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Chapter 5
The role of the Holocaust in the Australian-Jewish post-migration community

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I. Introduction

In his controversial book *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999), Peter Novick argues that in the 1970s Holocaust consciousness became a central tenet of American-Jewish community identity. A sense of shared victimhood replaced aspirations for assimilation as the predominant, but not sole, theme shaping communal self-identification. Indeed, Novick suggests that the Holocaust became an agent that fundamentally transformed American-Jewish identity to the extent that the Holocaust emerged as “virtually the only common denominator of American Jewish identity in the late twentieth century, [and] has filled a need for a consensual symbol” for American Jews in the face of fears that the community’s viability was threatened by assimilationist pressures and disunity (1999: 7). In Australia too members of the Jewish community by the 1980s heightened their public engagement with the Holocaust, and this was reflected in the establishment by Holocaust survivors of the Jewish Holocaust Centre (JHC) in Melbourne in 1984 and the Sydney Jewish Museum (with a strong focus on the Holocaust) in 1992. These survivors, mainly migrants who reached Australia in the immediate post-Second World War period, sought (among other objectives) to
raise awareness of the Holocaust in an Australian-Jewish community, itself the product of successive waves of migration, that had previously seemed neglectful of those tragic events. While undeniably Holocaust survivors succeeded in placing Holocaust remembrance at the forefront of Jewish communal consciousness, by contrast in the United States the Holocaust has not functioned as a “common denominator” holding the Australian-Jewish community together.

Indeed, despite, as will be demonstrated later, Holocaust survivors constituting a significantly higher proportion of the Jewish community in Australia than in the United States, support for Zionism outranks Holocaust identification as the predominant “consensual symbol” for Australian Jewry. It was the demographic profile of Holocaust survivor migrants themselves – according to Bill Rubinstein (2006), the majority came from Poland and from right-wing, pro-Zionist or Orthodox religious backgrounds – that accounts both for high levels of communal homogeneity and resistance to assimilation, as well as strong identification with Zionism. This has placed the Holocaust survivor community itself in a somewhat paradoxical position because, although its members by and large embrace particularist, nationalist Zionist values, Holocaust organisations such as the JHC have from their inception emphasised universalist human rights as a core element of their mission. By raising awareness of outcomes of extreme intolerance they hoped that future genocides could be prevented. Such aspirations were, according to Daniel Levy and Natan Szaider, not confined to survivor institutions but reflected a global tendency to characterise the Holocaust as the “dominant symbolic representation of evil in the late twentieth century and as a foundation for a representational moral universalism” (2006: 5). Nonetheless, they suggest that, with the emergence of “hybrid formations composed of both global and national elements” (2006: 9), the universalisation of the Holocaust is not irreconcilable with particularist tendencies, an insight that also throws light on competing understandings of the place of Holocaust memory in an Australian-Jewish community created and transformed by successive waves of migration.

In the following message to non-survivor guides, who of necessity are increasingly replacing Holocaust survivors in the JHC museum, Maria Lewitt, herself a Holocaust survivor guide, points to issues of transition, as the community of Holocaust migrants diminishes in numbers and the shape of the Australian-Jewish community changes:

A warm welcome to the new generation of volunteers at the JHMRC. At last we can be hopeful that the work we started in 1984 – to remember the six million Jews who perished, and to fight racism in all its forms – will continue.

Until now, the Centre has been run by post-Second World War migrants, the majority being Holocaust survivors. We were a formidable generation, I state this without apologising. We were the people who rose from the ashes.

We were the lost, displaced generation, firmly rooted in our past. A stubborn people with unbending vision and a clear purpose. We had to start a new life in a foreign land. To acclimatise, to learn a new language, new skills. To settle down, to give our children all that we missed out on in our young years. In the
majority of cases we have succeeded. In these respects you are our children: the best educated, the most pampered Jewish generation ever (Lewitt April 2000: 17).

As the Australian-Jewish community moves from a predominantly migration to a post-migration phase what tensions have emerged between the need to maintain connections with the premigration world and links with non-migrant members of the community?

II. The formation of the Australian-Jewish community and the construction of identity

Jews have been present in Australia since the beginning of European settlement, a subject which has attracted much scholarship (Levey 2004) and issues surrounding the minority community’s identity in relation to the host community and the wider Jewish community have been a consistent theme. Of some 160,000 convicts transported to Australia between 1788 and 1868, about 1000 were Jews. Jewish free settlers who, like the convicts, were largely derived from Britain’s lower classes, began to arrive from the 1820s. By the 1840s, they comprised about 1200, or 0.5 per cent of the population, in New South Wales, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia, and this percentage has remained fairly consistent over time (Rutland 2001a; Turnbull 1999). The first 150 years were dominated by Anglo-Jewish elites, despite successive waves of German and Russian Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Rutland 2007). From the late 1920s, however, the Jewish population became much more diverse, representing a variety of traditions, values and cultures (both secular and religious). The evolution of Jewish communities in Australia reflects the broader shift from a dominant British culture to a more multicultural society in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Malcolm J. Turnbull suggests an even more global identity for those refugees and migrants who arrived in Australia from Central and Eastern Europe before, during and after the Second World War. He argues that they have been “fundamentally redefined by the Holocaust, the emergence (and political survival) of the State of Israel, [as well as] the evolution of Australia’s relationship with Britain and the rest of the world” (1999: 9-10). At the time of the bicentennial celebrations in 1988, Rubinstein commented that, most of those in Australia today were originally Yiddish-speaking Eastern European migrants (many of them Holocaust survivors) or are their offspring. Few retain any special loyalties to the United Kingdom, and most fully accept the concept of multiculturalism (cited in Turnbull 1999: 10).

Until the Second World War, there were few immigrants to Australia who could be classed as refugees save the small number who came from Czarist Russia via the United Kingdom from 1882 and into the twentieth century (Richards 2008; Turnbull 1999). Deteriorating conditions in Eastern Europe led to some 2000 Yiddish-speaking Poles migrating to Melbourne and Sydney in the later 1920s which caused consternation in both the wider
Australian community and the Anglo-Australian Jewish establishment. Some of the early Jewish migrants to Australia had become so Anglicised that they resented those who came after the First World War and in the mid-to-late 1930s (Richards 2008). Anti-Semitism in this period of Australia’s history was strong and several authors argue that Australian Anglo-Jews consciously downplayed their distinctiveness, emphasising their loyalty to the country and the Commonwealth (Levey 2004; Rutland 2001a; Turnbull 1999). Assertion of Anglo-Jewish identity coincided with a decline in religious observance and Jewish education and an increase in intermarriage. High levels of out-marriage led to predictions that within a generation the community would have assimilated completely into the general population. Community leaders adopted a policy of revitalisation to foster a heightened sense of “Jewishness” amongst the youth. Ultimately, however, international events intervened. The rise of Hitler in 1933 and the spread of fascism and the resultant emigration of large numbers of Jews from Nazi-controlled Europe to Australia transformed the Jewish community, revitalising Jewish culture and identity in Australia (Goldlust 2004; Turnbull 1999).

The pre-Second World War wave of Jewish refugees to Australia was the first real test of a small shift in Australian immigration policy arising from the Evian Conference in 1938 to which Australia was a reluctant signatory. At the Conference Australia agreed to grant asylum to Jews fleeing from Nazi-controlled Europe by taking a small proportion. Altogether 8,000 German, Austrian and Czech Jews came to Australia between 1933 and 1940 to escape Nazi persecution (Richards 2008). Many were classed as “enemy aliens” and interned throughout the war in isolated camps at Tatura and Loveday. In September 1940, after the ship “Dunera” arrived in Sydney from Britain carrying 2,542 male refugee internees (both Jewish and non-Jewish), Jewish refugees were sent to these camps, as well as Hay, as a result of public concern over a perceived “enemy within” (Richards 2008; Turnbull 1999).

Despite the fact that many Central European Jewish refugees were from the middle classes, highly educated and with contacts in Australia, they faced hostility and condescension on arrival. They struggled to overcome the expense of their migration and encountered what for many was a cultural wasteland. The Australian public was apprehensive about the arrival of so many non-British “aliens” and their close congregation in particular suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne (Richards 2008; Turnbull 1999). Indeed, in the second half of the century, the number of Jews settling in Sydney and Melbourne (40,000 each in 2001) was close to 90% of the Australian-Jewish population (Goldlust 2004). It has been argued that resistance to this pre-war Jewish intake was not necessarily anti-Semitic but related to all non-British “white aliens” entering Australia at this time, particularly Italians and Maltese who planned to establish group settlements. The “free land” proposal in 1939 to set up a Jewish colony in the Kimberley in the Northwest of Western Australia generated much public debate but was opposed by
a federal government bent on an assimilationist settlement policy (Langfield 1990; Richards 2008). Support for Jewish refugees, however, came from a variety of groups including Theosophists, the Communist Party, Quakers and various Leagues of Peace (Richards 2008).

Jewish immigration in the immediate post-war period was equally contentious. At the end of the war, the humanitarian crisis was urgent with 2000 permits being granted in March 1946, mainly to Jews who had been in camps or were destitute. Arthur Calwell, Minister for Immigration, however, believed the government had done enough and declared that no more than 25 per cent of Australia’s immigrants would be refugees. While the government argued that religion would not be a criterion for migrant selection, bureaucratic measures were adopted to specifically limit the intake of Jews (Blakeney 1985; Markus 1983; Richards 2008; Rutland 2001b, 2002).

The mixed reception of Jewish refugees and displaced persons was particularly sensitive at a time when Australia was beginning to receive more non-British “white alien” immigration. Between 1938 and 1954 Australia accepted over 25,000 Holocaust survivors from Europe and many others who had sought refuge in Egypt, Russia, Israel, South Africa and Great Britain. It is generally accepted that Australia absorbed the highest rate of Holocaust survivors per thousand of its population outside of Israel (Rubinstein cited in Richards 2008), a phenomenon that was part of the great cultural diversification of Australia just before and after the Second World War. This group of newcomers included well-educated people, as well as those deprived by the Nazis of educational opportunities and who aspired to success; some who were deeply religious, some with strong Zionist convictions and a number experienced in political activism. The transfer of influence from the Anglo “Establishment” to the various Boards of Deputies and Zionist organisations can be viewed as an inevitable result of the profound demographic and ideological transformation of the community (Turnbull 1999). Thus, the post-Second World War migration program to Australia resulted in the modification of Australian-Jewish identity (which had earlier been shaped predominantly by largely British waves of migration) (Rutland 2007). In the post-Holocaust era Australian-Jewish identity seemed less oriented towards assimilation, and more towards an affirmation of distinctiveness.

According to Rubinstein, these new migrants “were determined to establish a network of Jewish institutions which would ensure the survival of the community” (cited in Turnbull 1999; 13). Being Jewish meant more than being part of a religious tradition – it involved espousing a range of secular, ethnic and religious identities and increasingly, a group focus on nationalism and a Jewish homeland (Turnbull 1999). Turnbull argues that “the maintenance of ‘Jewishness’ in Australia has always depended on group support and active involvement in the educational, social, cultural and religious

1 One aspect of this transformation was the growth of the Jewish day school movement, discussed below.
structures of an identifiable community” (Turnbull 1999). By the end of the twentieth century, with a population of over 100,000, in Rubinstein’s view, the Australian Jewish community constituted “one of the best organised Diaspora communities in the world” (cited in Turnbull 1999: 13). A predominantly urban community, based in Melbourne and Sydney, and with smaller numbers in other states, it includes over 50 congregations with the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ) acting as a national umbrella body (Turnbull 1999).

Within Australia’s multicultural population, Jews remain distinct, comfortable within the mainstream while retaining a strong commitment to their identity as either “Jews in Australia” or “Australian Jews”, the word order, indicates relative priorities (Goldlust 2004; Levey 2004). According to a 1991 Melbourne study on social relations and group identity, most Jews (whether migrants or descendants of migrants) still mix extensively with other Jews with a firm commitment to future Jewish cultural continuity (Goldlust 2004; Levey 2004). Yet while the Australian-Jewish population continues to grow, this is the result of further immigration (predominantly non-European) rather than natural increase, raising questions about the origins of future Jewish migrants and how they might affect existing community dynamics. At the time of the 2001 census, the number of overseas-born Jews was 53 per cent, more than twice as high as the overseas-born percentage in the Australian population as a whole (Goldlust 2004). Despite the definitional complexities of what it means to “be Jewish” and possible underestimating of the 2001 census figures, the changing nature of the Jewish intake and intermarriage will inevitably affect Jewish cultural heritage and identity in Australia in the future (Goldlust 2004; Levey 2004). Goldlust suggests that while most of the recent arrivals from South Africa have espoused Jewish institutional and community values and appear to be well integrated into Australian-Jewish life, the same cannot be said for those from the former Soviet Union. This is partly because of the lower socio-economic status of the latter group who are often marginalised owing to their more modest circumstances, but also due to the lack of involvement with Jewish communal life in the Soviet Union where identification with Judaism was actively discouraged (Goldlust 2004).

III. Australian-Jewish and American-Jewish community identity compared: The role of the Holocaust

To return to Novick and his contention that from the 1970s the Holocaust played a pivotal role in the re-conceptualisation of American-Jewish community identity, significant contrasts emerge between the American and Australian communities.

First, it must be noted that, whereas the Australian-Jewish community is still predominantly composed of first-generation migrants and the migration of Holocaust survivors who fundamentally transformed the character of the community, this was not the case in the United States. The ar-
rival of almost two and a half million Jews from Eastern Europe between 1881 and 1927 meant that by 1927 just over 50 per cent of a population of 4,228,000 American Jews was born overseas. By comparison in 1990 foreign-born Jews comprised just 8.6 per cent of America’s 5.9 million Jews (Gold Spring 1999). Thus, the approximately 140,000 survivors who reached the United States immediately after the war, while representing a significant number in absolute terms, did not have the same demographic impact on the American-Jewish community, as had the survivors on the Australian-Jewish community (Helmreich 1998). Moreover, as a recent study of the reception of Holocaust refugees into the United States has cogently argued, in general, American Jews had little understanding of the plight of Holocaust survivor refugees whom they believed should integrate into American society within months of their arrival (Cohen 2007a) – the lack of insight into the impact of Holocaust trauma seemingly paralleled the community’s much-criticised earlier indifference to the dangers confronting Jews during the Holocaust. Unlike in Australia, American Holocaust survivors did not perform a transformational role on the receiving Jewish community, instead they experienced considerable pressure to become “Americans”.

Jonathan S. Tobin, executive editor of Commentary, a mainstream American-Jewish magazine, summarises the historical “consensus” on the interrelationship between attitudes to the Holocaust and community identity. Interestingly, he also points to the strengthening in the twenty-first century of American-Jewish community identification with Zionism, which suggests greater convergence between the American and Australian communities:

The contrast between the timorous Jewish leadership of the 1940s – worrying more about the backlash from anti-Semites than it did about taking action on behalf of Jewish victims – and the strong pro-Israel lobby in the early years of the 21st century that has achieved near mythic status (and has become the focus of a new generation of anti-Semites) could not be greater. But this transformation did not take place overnight. The period between the end of World War II and the 1960s was one in which the public voice of American Jewry was not the political or moral force that it would subsequently become in the heat of future battles over Soviet Jewry and Israel.

This leaves us with the question of what happened in the 1960s to jolt American Jewry out of the shadows ... The answer, according to almost every serious historian, is that it was in this time that American Jewry came to grips with the enormity of the Holocaust and began incorporating its memory into their communal culture in a way it had never done in the previous years (Tobin 2009: 57-58).

Care needs to be taken nonetheless not to suggest that in the 1950s and 1960s American Jewry was impervious to the Holocaust. The historian Hasia Diner is highly critical of those who have constructed a paradigm of historical silence without, in her view, systematically studying empirical evidence documenting extensive survivor and broader communal engagement with Holocaust memorialisation and education projects (Diner
2. As important as Diner’s corrective is, Tobin (whose essay is written in response to the publication of an extended examination by Diner of the issues raised in her earlier article) argues that the examples revealed in her research still do not account for the radical attitudinal shift evident in the American-Jewish community from the 1970s, from what he terms a “feeble” response, to one that was far more proactive in relation to perceived threats to Jewish existence (Tobin 2009: 58).

By contrast to the United States, in the immediate post-war period, Zionism, despite (or perhaps because of) the high proportion of Holocaust survivors, lay at the core of Jewish identification in Australia. Indeed, Danny Ben-Moshe writes: “Israel is central to the identity of Australian Jews”. He attributes this to a number of factors: the Holocaust, communal structure, Jewish media, fundraising, and Israel visits and emigration. In particular, he suggests, “with 50 per cent of the Australian Jewish community being either Holocaust survivors or their descendants, the Holocaust remains a driving factor behind the community’s strong identification with the Jewish State”. The nexus between the Holocaust and Zionism was made clear in one survey response: “I am a holocaust survivor. If we would have had a homeland before World War Two, we would have had somewhere to go” (Ben-Moshe 2004: 128-132).

Further reinforcing Holocaust survivors’ strongly particularist orientation was the strong support by many of the post-Second World War immigrants to Australia for the Jewish day school movement and Jewish youth activities as a way of transmitting Jewish identity from one generation to the next (Ben-Moshe 2004; Rutland 2007). This high proportion of Jewish students attending Jewish day schools increasingly distinguished the Australian-Jewish community from the American, which continued to emphasise the importance of absorption into the wider American community (Gold 1999). Beginning with Mount Scopus College, which opened in Melbourne in 1949, there were some twenty Jewish day schools established by the end of the century, with the majority of Jewish children spending at least part of their education in this non-government, fee-paying community environment. This was regarded as “the community’s most significant effort towards ethnic continuity” (Glezer 2001: 541). Even prior to the emergence of Holocaust consciousness in Australia, the day school system was particularly concerned with “preserving” Jewish identity, especially Zionist loyalty. As indicated earlier, support for Zionism was a product of the influence of Holocaust survivors and their assertion of Jewish identity, but it was only in the 1970s that Jewish schools systematically started to teach the Holocaust, and it became more central to the curriculum. This shift was conten-
tious because traditionally the curriculum’s focus had been much broader, encompassing centuries of Judaism and Jewish experience, and there was a reluctance to reduce Judaism to the Holocaust. Implicitly too there was a risk that Holocaust memory was subsumed to Zionism.

IV. Institutionalising Holocaust memory in Australia

Heightened Holocaust consciousness was apparent in other Jewish diasporas as well, particularly in former British settler societies, such as Australia and Canada. This was despite the fact that Jewish populations in the former British Dominions were less diverse than those of the United States and, that the other marker of Jewish identity, connection to Zionism, was also particularly strong. Nevertheless the push for post-war Jewish migrants to assimilate into these host societies had apparently led to decades of silence about their lives before and during the war (Cohen 2007b; Lawson and Jordan 2007; Rutland 2007; Wajnryb 2001). With the advent of integration and multicultural policies, however, there was an opportunity for a degree of separatism from the national mainstream identity and a growing awareness of the need for Jews to share their individual and collective Holocaust memories with others.

The rise in Holocaust consciousness led to what French sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs, calls the “institutionalisation of memory” resulting in the establishment of a number of institutions dedicated to the Holocaust (quoted in Novick 1999: 6). The Sydney Jewish Museum, in the words of Avril Alba was “built by survivors and in memory of those who did not survive” (cited in Cohen 2007b: 101). It was officially opened in 1992, providing a space for survivors to meet and share their stories and where many have served as volunteer guides. Sharon Kangisser Cohen argues that the Holocaust is integral to the public and private identity of the Sydney Jewish Community with Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) annually commemorated (Cohen 2007b).

Eight years earlier in Melbourne, growing Holocaust consciousness, particularly amongst the survivor community, was reflected with the establishment in 1984 of the JHC, through which survivors strove to raise awareness of the Holocaust among Australian Jewry. But ignorance was high in the community in general. One Melbourne survey in 1984 indicated that of 2,112 Australians surveyed (teenagers and older), only thirteen per cent knew what the Holocaust was (Mann December 1984). Right from its inception, the JHC was designed for everyone, not only for the Jewish community. Its universalist conception as an educational institution designed to build bridges of understanding between the Jewish and non-Jewish community and to guard against possible threats from prejudice and intolerance in a multicultural and pluralist society (Bartrop 1984; Sokolowicz 1984). The Centre’s Mission Statement is as follows:
The Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre is an institution dedicated to the memory of the six million Jews who were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators between 1933 and 1945. We consider the finest memorial to all victims of racist policies to be an educational program which aims to combat anti-Semitism, racism and prejudice in the community and foster understanding between people (Marks 2004: 9).

V. Conclusion: Beyond Universalism and Particularism

Reference to the specific experience of Jewish victims and survivors, nonetheless, highlights the fact that the particularity of the Holocaust cannot be denied, but is it possible to move beyond the universalist and particularist dichotomy?

That these tensions are acknowledged within the JHC itself is evident in two articles published in the JHC periodical, Centre News in 2001 that comment on debates arising from Novick’s critical analysis of burgeoning global awareness of the Holocaust. Michael Berenbaum, the first director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, in an edited version of an article previously appearing in the American magazine Commentary in 2000, highlights concerns that by going “mainstream”, not only has the Holocaust assumed “too dominant a place” in Jewish identity politics, but it has also become so integrated into non-Jewish consciousness as a symbol of universal suffering that it risks losing its particularly Jewish character (Berenbaum 2001). While Andrew Markus covers similar ground to Berenbaum, he is especially concerned by charges that emerge from Novick’s work that in the United States elements of the American-Jewish leadership promoted Holocaust awareness for “narrow political ends”. He nonetheless concludes that the “imperfect” nature of some proponents of broadly publicising the Holocaust, should not detract from the overwhelming and continuing importance of Holocaust awareness for Jews and non-Jews alike (Markus 2001).

The appearance of articles that addressed unforeseen problems that may have arisen from tensions between the JHC’s universalist and particularist goals at the turn of the twenty-first century points towards possibilities of an increasing hybridisation of memory politics. Alternately, the risk in an Australian post-migration era may be that the survivor commitment to universal values gets lost, if the Australian-Jewish community does what Berenbaum criticised the American community for, and increasingly subsumes Holocaust memory for instrumental purposes.

4. An Australian academic, Markus was at the time of publication Director of the Australian Centre of the Study of Jewish Civilisation, Monash University, Melbourne.
References


