspective, I’m really keen to know how it is that we might sustain our identity as a people whilst participating in all the opportunities and privileges that come with being an Australian.” He then quoted a passage from *The Aunt’s Mirrors*, in which I discuss the meaning that objects have held for my family, and observed “That is fundamentally resonant with the Aboriginal concept of family and the passing on of sacred and important objects between generations. The whole memory of the ancient past is carried in those objects.”

He read from a number of other passages that resonated with him, but I shall leave you to discover them for yourselves. What struck him is the importance that I attach to an ancient form of life, and the sense in which the meaningfulness of participating in such a form of life is something that cannot be compared with the transient pleasures of the modern lifestyle

that we all enjoy. In Sydney, sunbathing seems, to me, to be emblematic of the transient pleasure of secular Sydney. Reading from the book, Mr Pearson repeated the sentence, “The Sydney sun is no substitute for an ancient form of life.” It speaks to the meaningfulness of traditional Aboriginal form of life, as much as it speaks to the Jewish form of life.

## 6. Personal and universal significance of my memoir

This book is a memoir. It is a memoir of family experience and meaningfulness. As such, it is obviously a deeply personal book for me. But I hope that it says something more universal about how a shared form of life gives collective meaning to the lives of the individuals who participate in it. In that respect, the story of my family in Australia serves to exemplify something more general about Australian society. It says something about the way that the lives of ordinary people can gain meaning from being part of a shared form of life.

So I hope that you might buy a copy of the book, and, having bought it, read it, and, in reading it, gain some insight into the meaningfulness that is the sublime perspective from which the lives of seven generations of an ordinary Australian family form part of something timeless.