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An Australian Response to *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging*

In her chapter, "Destination World Jewry: The United States vs the World," Hasia Diner queries the central theme of this book in terms of Canada offering a "no better home" for Jews, noting that this is both a question and a statement. She asks how historians can evaluate what was the best place for migration. She argues that given the strong pull of the United States for Jewish migrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which attracted around 80–90 percent of all Jewish immigrants to what was known as the "Goldene Medina" (Yiddish for Golden Land)" in the New World, surely it was the best place for Jewish migration.[1] Certainly, for distant Australia at the "edge of the Diaspora,"[2] its importance for European migration before the Shoah pales into insignificance compared with the United States, and even in terms of East European Jewish migration to the other English–speaking countries: Canada, Britain, and South Africa.

Yet, the complexity of the question posed by the book's title resonated with me, given my own family's migration history before and after the Shoah. My Polish–born parents migrated from Antwerp with my older brother to Australia's shores, known as the "lucky country," arriving in January 1939. After the war, they sponsored all the surviving family members on my father's side to Australia——there were virtually no survivors left in Europe on my mother's side of the family. My father's family, based in Krakow, were luckier——two of my uncles, Chaim and Jacob Perlman, were saved by Oskar Schindler, and a third uncle, Monek, also survived even though he missed his name when it was called for Brunnlitz and ended up in the Mauthausen concentration camp. A few other members of the Perlman family also survived and arrived in Sydney, Australia, after the war, sponsored by my parents. However, my uncles were strictly Orthodox Bobover Hasidim and Sydney's religious life was too diluted for them. They moved on: my granduncle, Chaim Perlman, moved to New York to marry the sister of the Bobover rebbe——both had lost their families during the war and had met after the war but were separated by their migration choices. My other two uncles, Jacob and Monek, moved to Canada and settled in Toronto. This family story highlights migration challenges, and the different choices people make——in my family's case Australia, United States, and Canada.

My own parents chose to remain in Sydney and were eternally grateful to their new home. Indeed, from its foundation, Australia offered the same freedom and tolerance as Diner describes in her chapter for Canada and the United States, and possibly even more so. For example, Sir Benjamin Benjamin was elected as Melbourne's first lord mayor, serving from 1887–1889, while Sydney's first Jewish lord mayor, Ernest S. Marks, was elected in 1933.[3] This compares with Toronto, which, as described by Harold Troper in his chapter, only elected its first Jewish lord mayor in 1954, after a century of Protestant domination.[4] In addition, Sir John Monash was appointed as Australia's commander–in–chief of the Australian army in 1918, despite the fact that he was a triple outsider——Jewish with Prussian–born parents who was a civilian soldier. His engineering brilliance enabled him to maximize tank warfare in the bat-

tles in France in 1918, ensuring and Allied victory.[5] Again, in 1930, Sir Isaac Isaacs, was appointed as the first Australian–born governor general, representing the British crown.[6] In contrast to the United States, Jews were permitted to join the Sydney stock exchange from the nineteenth century. However, the "tyranny of distance" meant that if, as Diner describes it, Canada "barely figured" for European Jews and that "it loomed in only the most shadowy way in the Jewish imaginary role in Europe," Australia virtually did not figure at all.[7] As a result, while 120,000 East European Jews migrated to Canada from Tsarist Russia between 1900 and 1931, only around 2,000 migrated to Australia.

The picture was to change after the introduction of the quota system in the United States in 1924, when the gates to European Jewish migration were suddenly slammed shut and Emma Lazarus's words "send me your tired, your poor" no longer applied in the same way. Hitler's ascension to power in 1933 created an immediate refugee crisis and suddenly distant Australia, with its wide–open spaces and small population, seemed a desirable migration place. Diner does not address this phase of Jewish refugee and survivor migration directly or the issues highlighted by Irving Abella and Harold Troper in their book, *None is Too Many*, which are also not addressed directly in the volume under discussion.[8] Numerically, around 140,000 Jewish survivors migrated to the United States after the war, adding to a Jewish population of over four million; around 35–40,000 Jewish survivors migrated to Canada, adding to a Jewish population of approximately 170,000; but around 25,000 Jewish survivors migrated to Australia after the war, adding to the 9,000 pre–war refugees and internees, and resulting in an almost trebling of the Australian Jewish population from 23,553 in 1933 to 59,343 in 1961. In this way, Australia absorbed more Jewish survivors on a pro rata population basis of any country outside Israel. Australian Jewry was transformed as a result of this migration, with every aspect of Jewish life and culture being affected.[9]

Despite permitting a quota of sponsored Jewish survivors to enter Australia in the post–war era, government policy was that no funds were to be expended on Jews. Sponsors, who included family members, employers, and the Australian Jewish Welfare Society, had to guarantee that the migrant(s) they were applying for did not become a charge on the state for five years. As well, they had to have their accommodation guaranteed on arrival in Australia. Providing passage to Australia, hostel accommodation, English classes, employment advice, placed a significant financial burden on the local community, which in 1933 had only numbered 23,000.

Already in 1939, two leaders of the Australian Jewish Welfare Society travelled to New York to request financial assistance from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and its offshoot, Refrecom (Refugee Economic Committee), led by Charles Liberman. Their pleas were heard, and they were able to establish two interest free loan societies—Mutual Farms to assist refugees from Nazism settle on the land—not— a successful venture for central European Jews who had no farming

experience and no idea of how to cope with Australian climactic conditions—and Mutual Enterprises to assist refugees setting up in business, a much more successful project. After the Shoah, this assistance from the JDC and Refrecom, as well as HIAS (Hebrew Immigration Aid Society), was crucial in assisting survivors settle in Australia. Emery Komlos, one of the American emissaries who visited Australia to investigate the situation, described these organizations as "three rich uncles."[10] This extensive American aid played a significant role in ensuring the successful integration of the survivors into the Jewish and general communities in Australia. This situation contrasted with the United States, where cases for survivors were closed after one year.[11] While Diner's contribution is certainly correct in its analysis of the immigration trends to the New World until after the First World War, this aspect of America's role following the closing of its gates is not discussed in her chapter.

Parallels between Australia and Canada can be seen in terms of the Holocaust survivors' story of travel, arrival, and memory. In chapter 7, Mia Spiro writes about the challenges of travelling to Canada by ship and then the train travel after arrival to their final destination and notes that most survivor memoirs do not refer to their experiences on arrival and write very little about their life in their new home. Their focus is on their Holocaust experiences.[12] The same applies to Australian Holocaust memoirs where the one exception is child survivor Diane Armstrong's book *The Voyage of Their Life*, about her trip on the SS Derna to Australia in 1948. She describes how, for the young people on the ship, the voyage was a fun experience after the suffering of the Holocaust, while for their parents it was a time of worry about their future life in Australia.[13] Most survivors constantly stress in their memoirs how grateful they are to Australia for giving them a new life—many felt as though they were born again—as highlighted in the book, *The Gift of Life*, prepared for the first major Australian and international survivor gathering held in Sydney in 1985.[14]

Another interesting parallel relates to Ruth Panofsky's chapter, which analyzes Bernice Eisenstein's *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*, the first Canadian second-generation account published in 2006.[15] Interestingly, two important books by Australian second-generation writers were published earlier, but they also mirror Eisenstein's account of how their "harrowing wartime memories possess Ben and Regina Eisenstein (her parents)."[16] Second-generation Melbourne writer Mark Baker's novel, *The Fiftieth Gate*, highlights his parents' struggles as he seeks to find out their full story—conveyed to him as a child through his father's nightmares, while Sydney based Ruth Waynryb's *The Silence* explores the way she grew up with the past totally cordoned off.[17] Panofsky describes "The Group," the senior Eisenstein's close circle of survivor friends, which provides them with support. Similarly, Baker's father was part of the group known as the "Buchenwald Boys," who were orphans liberated from Buchenwald in April 1945 and who migrated as a group to Melbourne sponsored by the Australian Jewish Welfare and Relief Society, who also found solace through their "shared past."[18]

As this discussion has demonstrated, Australia's distance was both a disincentive and an advantage, particularly for Jewish survivor migration after the Shoah. For those who wanted to get as far away from Europe as possible, it was an advantage; for those who wanted to be in a place where there was a stronger Jewish religious life, it was a disadvantage. However, for Jews escaping European persecution—whether it was from Tsarist Russia, the Nazi inferno before, during and after the Holocaust, or from the Soviet gulag, and to whichever English–speaking country in the New World of–fering them sanctuary, whether it was Australia, the United States, or Canada—there was "no better place."

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1
Hasia Diner, "Destination World Jewry: The United States vs the World," in *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 35.

2
This is the title of my book, *Edge of the Diaspora: Two Centuries of Jewish Settlement in Australia* (New York: Holmes & Meier), 2001.

3
Geulah Solomon, "Benjamin, Sir Benjamin (1834–1905)," Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/benjamin-sir-benjamin-2972/text4331, published first in hardcopy 1969, accessed online March 26, 2023; Suzanne D. Rutland, "Marks, Ernest Samuel (1871–1947)," Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/marks-ernest-samuel-7777/text13055, published first in hardcopy in 1986, accessed March 26, 2023.

4
Harold Troper, "Nathan Phillips: The Election of Toronto's First Jewish Mayor," in *No Better Home?*, 148.

5
Geoffrey Serle, *John Monash: A Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1982).

6
Zelman Cowen, *Isaac Isaacs* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1967).

7
The "tyranny of distance" was coined by Geoffrey Blainey with the title of his book, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History*, published in 1966 and regarded as a classic; Diner, "Destination World Jewry," 35.

8
Irving M. Abella and Harold Troper, None Is Too Many*: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933–1948* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1982).

9
Rutland, *Edge of the Diaspora*, 256.

10
Suzanne D. Rutland and Sol Encel, "'Three Rich Uncles in America': The Australian Immigration Project and American Jewry," *American Jewish History* 95 (March 2009): 451-487.

11
Beth B. Cohen, *Case Closed: Holocaust Survivors in Postwar America* (Rutgers University Press, 2006).

12
Mia Spiro, "Crossing in/to Canada: Canada as Point of Arrival in Holocaust Survivor Memoirs," in *No Better Home?*, 117-134.

13
Diane Armstrong, *The Voyage of Their Life: The Story of the SS Derna and its Passengers* (Pymble, NSW: Flamingo, 2002).

14
The Gift of Life: A Commemorative Book of The Holocaust Gathering May 1985 Sydney Australia (Sydney: Australian Association of Holocaust Survivors, 1985).

15
Ruth Panofsky, "The 'Nu World' of Toronto in Bernice Eisenstein's *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*," in *No Better Home?*, 135-146.

16
Ibid.,140.

17
Mark Raphael Baker, *The Fiftieth Gate: A Journey Through Memory* (Melbourne: HarperCollins Australia, 1997); Ruth Waynryb, *The Silence: How Tragedy Shapes Talk* (St Leonard's, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2001).

18
Panofsky, "The 'Nu World' of Toronto," 141.