

THE NEW ZEALAND JEWISH COMMUNITY

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The original natives of the territory of New Zealand were the Maori, who were not Polynesians, but are thought to be of Taiwanese origin. When the original English settlers came to New Zealand, there were many wars, and, ultimately, the *Treaty of Waitangi*, The founding document for New Zealand, was signed.

Today, there are many disputes with the Maori over “sacred” lands and territorial rights. The Maori language is still spoken by many people. The Maori language has experienced a renewal after near extinction, and today it is being taught at schools and Universities. All of the Maori have intermarried, many with Jews, and there are no “pure” descendants of the tribe.

The original Jews started to arrive in Auckland and Wellington in the early 19th century, with the discovery of gold. The first synagogue was established in 1843 in Auckland, and a Jewish cemetery was established in 1858.

Approximately 3,000 Jews live in New Zealand, which represents 0.075% of a country with a population of almost 4,000,000 inhabitants, 85% of which live in the larger cities. Most of the population (75%) are New Zealand European, and 10% are Maori descendants. There are two official languages, English and Maori, and 99% of the population are literate!

One of the first settlers was *David Nathan (1816-1866)*, who operated a clothing store in 1841 in Auckland. He married *Rosetta Aarans* that year, which was the first Jewish marriage, recorded in this new country. The Nathan's were one of Auckland's leading families, and founded one of the city's most important businesses, *I.D. Nathan's*, which today is the largest department store in Auckland.

Probably the most famous of the New Zealand Jews was *Julian Vogel (1835-1899)* who went to Australia in 1852, and after a few failing mine ventures, moved to New Zealand. In 1873 he was elected to the office of prime minister, and was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1875. In the early part of the 20th century, British Jews began to arrive. There was also a limited influx of Jews from Russia and South Africa during this period.

Today, there are six synagogues in New Zealand. Two are in Auckland (1 orthodox, 1 liberal); two are in Wellington

(1 orthodox, 1 liberal); one in Christchurch (orthodox) and one in Dunedin (liberal). The community in Christchurch has about 200 Jews. (After all, how many Jews would want to live in a city with that name?)

The original synagogue in Christchurch was built in 1890, and rebuilt on a new site in 1980. They have great difficulty in getting a *minyan* on Shabbat, and have sporadic Friday night services. They have services, however on the high holy days. As with the other small communities, most of the community has mixed marriages. The Jewish community was established around 1850 –1860. One of the original settlers was a man named Alexander Singer, who went to work in the gold mines on the west coast, (which many consider to be “the end of the world”) and was never heard from again. Many of the Jewish residents are associated with the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, and there are a few Israelis who come to the University to study for a year or two. These students, plus tourists, contribute a great deal to the services, including participation and attendance.

There are also two very small Jewish Congregations, one in Whangarei, and one in The Waikato region of the Mid-North Island. Whangarei is the cultural and commercial heart of the Northland region of New Zealand, in a mountainous and remote area. The urban population is approximately 40,000, and the district is about 63,000. There are approximately 100 Jews in this area, most of who are married to non-Jews. Most of the early Jewish settlers in this region were merchants living and trading in the more remote parts of the country, and they would marry Maori women. The Whangarei community is “unaffiliated”, but they use the reform prayer book for the holy days.

Also, there is an “academic Jewish presence” in some of the University towns. One of the more active ones is the Waikato Jewish Association in Hamilton, which does not have regular services, but is there to help Jewish College students, as well as assisting the Jewish Community in any way they can. Although this community is very small (approximately 60 families) they distribute a newsletter, meet on Jewish holidays, and recently have been very active in demanding an inquiry into the acceptance of a Neo-Nazi doctoral student to the University of Waikato. This German-born middle-aged student is author of substantial amounts of Holocaust denial material on the Internet. The objections are based on not what he says or believes, but that his research topic (not related to the Holocaust) would involve him collecting material and interviewing Holocaust survivors or their families, which would be ethically unacceptable to such participants.

Further, a doctoral degree would also give credibility to his claim to be a “Germanist” – an expert in German history, language, and culture.

For the Jewish people living outside of Auckland or Wellington, simple things such as obtaining matzos during Passover requires a special delivery from Auckland or Wellington, and giving the children Hebrew or bar/bat mitzvah lessons requires a very long drive on Sunday!

The largest Synagogue in Auckland is the *Beth Israel Synagogue*, which is orthodox, and serves about 500 congregants. This synagogue has a rich tradition, dating back to the earliest days of British sovereignty in 1840. The majority of Jews that settled in Auckland came from a wide range of backgrounds; many from England and Scotland, others, known as “Kiwi” go back many generations. In the ‘30’s, many came from Nazi Europe. More recently, there have been immigrants from the former Soviet Union, South Africa, and Israel. There are no daily services in the *shul*, but they are held on Friday evening, Saturday and Sunday morning, and all the holidays.

There is a Mikveh, as well as a Kadimah Hebrew school; but there is no Eruv, Mohel, or a Beth Din in New Zealand. There are no kosher restaurants, although some of the stores carry kosher foods, and the synagogue carries a wide variety of kosher products in the synagogue shop.

In conclusion, The Jewish Community in New Zealand is miniscule, and, with the exception of Auckland and Wellington, very scattered. One cannot but admire the Jews of the outland areas who, in spite of many obstacles have preserved their Jewishness.

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