

JACOB MYER ISAACS
SYDNEY SYNAGOGUE'S SECOND MINISTER
AND HIS FAMILY
JOHN ISAACS, and MYER DAVID ISAACS (PLAYWRIGHT)

by
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After the departure of the Reverend Rose in March 1838, the Jewish community in New South Wales remained without a spiritual leader. The Committee of Sydney's Bridge Street Synagogue was therefore glad, when at its meeting on 6 May 1840, George Moss, the former Hon. Secretary of the congregation, now a member of the Committee, informed them that Jacob Myer Isaacs had arrived in Sydney and "was capable of filling the situation of Mohel and Reader." Jacob Myer Isaacs was the brother of the Reverend D. M. Isaacs of Liverpool. He had received a thorough religious and secular education and had come to Sydney to join his brother John Isaacs, a free settler and member of the Synagogue. Another brother, S. Isaacs, was then living in New York.²

After a long discussion, the Committee decided that Isaacs should be asked to send in a statement as to his future intentions with regard to the Congregation. He was also requested to state "his professional calling". By letter of 13 March 1840, Isaacs answered that "prior to his arrival he had been induced to migrate to Sydney, because he had been informed that a person competent to undertake the situation of Mohel, Schchet and Reader was required in Sydney". He now "offered his services in this capacity and promised to exert himself to forward the cause of Judaism in this colony to the utmost of his power". This promise Isaacs was, indeed, to keep during the long years he was to serve the congregation.

He was informed that the "Committee could not consistently with the present state of their funds engage him in these capacities at a salary sufficient to maintain him without him entering into business". The colony was already feeling the first signs of the approaching economic depression of the forties. The Committee therefore agreed to engage Isaacs at "a salary of £100 per annum with any fee that may be voluntarily given to him". This offer did not satisfy Isaacs and on 20 May he let the Committee know that "with the many duties involved which would take him very often and at no suitable time away from his business," he could not agree to the £100 offer. He further stated that he had been informed by his brother as well as by some other member of the Committee (probably George Moss) that the proposed salary was £200 p.a. It was, he wrote to the Committee, "the opinion of these gentlemen that £100 would not keep him and his family respectably". He begged, however, to state that he was "perfectly satisfied with the above mentioned sum, as it was his intention to fill up his vacant time by either opening a school for teaching Hebrew and English, or give lessons privately, trusting this will meet with the Committee's approval." Isaacs had made a very good impression on the Committee and they decided forthwith to engage him. The Minutes record that on 27 May 1840 Moses Joseph, Israel Solomon, Isaac Simmons and Jacob's brother

John Isaacs, agreed to guarantee to the Synagogue the amount of £108 to make the minister's salary £208 per annum. One has to realise that the congregation was then still very small and that there were very few rich men among them. John Isaacs, who had arrived in 1833 as one of the first free settlers, was by then already a prosperous businessman and an influential member of the community.³

After the four gentlemen had guaranteed half of the salary, Isaacs was formally engaged with a salary of £208 p.a. for one year. On 3 June 1840 he attended a Committee meeting at which he was informed of his duties which included also the duty to attend members of the congregation who resided in the country. Isaacs had practically become the Minister of the congregation with the title of Reverend.

Nine months later he attended to a very sad and sensational funeral. It was that of Edward Davis (real name, Davies), the Jewish bushranger who, in the early forties, had terrorised the Hunter Valley with his "Jewboy Gang". It got its name from the name of the leader who was called "Teddy The Jewboy". After they had been caught, Davis and his men were sentenced to death and hanged on 16 March 1841. Isaacs assisted Davis, when they were led to the gallows at the rear of the old Sydney gaol in George Street.⁴ *The Australian* then reported that Davis prayed with Isaacs and thanked him for the attention paid to him in his last minutes.⁵ Isaacs was to bury Davis at a corner of the Jewish section of the Devonshire Street cemetery. When this cemetery was abandoned to make place for Sydney's Railway Station, there was no trace of Davis's grave, but a diagram found during building operations of the Great Synagogue showed where he had been laid to rest.

On 30 March 1842, Isaacs was sent to Maitland to circumcise Philip Joseph Cohen's son, Sidney, who was born on 23 March. This was the first of the many journeys he had to undertake during his ministry, when called to circumcise children, conduct marriages and funerals in the country.

Isaacs was re-engaged on 1 June 1842, and, when on 19 April 1842 the foundation stone of the York Street Synagogue was laid, Isaacs's name appeared on the plate attached to the foundation stone as the "reader" of the Synagogue.⁶

When George Moss in the first number of the *Voice of Jacob*, Sydney edition, wrote on 27 May 1842 that "Australasian Jews have hitherto not profited by the devotion of a Rabbi",⁷ David Benjamin commented that "although he was technically correct, it was perhaps a little unfair to Isaacs whose existence and service deserved at least a mention."⁸

His salary was probably not enough to rear a family and he had to supplement it as a dealer. David Benjamin wrote that in the early stages of his ministry he was in business,⁹ and an early report in 1845 listed him as "Officiating Rabbi" of the York Street Synagogue and "agent of George Street North".¹⁰ On 6 June 1843 Isaacs was again re-engaged. When the York Street Synagogue was solemnly consecrated on 2 April 1844, the Sydney Morning Herald reported that Isaacs commenced the proceedings and that he was "dressed in a black gown and bands over which he wore a white silken scarf" and that he was "the only person formally dressed."¹¹

The *Voice of Jacob* noted in 1845 that at the anniversary dinner of the laying of the foundation stone of the Synagogue "he chanted grace in the most effective manner".¹¹ As the report was most certainly sent to London by George Moss, he may have tried to make good for his earlier omission of Isaacs's name. In the 1845 Report of the York Street Synagogue Isaacs was listed as "(Chazan) Reader".

When, in June 1846, Moses Rintel, then a Hebrew teacher who in 1844 had arrived from England with authorisation from the Chief Rabbi Solomon Herschell to officiate as minister,¹² was asked to deliver a "discourse", as a sermon was then called, at the Synagogue, the Minutes record on 14 June 1846 state that "Isaacs also immediately offered a lecture and his offer was accepted."

On 11 August 1847 the Committee of the Synagogue expressed hopes that a choir could be formed in co-operation with Rintel and Isaacs for the forthcoming High Holidays. On 6 November 1847 some kind of "ecclesiastical board" was formed by Rintel, Isaacs and Moses Moses to report on the case of Mr. and Mrs. Shannon, but no decision was made and the report was sent to the Chief Rabbi.

In June 1850 Isaacs went to Goulburn to celebrate the first Jewish marriage in that town, when he married Sarah Phillips, the daughter of B. A. Phillips of Pitt Street, Sydney to Samuel Davis well-known jeweller and watchmaker in Goulburn.¹³

He was asked in August 1850 to co-operate with Solomon Phillips in the arrangement of prayers for the High Holidays. Phillips, who had arrived in 1833, had acted as Minister of the Bridge Street Synagogue in 1834/5 but had then settled in Parramatta, where he went into business, whilst remaining closely associated with the Synagogue. He had assisted Isaacs in the consecration ceremonies in 1844, and at times also replaced Isaacs as a reader, when he was out of town.¹⁴

On 3 March 1851 the salary of Isaacs was raised to £150 p.a., retrospective to 1 March 1847. In August 1852 he was again asked to deliver "lectures" relating to the High Holy Days. In February 1853 Isaacs fell ill and Lewis Goldring was asked to act as reader during his indisposition.

That his services were highly estimated, is shown by the fact that on 6 February 1853, the increased congregational work impelled the Committee to raise their minister's salary to £400 p.a. In the meantime Isaacs started a Jewish school in Sydney and on 20 March 1854 the Committee asked him to report on this school. Isaacs thereupon stated that he had 24 to 27 children in his school and that the average payment by the parents was 1/6d per week, but that he has to pay 25/- per week for the use of the school room. He had, he said, little left to support himself, especially as the parents stop payment for any day the children are not in school. He needed, he said, £50 to carry on for six months and, if this would be granted by the Committee, he would put his school under the direction of the Committee of the Synagogue.

His deep sense of humanity was shown, when, after George Moss died under tragic circumstances on 25 November 1854, he took care of his children and kept them in his house until he left Sydney. There is no record

that the Committee of the Synagogue did anything to help him; and only after his departure, the Committee became uneasy about the fate of the children.

After the Reverend M. R. Cohen was temporarily engaged as Minister of the York Street Synagogue in August 1855, the Committee asked Isaacs to co-operate with Cohen in the arrangement of prayers for the High Holidays. Isaacs who had then served the congregation which, due to the goldrush had grown in strength and membership for 15 years, and who was aware of the fact that the congregation was contemplating to engage a qualified Minister in the person of the Rev. Herman Hoelzel, probably realised that soon he might not be needed. In January 1855 he gave notice that he wished to retire and on 6 January 1856 the Committee decided "to send a deputation to him to ascertain his wishes and whether he would be willing to return to England." He told the deputation that he would, indeed, like to return to England and asked the Committee to grant him a retirement pension of £200 p.a. and to pay his and his family's passage to England. An attempt by J. G. Raphael and Lawrence Spyer that Isaacs should later pay back the passage, was fortunately lost. The Committee decided to agree to Isaacs's demands and on 20 January 1856 a General Meeting approved the Committee's decision and further decided to liquidate Isaacs's liabilities amounting to £322. His retirement was to take effect on 30 June. He was asked to act until a new Minister was appointed. This was to take place in August 1856. On 24 August the Rev. M. R. Cohen was formally engaged.

Before his engagement had expired, Isaacs was to perform a marriage which had serious consequences for Sydney's Jewish community. On 27 February 1856 he married Julia, the daughter of Joel John Cohen, to Solomon Cohen, the brother of Samuel Cohen who was then one of the most prominent members of the York Street Synagogue. With this marriage, Isaacs laid the foundation stone of the Macquarie Street secession, because it was later found that Julia's mother was not a member of the Jewish faith, and although Julia had been brought up as a Jewess, neither she nor her mother had been properly converted. It may be assumed that Isaacs was under the impression that Julia was Jewish and, during the secession quarrels which led to the walk-out of the "Establishment" and the foundation of the "New Synagogue" in Macquarie Street, Philip Joseph Cohen wrote to David Cohen in London, another brother of Solomon Cohen, that "the Reverend Isaacs must have satisfied himself of the correctness of his conduct".¹³ Isaacs unfortunately became a victim of secession. He and his family left Sydney at the end of the year 1856. He received his pension regularly. But in March 1862 a deputation consisting of Solomon Moses and L. J. Spyer, representing the Committee of York Street Synagogue, approached the Committee of the Macquarie Street Synagogue and informed them that their Committee was of the opinion that they should contribute to the pension of the Reverend Isaacs, and asked them how much they were prepared to pay. When the Committee of the Macquarie Street Synagogue refused to contribute anything, the York Street Synagogue Committee reduced Isaacs's pension to £100. David

Benjamin wrote that "it was scarcely fair by the Macquarie Street Board to refuse to participate in Isaacs's pension because the majority of its members and certainly its leaders had benefited from Isaacs's work for fifteen years."¹⁶

In September 1862 Mrs. Isaacs wrote complaining of the hardship which would result from the drastic reduction of the pension. The Committee decided that the reduction would commence on 1 December only, but on 5 October they reversed the decision and raised the pension again to £140 p.a. They also decided to again approach the Macquarie Street Synagogue which did not lead to any reconciliation whatever. Another thirteen years were to pass until the two congregations were willing to bury the hatchets. By then the Reverend Jacob Myer Isaacs had joined his ancestors.¹⁷ In March 1866 the York Street Committee was informed of the death of Isaacs and decided to pay the allowance of the current quarter and to make it up with a gratuity of £100 to his widow. As was the case with the children of George Moss, gratitude had not been the strongest side of the York Street Synagogue administration.

JOHN ISAACS

Jacob Isaacs's brother, John Isaacs, was one of the early free immigrants. He arrived with his wife Rosa on 24 April 1833 by "Enchantress". The ship brought also two Jews to Australia who were later to act as Ministers, Solomon Phillips and Isaac Friedman, as well as Emanuel Crabb who was to become the Secretary of the Sydney Synagogue.

David Benjamin wrote a short note on John Isaacs in which he said:—"

"John Isaacs was one of the early leaders of the Sydney Synagogue. He was a trustee of the land in York Street, the first Treasurer of that Synagogue, and a member of the Committee for many years. He gave generously to the Building Fund." He then continued:—

"In his later years he was on the Board of the Great Synagogue and gave to it a handsome set of posts for the wedding canopy which are still in use. In 1868 and 1869 he was President of the Sydney Hebrew School. He was a member of Sydney's first Schechitah Committee (1868). He died in old age on 24th April 1893." Unfortunately, Benjamin confused two persons. The John Isaacs who was "in later years on the Board of the Great Synagogue", was not the one who had arrived in 1833, but a namesake, whose name was John (or Jonas) Nathan Isaacs, who appears to have arrived, with his wife Dinah, in 1847 and joined the Committee of the York Street Synagogue first in 1858. To complicate the matter, another John Isaacs had arrived, also in 1847, with his wife Jane, but he died on 8 August, 1867.

The first John Isaacs had a house and shop in George Street.¹⁸ In October 1842 he was requested by a number of people to stand as a candidate for the Bourke Ward at the first Municipal election.¹⁹ He appears also to have been a keen freemason, because, when in December

1842 a Freemason's dinner was announced, it was in his shop that tickets were available.²⁰ The last we hear of John Isaacs was that he was mentioned in the 1845 Report of the Committee of the York Street Synagogue as a seatholder. As there is no record that he or his wife died in Sydney — the couple appears to have been childless — it must be assumed that they returned to England, followed in 1856 by Jacob Isaacs and his family. John's wife had been a member of the Committee of The Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Institution founded in October 1841.

MYER DAVID ISAACS, Playwright and Actor

The Isaacs family was a talented family. In the year Jacob Isaacs retired, a Jewish playwright came into notice in Sydney. It was Myer David Isaacs, of whom *The People's Advocate* wrote on 12 April 1856 that he was "the son of the celebrated Hebrew Divine, the Reverend D. M. Isaacs of Liverpool, England, and the nephew of the Rev. J. M. Isaacs of Sydney and S. Isaacs of New York, America". The fact that his other uncle John Isaacs was not mentioned, indicates that John Isaacs had by then left Sydney. *The People's Advocate* mentioned that M. D. Isaacs was "the author of the comedietta "We do not take boarders" which met with a marked success at the Victoria on Friday evening so marked indeed, as to cause a general call for the author on the dropping of the curtain". Curiously enough none of the large newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Empire* reported this event. The "comedietta" was probably not reviewed, because it was only a one-act "afterpiece".

It is not known how M. D. Isaacs earned his living in Sydney, for it was only four years later, in 1860, that another of his plays, again a comedy, called "Wealth and Worth" was performed at the Royal Victoria Theatre, on 2 November 1860.

This time, the *Sydney Morning Herald* deemed the play worthy of review on 3 November 1860:—

"The play which formed the principal dramatic action of the evening, went off successfully, its local hits appearing to afford much amusement to the audience, who also highly appreciated the language and dramatic action of the more serious parts. The scene is laid in Sydney, and in the course of the piece, a good view of the Harbour from the Botanical Gardens is introduced. As a first effort, "Wealth and Worth" is not without merit.

At the fall of the curtain, Mr. Isaacs was called for, and in responding to the call, he expressed his gratitude for the support he had that evening received, and his high sense of the high honour conferred upon him by the kind of approbation of the house, and begged to assure them that the success he had achieved would excite him to renewed exertions." The performance was several times repeated and on 21 November *The Empire* wrote that "Mr. Isaacs will appear in his own comedy" at a Benefit of Mr. Isaacs in one of the main roles "Mark Thoughtful", performed on this day.²¹ Two more years passed until another play by Isaacs was performed in Sydney. The reason for this was that Isaacs was involved in a completely

different field of activity. This was journalism, not in Sydney, but Lambing Flat — Burrangong on the newly discovered goldfields in the West of New South Wales. On 2 February, 1861 the first newspaper *The Miner and General Advertiser* appeared at Lambing Flat with M. D. Isaacs as editor.²² It appears that after the discovery of the Burrangong goldfields, Isaacs like many other Jews, especially those who had stores on the now nearly exhausted goldfields of Kiandra, Beechworth and Ophir, had gone to the new goldfields. Yet, neither did he dig for gold nor did he open a store. He became a newspaper editor. As the reports show, Isaacs was an able journalist and also a powerful orator who soon wielded great influence on all important activities of the goldfields. There was hardly a local cause which he did not immediately embrace. "He did much to form public opinion on the goldfields, and it may be noted that he was responsible for some of the publicity against the Chinese at Lambing Flat. In a sense one could summarise much of the history of Lambing Flat by listing movements and institutions with which Isaacs was associated. He was the secretary of the Burrangong Race Club as well as founder and chairman of the Burrangong Amateur Dramatic Society. Messrs Michael Levy, Davis and Louis Phillips (Secretary) were fellow members of the Society."²³ At the performance by this Association of a play "Woman and the Devil" and Sheridan Knowles's five act drama "The Hunchback" performed on 18.7.1861, Isaacs together with auctioneer Michael Levy took part as actors.²⁴ "In March 1861, Isaacs organised a committee for the relief of the "Victims of the Recent Murderous Outrage" and only a month later he also prepared a petition for a better route for the mail. He greatly supported the move for a hospital on the fields. He further acted as president of the Burrangong Prospecting Association and the Diggers' Mutual Society and as secretary of a move to secure better parliamentary representation for Burrangong."²⁵ Isaacs was a very conscientious Jew and when the Jews at Lambing Flat, which in 1861 was proclaimed as the town of Young, celebrated in 1861 the High Holy Days in Mr. Levy's house, he wrote a long and detailed report about this event.²⁶

It appears that early in 1862 he returned to Sydney for another theatrical bout. This time it was a drama, "The Battle of Life", the scene of which was laid at Asherley Castle. On 1 April 1862 the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Empire* carried advertisements announcing that in the Royal Victoria Theatre, the popular actress Mrs. Charles Jones would have her first benefit.

"On this occasion will be presented, for the first time on any stage, an elegant play, in three acts, from the pen of Myer David Isaacs, author of "We do not take Boarders", "Ilander", a new version of "Elizabeth", "Australian Leaflets" etc. etc., entitled "The Battle of Life" with an unequalled cast of characters, followed by Dido, Queen of Carthage. The play was performed on 2 April, but the review by *The Empire* was not very encouraging for Isaacs:

"It may be well to premise that we do not belong to the number who condemn a thing because it is not of foreign production, being believers in native talent, where it is to be found, and so, let us to the play. It is not

possible to give in a three-act play any more passion, high, low (very) or comfortable life, nor a more "foul, bloody and unnatural murder" than was perpetrated last night; and sincerely we trust that Mr. Isaacs's talent, when next worked out, may go further than to the mere collection of a meagre plot, badly laid, platitudes and vulgar language.

At the fall of the curtain, a general call was made for the author, who appeared in answer to the cheering and thanked the audience for their kind reception of the play. He gave it as his opinion that no more imported talent should be used, when it could be found at hand. He hoped yet to become the dramatic author of the colonies, and flattered himself that he would meet with success. This, it may be said, was indeed flattery of the vilest sort, coming as it did from himself to himself."

"Bell's *Life in Sydney*, the popular weekly was more friendly, when its editor wrote on 5 April:—

"Mr. M. D. Isaacs's new play "The Battle of Life" was produced under the most favourable auspices; and without entering into minute criticism, we may briefly express an opinion that it takes precedence of all the author's previous works. Mr. Isaacs was honoured by an unanimous call before the curtain, and, in a few appropriate words acknowledged the compliment".

The Sydney Jewish Community had always patronized the theatre. It might well have been possible that in the theatre were many of Isaacs's co-religionists who were only too happy to favour the young Jewish author.

After this theatrical interlude, Isaacs returned to the goldfields. In the meantime, as happened so often, the activity on the fields had moved from Lambing Flat to the nearby new township of Forbes, and so had most of the Jews. *The Miner* was now also appearing in Forbes, and was soon replaced with a new paper *The Lachlan Observer and Miner's Advocate* with which Isaacs was not associated. Whilst he was at Forbes, he became again a keen worker for local causes. He was among those who pressed for additional police protection of the gold transports, following upon the Eugowra Escort robbery. He was secretary of the Local Court Committee and also associated with the move for better roads. As a keen dramatist, he ran a charity in support of the hospital, but as his efforts were far from successful, his friends had to arrange a "Grand Complimentary Benefit", to make good his loss. Another of his ventures was his application as Principal for the new Forbes Grammar School. However, he assumed prominence in the small Jewish community in Forbes as the secretary of the congregation which was to build a short lived synagogue.²² In September 1862 Isaacs left Forbes and moved back to Young, where, on September 6, he advertised in the *Burrangong Courier* that he had "commenced business as agent for Mr. Willoughby, solicitor of Forbes," and from reports in this paper we can conclude that he acted as some kind of pettifogging lawyer in the Young Police Court, using the knowledge he had once acquired as a solicitor's clerk.

Three years later Isaacs was to be found in Brisbane. On 22 March 1865 a new play of his "The Belle of Brisbane or the Lady of Queensland" was performed at Mason's Concert Hall in Brisbane under the immediate

patronage of Sir George and Lady Bowen. The review of the play by the *Brisbane Courier*²⁴ was, however, not favourable. The paper wrote that the "Belle of Brisbane" might as well have been "The Belle of Munster or anywhere else". The play obviously lacked local flavour. Curiously enough, an advertisement in the *Brisbane Courier* on 21 March 1865 claimed that three other plays by Isaacs had been presented in Sydney, as follows:—

"Slander" at the Prince of Wales Theatre on 14.1.1867, "Brightshade and Nightshade" at the Royal Victoria Theatre on 4.6.1858 and "Poor Indeed" also at the Royal Victoria Theatre on 12.5.1859. This was a dubious claim, as no evidence whatever can be found in the newspapers that these three plays were ever produced on the dates mentioned. It is not impossible that they were performed by amateur groups.

The performance in Brisbane is the last record of one of Myer David Isaacs's plays. It may be assumed that he, too, returned to England.

Acknowledgment

The author acknowledged the assistance of the staff of the Great Synagogue, the Mitchell Library, Mrs. Phoebe Davis and Mr. Eric Irwin.

NOTES

1. Minutes of the Bridge Street Synagogue.
2. The People's Advocate, Sydney 12.4.1856.
3. Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal, Vol. III, p.269.
4. G. F. J. Bergman. A.J.H.S.J., Vol. IV, p.205.
5. The Australian 18.3.1841.
6. A.J.H.S.J. Vol. I, p.170.
7. A.J.H.S.J. Vol. III, p.447.
8. A.J.H.S.J. Vol. III, p.466.
9. A.J.H.S.J. Vol. III, p.371.
10. A.J.H.S.J. Vol. III, p.241.
11. Voice of Jacob No. III. A.J.H.S.J. Vol. III, p.358.
12. Australian Dictionary of Biography Vol. 6, p.31.
13. Goulburn Herald 1.6.1850.
14. A.J.H.S.J. Vol. I, pp.76-77.
15. A.J.H.S.J. Vol. III, p.9.
16. A.J.H.S.J. Vol. III, p.393.
17. A.J.H.S.J. Vol. III, p.269.
18. The Australian 9.9.1842.
19. The Australian 31.10.1842.
20. The Australian 21.12.1842.
21. Sydney Morning Herald 21.11.1860;
The Empire 1, 2, 20, 22 Nov. 1860.
22. M. Z. Forbes, Jews of the Lachlan District,
A.J.H.S.J., Vol. IV, p.7.
23. The Miner & General Advertiser 10.7.1861.
24. Brisbane Courier 22.3.1865.