

The Friends Who Peopled My Youth

When I think of Strathfield and District Hebrew Congregation I am almost overwhelmed by the flood of heartwarming memories. Strathfield Schule, as we called it, was my second home and the place where my Jewish soul was born. Sure I began cheder in Bondi Junction at Central Synagogue. I went to schule there almost every week of my young life, but it was so boring. At Strathfield I was with my family. My parents were foundation members and my mother tells me that my father, being an electrician, was the only tradesman in the group of founders. Apparently, he examined the old mansion on Florence St and found it to be a good buy.

The foundation members were the pillars of my world. They were Uncle Philip and Auntie Mena, Auntie Rae and Uncle Simon, Auntie Fan and Uncle Lou, Auntie Betty and Uncle Judah. Although I knew we were not related by blood, these wonderful people were those I could rely on in a crisis. Our Rabbi wasn't a real Rabbi but a 'Reverend'. Rev. Goran was the very embodiment of a mensch. He taught me Hebrew. The pity of it was that my Hebrew lessons stopped when we went to live in Perth. He trained me for the Louis Pulver prize which Joey Kensell won. I was thrilled for Joey as he worked harder for it than I did. Rev. Goran was the one I ran to when I overheard my parents talking about the terrible illness that had my father in its grip. He was such a kind and understanding man whose dream it was to gather all the Jews in the area into the fold of our community.

In my memories of the time these were the friends who peopled my cheder and went to my schule. If I have forgotten someone who still remembers me, please don't be offended. The Sekel Boys - Kevin, Gary and Victor; the twins David and Diana Brem; Deanne and Merrylin Goran; John and Vivienne Flachs; John and Aviva Ziegler; the Wechlser boys - Fred, Robert and Ian; Irene Billig; David Laufer; Ron, Richard and Evelyn Sekel; Joey and David Kensell; Miriam Deston; Denis and Eva Spitzer; all the Bernsteins [but in cheder, particularly Maurice, Anita and Myron]; Renee and Beverly Shaw; John, Judy and Anita Lowbeer; Trevor Collins; the Tractenberg boys - Michael and Tony; Tommy and Roly Nagel; Ron Speiser; Ellen Cohen; John Lutman; Peter and Tommy Goldman. The kids that peopled the Sunday school were my real friends. We often stayed overnight in each other's homes and shared Seders too.

I remember Purim parties and parades in the old mansion that was our schule. One year my mother painted my brother and my faces with black stage make-up and we went as Epaminondas and his Auntie¹. I only ever heard the story from my Mum, about a silly boy who kept making mistakes and the poor aunt I represented. I wore a red scarf around my hair and

¹ An American folk tale by Sara Cone Bryant.

my skirt and blouse were stuffed with pillows to make me look fat. My friend Deanne went as Queen Esther and I was so envious of her. She looked so beautiful.

I remember the endless money raising functions that my parents were involved in, the telephone calls and the meetings. The founding group was supportive of each other and all so involved in building the community. There was never a weekend when we didn't spend time with these stalwarts and their children, who were our friends.

I joined Habonim and we met in the grounds of the old building on Sunday afternoons. They were some of the best times of my life. We learned to sing Hebrew songs, mispronounced of course but always so enthusiastically. We learned Israeli dancing and at the tender age of 11 going on 12, I developed my first major crush, whilst dancing to Simi Yadech². Our leaders, I later realized were child survivors of the Shoah, which they never mentioned. There was Litzl Sonnenschein and Eva Spitzer. Sometimes Jack Katz or other Eastern Suburbs branch madrichim would drop in on us at Strathfield. The other Zionist youth group that met at Strathfield was Betar. Our two groups were rivals. Apparently we were politically and ideologically opposed, although at that early age I wasn't sure how or why. We played machanaim in the grounds and avoided contact with the other mob, even though we all went to the same cheder on Sunday mornings. Ron Sekel, I remember, belonged to the other mob.

My father's illness took us away to Perth in the hope of a cure and an easier life for my mother. It was so sad to leave Strathfield schule. I still treasure the silver tray that was presented by the congregation to my parents as a gesture of esteem.

My father died in Perth and my mother was left to bring us up alone. But we were never really away from our friends in Strathfield. We stayed in touch mostly by mail. Uncle Philip, the foundation President of the congregation came to Perth regularly to visit us and make sure we were OK. The Goldman family, with my friends Peter and Tommy from Habonim, came to Perth on holiday and we all went sightseeing together.

After a few years in Perth the homesickness for Strathfield and the people of the community started to eat away at me. At that time I learnt to my sorrow that my Habonim friends, Peter and Tommy Goldman, had lost their mother. I visited Sydney after a Habonim camp in Melbourne and stayed with the Sekels in Kingsgrove but visited with Peter and Tommy at their home just around the corner from the schule. It was then that I started to think it would be good to make a shidooch for my mother with Mr. Goldman. It took time but it worked and we came back to Strathfield to live. Now my mother joined the Board of the Synagogue as

² A children's song: "Simi yadech, Al yadi, Ani shelach, Ve'at sheli". . ואת שלי, על ידי, אני שלך, ואת שלי. In translation: "Put your hand on mine, I am yours and you are mine."

Honorary Secretary and my step-father, Alf Goldman, served on the Board too. This was the time at which the new Schule/Communal Hall was built. The telephone calls and meetings went on apace.

I have a memory of the building process itself. Uncle Simon Sekel proudly took me on a tour of the new building, which was not quite complete. Amongst other features that he showed me were the modern mens' toilet. Never having seen anything like it before, I was totally nonplussed when I saw the urinals.

I remember the Strathfield Synagogue Youth Group and the dances we used to hold in the hall. It was the highlight of my social calendar and I never missed a function. I even won a lucky door prize in the raffle at one dance. I have other memories too: the new leaders of the congregation when we returned from Perth and my wedding at Strathfield Synagogue. But they are subjects for a separate piece.

by Sharon Milch
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