

Report on Michelle Urban talk on Jewish Convicts

by Joanne Hyland

The second part of Michelle Urban's fascinating talk about Jewish convicts shows links to Henry Seeligson and Abraham Rosenberg who fostered the early practise of Judaism in WA.

ROSENBERG, Abraham. 1806, picture-frame maker, semi-literate, possessing plates for bank notes 8 yrs, 1863, T.L. 1865 & C.P. 1868.

Rosenberg was capable of contradictory patterns of behaviour which he displayed after his arrival in the colony in 1862. Sentenced for possessing plates for counterfeiting bank notes, he was the member of the convict body best versed in Hebrew religious practice. After obtaining his ticket-of-leave, he conducted a jewellery business in the pursuit of which he visited country centres when they held a fair or race meeting.

Rosenberg also took the lead in securing a piece of land to serve as the Jewish burial ground, at the East Perth Cemetery. His convict record showed him to be married with four children at the time of his conviction, but there is no evidence of his wife and family following him to Australia.

He was often wanted by the convict authority for failing to report his whereabouts at the appropriate time.

Abraham Rosenberg's knowledge of Judaism, and unfortunately his predilection for deception, plunged him into a bizarre court appearance involving Henry Seeligson. As related to the court, Rosenberg undertook to induct Henry Seeligson into the mysteries of the "Kabbalah" (the Hebrew mystical tradition) to enable Seeligson to ascertain whether his wife would ever join him in the colony. In the process Rosenberg persuaded by means of deception or flattery, a watch valued at £15.00 from Seeligson, and sold it for £25.00. Ultimately, he benefited from his chicanery, although to a lesser degree than he anticipated, as the court directed him to reimburse Seeligson to the tune of £15.00. This same Henry SEELIGSON, more than any other of the transportees, was to do much to foster Judaism in WA.

SEELIGSON, Henry. 1830, general dealer, receiving stolen goods, 10 yrs, 1864, expirée 1873. By 1867, he had obtained a ticket-of-leave and set up business as a watchmaker and jeweller. Sentenced to 10-yrs servitude, he was transported to WA where he arrived on the ship "Merchantman" on 12 September 1864. Henry Seeligson, born about 1829 in Poznan Silesia, died 15 January 1906 (77 years).

The significance of the role played by Seeligson and that of his children who later joined him in the colony, cannot be overestimated. Born in Polish Silesia, son of a synagogue official, he was taken as a lad to Manchester where he soon became a general dealer. He married Julia van Weerden of Dutch origin and was father to four children, when he was convicted in Madras of receiving stolen goods.

In the late 1860s, assisted by his brother-in-law who was a diamond cutter in London, Seeligson opened a business in Perth as an “importer of gold and silver watches, jewelry, and general merchandise”. As well as his litigation with ROSENBERG, he was involved in a court case with George LEVI, another Jewish ticket-of-leave man, who had broken into SEELIGSON’s shop. By 1874 he advertised new premises in St. George’s Tce, Perth, where he also made his home.

He stood by his fellow convicts and as he prospered, he employed 8 ticket-of-leave men during the years 1869-1875. In 1877, he signed a petition regarding discrimination against ex-convicts. By 1880 he was part owner of the vessel “Theresa” which engaged in the pearling trade until 1888. He travelled to England and the eastern colonies during the 1880s.

Henry SEELIGSON’s communal importance rested not upon the dubious quality of his earlier career but his efforts to further the practice of Judaism in WA. While still in servitude he was associated with the moves which yielded the Jewish portion of the East Perth cemetery. Subsequently he assisted the conduct of religious services in Fremantle. Later again he participated in the formation of the Perth Synagogue in Brisbane Street, Perth (PHC).

SEELIGSON’s four-children, but not his wife, later joined him in the colony. **Phineas**, his oldest son, established himself in Perth as a pawn-broker and money lender.

Phineas Seeligson was a very prominent person in the Jewish community of WA and he was a pawnbroker. He decided to have a purpose-built building constructed which was a pawnbroker’s shop and family home. This is at 143 Barrack Street, Perth and is a rare 120-year-old surviving federation Romanesque building. It was built in 1894 to designs by Henry Trigg, the first architect to be born and trained in WA.

Pawnbroking was a really important part of the financial system of the day, providing important service in giving small flexible loans. Banks in those times weren’t as flexible with lending of money. Historical photographs show that, from the beginning, the building had a sign reading “City Loan Office” on the side. This property lay dormant for 50 years, and in 2008, the current owner set about conserving and activating every floor of the building.

Phineas Seeligson also featured regularly in newspapers, with reports of the time giving evidence in court on matters of stolen property. In 1892, the Perth Synagogue was inaugurated, and from 1893, Phineas Seeligson became treasurer and made notable contributions to this community for many years. When Phineas Seeligson died in 1935 he bequeathed his large fortune to the congregation. Within a few years this bequest transformed the basis of charitable work within the Jewish community.

His assets, composed largely of city properties, were to be administered by the Seeligson Trust. Apart from bequests for several public charities, including the institutions for the blind and deaf, the endowment of a scholarship within the Faculty of Agriculture at UWA, and certain annuities, the bulk of the estate was bequeathed to the Jewish community.

Michelle’s summary of early Jewish life in WA:

- It was not easy to be a Jew in the early days of settlement in Western Australia for the free settler on the land.

- There were none of the trappings, offices and services that are provided by congregational organisation.
- The lack of Jewish women meant permanent bachelorhood or marriage outside of the faith. As a result there are few if any Jewish descendants today.
- Although the convict origins of families were kept hidden for many years, there are today some who can and do claim a Jewish convict ancestor.
- Full credit goes to those Jewish convicts transported to Western Australia between 1850 and 1868 who not only kept their faith under awful conditions but actively promoted Judaism in the best way they could for the benefit of their fellow Jews and subsequent generations.
- It would be another 20 years before the Jews of Western Australia would come together to form a Hebrew Congregation.

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