

Chapter 4

'My Dear Friends'



THE CONGREGATION RESPECTFULLY rose as the rabbi walked in to take his place behind the rickety reading desk in the dilapidated church hall. He wore a black Geneva style rabbinical robe, high collar with white tabs topped off with a square-shaped biretta, which made him seem even taller than he was. (A white gown was worn for the High Holydays.) That style became his trademark, as was his habit of shaking hands with everyone he met. It was a European mannerism and quite foreign to pre-war Australia where formal physical touch was generally avoided.

Every sermon and every public lecture Sanger gave began with the words, 'My dear friends', regardless of the composition of the congregation. His pulpit mannerisms and imposing figure caused strangers to wonder if the rabbi was sincere. His polished language and English accent, which was very faintly touched with an echo of Europe, made some believe it was all just an act. It would have been an unfair judgment. In Berlin he had learned to emphasise his words with his hands and outstretched arms while his voice boomed. He would never lose the skill of being able to project his voice, for how else could you communicate to a congregation in a building with more than three thousand seats and no microphone? Australians were accustomed to clergymen adopting a strange sepulchral singsong sound in the pulpit. It was a shock to listen to a service conducted in an educated voice with no trace of the clerical monotone. Words were precious, and when Rabbi Dr Sanger spoke, poetry was never far away.

There were those who remembered the sermon in which the rabbi's left hand touched the open flame of the burning candle on the pulpit. Rather than obscure the point he was making his palm remained steady and he neither flinched nor winced as he completed his eloquent train of thought. Eloquence required concentration by the congregation and by the preacher. Woe betide an unruly child who stirred in the congregation or a talkative adult unaccustomed to the decorum demanded within a non-Orthodox service. The rabbi would stop, stare and wait grimly until the culprit was silenced. Synagogue and sermons were very serious business. Physical effort was required and his shirt would be soaked with sweat when the time came for the final blessing. At that moment Sanger, the quintessential teacher, became a priest. With both arms outstretched the hushed congregation rose for the priestly benediction. 'The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord let His countenance shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up His face upon thee and give thee peace!' The final sibilant syllable would linger in the mind's ear and many congregants would feel that they had literally been in the presence of God.

Time was important to the rabbi. Services began on time. A sermon took 20 minutes. Friday night services lasted one hour. Saturday morning took an hour and a half and the congregation was on its way home by noon. Prayers on the Day of Atonement concluded promptly at 6 p.m. whether or not the sun had actually set. Congregants were at liberty to conclude their Yom Kippur fast when they got home or wait for the rest of the family to arrive from their more traditional congregations when they could all compare the sermon topics of the day.

Sanger conscientiously kept in touch with London and the World Union, which had paid for the transportation of his library from Berlin and Breslau. Those books were a vital link to his previous life and contained many precious volumes he rescued from his family's rabbinic collection. Sanger had no illusions about his future. It was true that no one could have imagined the horror that lay ahead for the Jews of Europe but he understood that German Jewry was doomed. He told the World Union in November 1936 that he found Australia to be 'prosperous' and 'easy' while its Jews were 'apathetic', but he quickly understood that his

three predecessors had misjudged the community. He was particularly critical of Rabbi Jerome Mark who 'came from that early negative phase of American Reform when anything was justified and was judged by what you could take away from orthodoxy and nothing really strongly positive offered in its stead.'⁵⁶ Keeping this opinion to himself, Sanger wrote to Miss Montagu:

Youth work is indeed a greater problem here in Australia than anywhere else. The work of the existing youth organisations is appalling. Their chief activities are sports and dancing, lectures and theatre performances. However, the lectures are mainly given by outsiders so that no real (Jewish) instruction may be derived from them.

Sanger began to believe that fate had guided him to Australia. In his own words, 'I would be the rabbi who would help lead his people out of the wilderness of confusion and misunderstanding in which, for some years, they had found themselves. By presenting them with a vivid image of Liberal Judaism, not something blurred, indistinct or peremptorily negative, but calmly and reasonably positive, I would try to give them the direction they had for so long been seeking.'⁵⁷

He had enjoyed speaking to the Jewish Young People's Association and hoped to be invited to speak to them again. He planned to introduce Oneg-Shabbat gatherings as he had done in Berlin.

Our experience has been that the Oneg-Shabbat is the most effective when short. It should never exceed three-quarters of an hour, and usually comprises the Kiddush and a benediction after Motzi, one or two modern Hebrew songs and some story told by the rabbi followed by an informal discussion.' Unknowingly echoing the experience of his three previous Beth Israel rabbinic pioneers, Sanger complained, 'All Jewish congregations and associations are severely handicapped in their work by the indifference of Jewish people here.'⁵⁸

Within a few weeks of his arrival the young rabbi moved from his temporary rooms at the Majestic Mansions on Fitzroy Street, St Kilda, which the congregation quickly realised had seen better days, and was

deemed 'for various reasons, not altogether the place for a Liberal rabbi'.⁵⁹ He then moved to Coronado Court at 511 St Kilda Road, a residential boarding house that catered for a much more respectable clientele. In early September 1936 Sanger attended his first congregational Board meeting.⁶⁰ There were financial matters to be discussed and the rabbi tactfully arrived late so that the Minutes concerning the departure of his predecessor and the negotiations regarding his own arrival could be read and discussed. Six weeks later it was decided to dispense with this procedure because it was obvious that no secret correspondence or complaints would need to be hidden from their new employee. In reality, Sanger would never be regarded as an employee of the Board. In those first months he may not have been aware that simply being seated at the synagogue's governing body gave him a unique status. Unlike the Orthodox synagogues, Beth Israel welcomed rabbinic participation and always valued its presence. The young man's knowledge of congregational life and his first-hand experience of the Jewish world beyond Australia added immensely to the development of the congregation.

The records show that there was a very shaky £70 credit balance in the bank and £473 16s 6d in the Building Fund. The rabbi was paid £4 11s 6d each month, and in those early days Board members became accustomed to quietly passing the hat around at the conclusion of each meeting in order to pay the rabbi's salary. Sanger had quickly become aware of the general communal disquiet about Beth Israel's lack of distinctive Jewish symbolism which, in turn, coincided with his own view that Liberal Judaism should do its best to preserve tradition and not eliminate it. His first suggestion to the Board table, which was immediately accepted, required that every man called to the Torah should wear a hat and prayer shawl.⁶¹ Within a very short time hats had become normative for men within the congregation at large. (Australian women customarily wore hats to every formal function.) It seemed a small step in retrospect but in reality Sanger had initiated a pragmatic process that placed Australian Progressive Judaism somewhere between the two dominant non-Orthodox Jewish denominations, Reform and Conservative Judaism, in the English-speaking world.

The 1936 High Holydays were deemed to have been a success. The

Minutes show that the bank balance grew to £90 and the Building Fund increased to a healthy £594 3s 6d. The Board wondered whether it would be possible to buy the old Phillip Harrison Hall from the St Kilda Hebrew Congregation. Simultaneously, negotiations began to purchase an empty block of land close to Chapel Street in Alma Road. Fortunately their dilemma was quickly solved when the St Kilda congregation sensibly declined to sell their former synagogue to the new, rival congregation and the Alma Road site belonging to the Ellis family (who were related to the Phillips' family) measuring 54 feet by 120 feet became available.⁶² The 'most important meeting for seven years' was called at the Acland Street Parish Hall for 18 April 1937, when a general congregational meeting agreed to build 'a Temple'. The congregation would always officially be a 'Liberal Synagogue' but the building would be called 'Temple' in order to convey a sense of modernity and distinctiveness. Exuberantly Hymie Wittner offered Sanger a half hour on the radio station 3XY every weekend from advertising air time that his business had purchased. Wittner then expansively offered to publish one thousand brochures to celebrate the laying of the foundation stone.

The Board acclaimed the rabbi's 'cultured and beautiful services' and 27 new members were immediately added to the membership list. Dr Sanger announced, with evident relief, that the poorly attended Sunday evening services which he had inherited from his predecessors would be reduced to one a month and transformed into an occasion to invite an interesting guest speaker. Sanger also informed the congregation that three Torah scrolls, complete with their silver ornaments, were being sent to Melbourne. Two were a donation from the Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue and the third from Berlin's Lindenstrasse Synagogue which was located in the centre of Berlin's textile district. It was a bitter-sweet gesture from a doomed community and when the packing case arrived in Melbourne it was discovered that inside were four Torah scrolls.

Mrs Vera Silberberg wrote to London on behalf of her husband, giving Lily Montagu an enthusiastic report on the rabbi's first year in Melbourne.

We are more than fortunate in having a man of the fine leadership, ideals and force of character of Dr Saenger.

His scholarship is quite beyond the ordinary. He has introduced beautiful music and prayers into our Services and he has organised a choir. His sermons and lectures are always an intellectual treat. He is a dynamic personality in Melbourne ... He is especially keen in his work for the younger groups ... Gradually the mistakes, inevitable in a young movement, are being lived down. There is still much to do and much to work for.⁶³

The question of assimilation and conversion to Judaism pre-occupied the leadership of the Melbourne Jewry who were faced with a community in decline. The emergence of a new congregation, which did not recognise the need to adhere to the hegemony of the Orthodox Chief Rabbi in London, deeply disturbed the community's Victorian Jewish Advisory Board. Surprisingly, the 'Beth Israel Congregation' had been permitted to join this gathering of congregational presidents without any great drama and the Advisory Board proceeded, following a series of meetings, to try to obtain a 'gentleman's agreement' from the Liberals that the status quo would be maintained. (The status quo meant that conversion to Judaism was virtually impossible.) Beth Israel's Board was clearly out of its depth and was unable to respond either formally or informally. On 9 February 1937 the congregational board, with Sanger in attendance, resolved to send letters to the Jewish press in Melbourne and in Sydney 'denying the rumours that the Beth Israel Synagogue had converted [to Judaism] a Chinese woman'. Wild rumours circulated that dozens of hopeful applicants were besieging the new rabbi and Trevor Rapke, the young Honorary Secretary of the Advisory Board and a devoted disciple of Rabbi Danglow, wrote:

There has been no official correspondence in this matter, as it was felt better to clear the way as far as possible before any formal steps were taken. At a meeting of the Board held on the 18th inst. it was decided that the time was now opportune to take such steps.

I am to say that this Board is sincere in its desire to find some way to deal with this thorny problem, which will meet the proper requirements of your congregation, and enable it to work in complete harmony with the other congregations.

Further, it recognises the sincerity of your congregation also in its attempt to meet the wishes of the large majority of the Jewish community in a matter which can never be a purely domestic one.

Having politely offered an olive branch, Rapke then firmly suggested surrender!

No single congregation shall consider any application for admission into the pale of Judaism; but all such applications shall be dealt with by a body representing the community such as the Victorian Jewish Advisory Board or some sub-committee appointed by the Advisory Board upon which shall sit the chief ministers of the congregations represented ... That in the event of the Board deciding to recommend the admission of an applicant, the matter shall then be referred to the Melbourne Beth Din and the admission shall be carried out according to the laws and rites of traditional Judaism ... the Beth Din is the only method which would be agreeable to all sections of the community ... my Board believes that your congregation as the youngest and smallest constituent member of this Board will agree to fall in with the suggestions which represent the considered opinion of the overwhelming majority of Jews in this State.⁶⁴

The 'youngest and smallest' congregation decided to adopt the Australian Orthodox community's usual method of dealing with difficult questions by asking London for advice. In this case, Lily Montagu replied promptly on behalf of the Governing Body of the World Union citing the written opinion signed by three distinguished rabbis – Professor Dr Ismar Elbogen, Rabbi Dr Seligmann and Rabbi Dr Israel Mattuck.

Dear Dr Saenger,

The Governing Body (of the World Union) ... cannot approve of a plan which would force all proselytes to accept Orthodox teaching and methods of initiation, even though we have every sympathy with the desire expressed in the Board's letter of April 21st to work for the harmony of the whole Jewish community. This would mean a departure

from, or violation of, the Progressive Jewish standpoint in the matter. We hold that you should be altogether opposed to agreeing with the plan of forcing proselytes to accept orthodox teaching or methods of initiation even though we have every sympathy with the orthodox section of the community in their desire as expressed in the Board's letter of April 21st to work for the harmony of the whole Jewish community in the State of Victoria ... We feel that the principle of freedom of conscience must always be maintained ... A matter, which in the ultimate analysis affects the individual's relation to his God, is hardly one to be decided by the majority vote of a Public Board. It can only be properly considered by the Rabbi while discharging his sacred duties.⁶⁵

For Herman Sanger the local communal manoeuvrings must have seemed insignificant in the light of the brutal events at home. He had been entrusted by his Jewish community to find places of refuge and, as soon as he could, he made contact with the Australian officials entrusted with immigration. We know that during those first long months there were moments of personal despair and isolation and the besieged, harassed Jewish community of Germany, and Berlin in particular, could never have been far from his thoughts. Week after week, as he stood behind the little reading desk on Friday night he felt his heart break.

Later in life he would look back and describe himself as a 'young rabbi that ... was terribly earnest and very serious.'⁶⁶ He knew he was needed in Berlin. He confessed that he had been tempted to board the ship that had brought him to Australia and return to Berlin as quickly as he could. He was sure he could find employment in America or in England; however, he hesitated to leave Melbourne because he understood that his precipitous departure would crush the congregation. He had been touched by the warm friendship and emotional support he had received and every additional day in Australia made an escape more difficult. He had very quickly discovered that among the leadership group were genuine idealists who had refused to give up in the face of great hostility from family and from lifelong friends. They too, in the very recent past, had been confronted with the question of whether the group should

continue or simply surrender to communal pressure. And now that they had a new rabbi whose approach to Jewish tradition had not been shaped by American 'classical' reform, the cultural dissonance had lessened.

The president of the Beth Israel Congregation was Dr Montefiore David Silberberg, who was known to his non-Jewish colleagues as 'Bill' and to his Jewish friends as 'Mon.' Sanger described his new president as 'a very quiet, polished English gentleman' who was blessed with 'gentle wisdom and kindly humour'. Born at Branhholme in 1882 in rural Victoria's Western District where his father had been the local mayor and publican, Silberberg had studied medicine in Melbourne, specialised in cardiology in London and brought to Australia the country's first electrocardiograph machine. He had served in Egypt during the first two years of the World War and was the inpatient physician at Melbourne's Royal Alfred Hospital. In 1938 he became a Foundation Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians and a member of its Council for the following six years. Nobody could dismiss the seriousness or calibre of a congregation with Dr Silberberg as its president.

Bert Nathan was, at the time, president of the Victorian Optical Association. His artistically gifted wife Florrie and her sister Winnie sang in the congregation's choir, and together with their older sister Maie (Cohen), the trio constituted a very important part of Beth Israel's life. Bert had grown up within a conventional anglo-Orthodox household and had become acutely aware that he had failed to transmit a meaningful form of Judaism to his children. He saw the new congregation as his last chance to maintain a Jewish life.

Hymie Wittner was the founder of a successful shoe retail company. His business acumen and loyal friendship proved to be invaluable as the congregation struggled to become financially viable. Sanger described Ernest Marks as a 'true merchant prince' and 'one of the most cultured and best read men' he had ever met. It was a slight exaggeration, but he was the Australian managing director of the clothing company Julius Kayser. In his youth Ernest had been an enthusiastic member of the socially elite West London [Reform] Synagogue of British Jews. He travelled frequently on business to the United States and England and each time brought back home a suitcase filled with Jewish books. In the

course of time he served as treasurer, vice president and president of the Temple and was unfailingly supportive. Sanger made friends with all four men.

A few days after the High Holydays of 1936 the rabbi's initial honeymoon period with the community came to its inevitable end. Mr Sholem Judah Slutzkin, president of the Orthodox St Kilda Hebrew Congregation, came to a Saturday service at the Parish Hall to check on the progress of the new rabbi.⁶⁷ Slutzkin had attended the congregational welcome in August and had been impressed. On the chosen morning there might have been twenty people at the service. He looked around and asked the young rabbi, 'Why not join our synagogue where you would have a good congregation and a satisfying life?'

Sanger vividly recalled his reply: 'Mr Slutzkin, it is only the beginning of my term here in Melbourne. Given time I'm sure I'll be able to increase my congregation quite a lot.' Unable to answer politely, Slutzkin stood there while he looked wordlessly at the empty chairs among the depressing surroundings and at the few faithful congregants and was convinced that he was speaking to an eloquent but impractical fool.

Bert Nathan told everyone that once the new rabbi had settled down the congregation would be able to build its own synagogue. Sanger was less optimistic but he kept his doubts to himself and deliberately began to choose sermon topics that he thought would challenge the community and therefore present a new way of adapting Jewish tradition. The form and structure of the service changed and became more recognisably Jewish. The congregational English hymns vanished and men wore their prayer shawls again. The congregation adopted the Central European custom of dressing the Torah Scrolls, pulpit cover and the Ark curtain in red during the festivals, blue for the Sabbath and white for the High Holydays. Candles shone from the reading desk at all Sabbath and Festival services as they had done in Europe.

Newcomers were welcomed and cared for while the problems of immigration kept Sanger busy. Australia was just emerging from the Great Depression and the fear that the arrival of foreigners would take jobs away from the average working man was exacerbated by anti-Semitism.⁶⁸ At first the congregation seemed to be only dimly aware of

the problem. At the approach of the High Holydays in 1936 the Board of Beth Israel had thrown discretion to the wind and offered a grand total of ten 'free' seats for the newly arrived migrants. Sanger's highest priority therefore was to give Melbourne Jewry a sense of responsibility for the plight of the new arrivals and he worked hard to make them feel welcome. It was an uncomfortable topic to discuss but in the course of the first year, within the congregation at least, the message was heard loud and clear. The Temple established fundraising committees for European Jewry, for Palestine and for their own synagogue. The rabbi began to feel slightly guilty because every time he spoke in public he seemed to be asking his audience to put their hands in their pockets. However, the general public reaction to this barrage of appeals was overwhelmingly positive. In April 1937 the honorary treasurer, Ernest Marks, told the congregation that they could confidently look forward to the building of their synagogue and, in honour of the approaching event, the *Australian Jewish News* changed its usual heading 'Beth Israel Synagogue' to 'Temple Beth Israel'.

Week after week, beginning in 1937, the *Australian Jewish News* published information about the Beth Israel Congregation. The newspaper had begun as a Yiddish language broadsheet but in 1937 began to publish a supplement in English put together by the deeply religious, but unorthodox, editor Emanuel ('Mannie') Oderberg who, unlike the editor of the well-established *Australian Jewish Herald*, was delighted to publicise information about the religious 'rebels'. On Sunday, 8 February 1937 Sanger spoke on 'The Jews of Germany: Their History and their Fate'. An audience of hundreds filled the temporary premises in Acland Street and 'all those who managed to squeeze into the hall were stirred by Dr Sanger's words and made up their minds to do their best to help the Jews of Germany'.⁶⁹

Sanger decided that in Australia he would not follow the European Jewish pattern and confine his rabbinical work to the Jewish community alone. He was determined and ready to be pro-active and to talk about Judaism to anybody who was prepared to listen. He knew that by the time he was active in the German rabbinate it had been too late to reach out to the German Christian leadership who, at best, had remained

silent in the face of National Socialism.⁷⁰ Sanger resolved to build a living relationship between Christian and Jew in Australia before the poison of Nazi propaganda took root. True to his childhood upbringing in a household where his father and grandfather had fostered friendships with his Christian colleagues, he visited the local Anglican and Catholic Archbishops. The Anglican Archbishop was polite, while Melbourne's fiery Catholic Archbishop Mannix was deeply moved by Sanger's story and remained a friend through the decades to come. Melbourne's leading Methodist clergyman was the Rev. Irving Benson who invited Sanger to occupy his pulpit at Melbourne's Wesley Church. Benson's 'Pleasant Sunday Afternoon' service was broadcast to a wide audience and the invitation was most welcome. In fact, it was the first time a rabbi had preached in an Australian church and he proposed that the time had come to establish a local Council of Christians and Jews. It should have been a sensible suggestion, however Protestant-Catholic rivalry overshadowed all religious endeavours in Australia and nothing could be done for a further forty years.⁷¹

Sanger began to speak at numerous Church social and literary organisations and Rotary Clubs. In March 1937 the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation said farewell to its 'Chief Minister', Rabbi Israel Brodie, who returned to England. With Brodie's departure Sanger lost an outspoken colleague who strongly supported Zionism and whose eloquence he admired; his sense of professional isolation deepened. Addressing Britain's decision to further restrict Jewish settlement in Palestine Sanger observed :

The proposed partition of Palestine means a postponement of the ultimate realisation of a long cherished dream of our people ... even the arid wastes and swamps had to be paid for with the pence of millions of the blue boxes of the Keren Kayemeth. The land was desolate, without trees, without tolerable soil. The modern Jew is not held by the rigorous observance of the ritual but has now an idea, a future within our past. In Germany, as early as 1933, had there not been this hope, this goal, the morale of the Jew would have collapsed.⁷²

Sanger deliberately set out to entice his own community into a wider world of Jewish consciousness and commitment. There were a host of relevant topics from the pulpit and at the Sunday night lecture series, which no Australian rabbi had ever tackled before. They ranged from 'The Jews of Poland' to 'Heine and Wassermann: Two German Poets, Two Jews, One Tragedy'. The Passover sermon was poetically named 'The Golden Chains of the Messiah' and it was announced that a 'new choir' would sing Louis Lewandowski's setting of the festival Hallel psalms. In honour of Anzac Day the rabbi spoke on 'The War to End War'. He imaginatively linked the national rejoicing at the Coronation of King George VI with 'The 500th Anniversary of Don Isaac Abravanel, servant of God and King'. In May he spoke about 'the Jews of the United States', recalling his three fruitless visits to find a temporary place of refuge for 1000 German Jewish boys. (At the time it was beyond anyone's wildest nightmare to imagine that German Jewish girls were also in peril.) In June he chose to speak about 'Chassidism and Jewish Revival', and in the course of time his topics became bolder and more provocative. In February 1938 he spoke on 'The Return of the Prodigal Son'.⁷³ His topic for April was 'An Australian Zionist Conference and the Problems of the Australian Jews',⁷⁴ while the Kadimah Younger Set in Carlton heard Sanger speak on 'Inside Information on Continental Jewry'.⁷⁵ The Sunday evening lecture for May 1938 was 'The Jews and Western Civilisation'⁷⁶ and in June he spoke on 'Judaism, Socialism and Democracy'.⁷⁷

The congregation's building fund grew and finally, on 11 July 1937, in brilliant sunshine beneath an array of Australian and British flags, Sir Isaac Isaacs, the first Australian-born Governor-General, who was also the son-in-law of the thwarted religious reformer Isaac Jacobs, formally laid the foundation stone of the long-awaited new synagogue. Speaking as though he was a neutral observer, Sir Isaac said: 'We are taking the first step in raising yet another shrine where the great Father of all mankind may be worshipped in dignified simplicity.' Flanked by the former Governor-General and Lady Isaacs on his right, and Ada Phillips on his left, Sanger responded by paying tribute to 'the noble example of your life ... a life of service rendered to this country and to the British Empire ... We Jews know that today love of religion is the duty of civilised man!'

The commencement of building was a formidable expression of trust in the young man who had set foot in Australia less than a year before the ceremony. The simple, utilitarian brick structure that originally seated 332 worshippers would take only four months to build. The architect apparently took the same plan and design that had already been used for a Christian Science Church in the suburb of Camberwell and applied it to the available land in Alma Road. At least the congregation now had a tangible address with a hall, a permanent Ark, a pulpit, a small lobby and space upstairs for an office. The Jewish press paid tribute to Sanger's 'wide culture' and noted, 'The formation of a Liberal congregation in Sydney is a tribute to Dr Sanger's enterprise. Then again, it would be wise not to go into the question of the origin of a rigid Orthodoxy.'⁷⁸ Following the dedication ceremony Sanger exuberantly wrote:

This is a moment of victory but one of true humility, not vanity. The History of Progressive Judaism begins now! The period of pioneering is over. It [Progressive Judaism] would fight for the traditional Jewish home Palestine. It would uphold the tradition of the Jewish race where we Jews in Australia enjoy such a unique freedom.⁷⁹

Ada Phillips was clearly not pleased to hear that her family's work was 'over' and that the new rabbi thought that the story of the congregation had begun 'now'. By the time Sanger arrived in Melbourne the family's matriarch was already seventy-six years old, and they had first met at the congregational reception at Harrison Hall. 'Rather formidable' was his lasting impression.⁸⁰ She was the head of a large, extended and unruly family whose roots could be traced back to the first generation of organised Jewish life in Australia and she was accustomed to deferential obedience. Both the rabbi and the congregation's founder were united by a deep respect for the determined spiritual leadership of the Hon. Lily Montagu in London and they both believed that only religious change could save the Australian Jewish community from disintegration, but whatever was done was not enough. To Sanger's dismay, following the laying of the foundation stone, Ada Phillips immediately wrote to Lily Montagu and complained that the new rabbi had ignored her 'position' in the congregation. It was certainly true that, apart from her place

at the front of the crowd, there had been no reference to her family's pioneering role in the ceremony.

The rabbi was obviously embarrassed and while he promised to pay her 'every honour and respect' in the future, he explained to Miss Montagu:

To be quite candid I am not surprised that Mrs Phillips lodged a complaint of this nature, as it has been my misfortune from the moment I took up my ministerial duties here that no matter how much respect was showered on Mrs Phillips and various members of her family, it was never considered quite enough ... one would have expected that the growth and development of the movement which they had founded would have been their pride and pleasure and certainly no cause for displeasure and dissatisfaction.

Time would eventually heal those wounds and there certainly were far more important issues on the horizon as the Nazis marched into Sudetenland and then annexed Austria. The *Australian Jewish News* reported that in Vienna alone 12,000 Jews had applied for Australian landing permits while New Zealand had stopped processing applications for Jewish emigrants.⁸¹ Faced with a heart-breaking international crisis, an intergovernmental conference was convened at Evian-les-Bains to discuss how to cope with thousands of displaced Austrian and German Jews. Australia was represented by the very unsympathetic Colonel T. W. White, who told the gathering:

Some Jewish refugees had been admitted to Australia but no more would be admitted because Australia was unwilling to import a racial problem.

... under the circumstances, Australia cannot do more, for it will be appreciated that in a young country man power from the source from which most of its citizens have sprung is preferred, while undue privileges cannot be given to one particular class of non-British subjects without injustice to others. It will no doubt be appreciated also that, as we have no real problem, we are not desirous of importing one by encouraging any scheme of larg-scale foreign migration.⁸²

Despite the coldness of his words, the Australian government instructed White to agree to the comparatively generous total of 15,000 entry permits, and it is estimated that half of those permits were issued before war broke out.⁸³ As the Minister of the Interior John ('Jack') McEwen of the Country Party explained grudgingly:

In arriving at the figure of 15,000 over a period of three years the Government has been influenced by the necessity that the existing standards of living should not be disturbed and for reconciling with the interests of refugees, the interests of Australia's present population, and of the people of British race who desire to establish themselves in Australia.⁸⁴

Sanger was convinced that his lobbying had helped produce this result. Whether this was true or not, Sanger returned from each Canberra visit encouraged and amazed by the friendliness of the public servants and the readiness of politicians of both sides of the political spectrum to meet with him.

Melbourne Jewry welcomed Dr Benzion Shein, an emissary from Palestine and following his 'stirring' speech Sanger was asked to move a vote of thanks to the guest. As usual, Sanger spoke 'eloquently' and optimistically stated, 'The Jewish problem was a world problem. It would be solved. Five and a half million people in Central Europe needed a home and presaged that Palestine would be that home for many of them.'⁸⁵

On the night of 8 November 1938 the Nazis set fire to hundreds of synagogues and thousands of businesses owned by Jews, and the pavements of Central Europe were covered with broken glass and sparkled like crystal. We have some notes of Sanger's anguished speech that must have been delivered in the Melbourne synagogue in the week that followed the havoc caused by Kristallnacht.

Gradually, during the last week, more reports have revealed the deep shock of pity felt around the civilised world and the disgust felt for those modern cannibals. Sometimes shock wears off but not in this case. The latest reports unfold a story that would have been believed to be impossible. In fact, the word 'impossible' should be struck out of our

dictionary. We learn of 146 Jews beaten to death in the Concentration Camp of Buchenwald. Old men trampled to death. Jewish property looted and a huge fine imposed on German Jewry. It is hard to refrain from a wild outburst of anger. Cemeteries desecrated, chapels destroyed. Synagogues have even been burnt down in newly acquired Sudetenland. German Jews are not even allowed to gather for private prayers while 35,000 Jews have been arrested. Jewish hospitals are without doctors. Patients have been turned out of hospitals and a Jewish children's home in Saaburg set on fire. And Goebbels dares to describe this as a nation's 'healthy instincts'.

In the presence of the Almighty we denounce this mob rule and bestiality all of which has been promulgated as the law of a whole people that not so long ago was to be counted as one of the leading forces of civilisation in Europe ... We appreciate all the sympathy that is being shown us, because it has restored our confidence in the ethical conscience of the world and because we believe that lasting peace, for which we all hope, cannot be based on oppression and injustice ... There is a solution to the Jewish problem in Central and Eastern Europe and that is a new (Jewish) State. It has been said: 'Out of every evil cometh good'. German Jewry may die and the fate and future of millions may soon be decided. Civilisation is the accumulated human effort of centuries and civilisation's fate can be decided within months and years.

Rabbi Jacob Sanger had died in Breslau on 23 June 1938, the day of his sixtieth birthday.⁸⁶ In retrospect, it was a merciful death. He was spared the pain of witnessing the destruction of his synagogue and his community. A thousand people were said to have attended the funeral of the rabbi, and Breslau's Jewish communal newspaper described him as 'the friend behind the lectern'. In the cemetery at Lohestrasse a colleague, who had once been his student, referred obliquely to the plight of those who stood at the graveside and attempted to console the beleaguered community.

One of his favourite characters was the pious and God-fearing Job, whom God led through the hardest trials, until, at the end of his life, he rewarded his steadfast faith and belief in God's final justice with every imaginable gift. I can still see Dr Sanger at the lectern, as he tried again and again, to convince us young people, who questioned and challenged these divine trials, that there was a divine purpose hidden behind them all. He himself had to suffer the trials of Job in his sickness until he was called to eternal life.

In Australia his grief-stricken son wrote to England that it was a 'grievous blow indeed for me to lose him so soon, the saddest part of it being the enormous distance separating me from my mother who is quite alone. My work has indeed been a very great help and comfort to me.'⁸⁷ With the help of guarantees signed by members of the congregational Board a permit was quickly arranged and a bereft, bewildered 59-year-old Mrs Hulda Sanger arrived in Melbourne on the British ship, the P & O steamer *Strathaird*, on 19 June 1939.⁸⁸ Unlike her husband, she had witnessed Kristallnacht and the wanton destruction of her synagogue, and she would spend the final ten years of her life attempting to cope with an alien world where her former status as 'Frau Rabbiner Dr Sanger' was of little or no consequence.⁸⁹ Her family would be scattered around the world. Her three brothers would find refuge in America. Her husband's nieces and nephews escaped to Palestine and one cousin would settle in Melbourne.

At the Annual General Meeting on 11 September 1938 the newly elected Board included Joseph Edward ('Ted') Nathan as Vice President. He had been born in Palmerston North, New Zealand, and became the representative of Glaxo Industries in Australia in the 1920s.⁹⁰ Ted was a small, dark, bespectacled, highly intelligent man with a dry, ironic sense of humour, which invariably baffled the serious young German-born rabbi. In 1923, at the age of nineteen, Winifred Eleanor Clements, the youngest of three sisters, had married her 34-year-old husband in Melbourne. She had been born in Folkestone, England, on 16 April 1904 to Robert George Clements, Pharmacist and Lodging House Keeper, and Hannah (nee Cohen).⁹¹ Both Ted and Bert had served overseas in the First World War and, although cousins, regarded each other as brothers.

Ted was in London when the First World War broke out and became an ambulance driver on the Italian Front where he suffered severe shrapnel wounds and subsequently lost the sight of one of his eyes.

Ted was to become a member of the Board of Management of Temple Beth Israel and served as its president. In doing so, he was following a family tradition, as both his father and grandfather had been president of New Zealand's Wellington Hebrew Congregation. Winnie and Ted Nathan became the parents of two young boys – Peter (b. 1927) and Robert (b. 1933). Ultimately, there can be no doubt that the fifteen-year difference in age between bride and groom, exacerbated by Ted Nathan's severe health battles with diabetes, eventually had a dramatic effect on the marriage.

By the end of the winter months of 1938, Sanger had moved from his boarding house accommodation on St Kilda Road to rented rooms at 670 Inkerman Road in Caulfield until he found sufficient space to house his library. He then rented a self-contained apartment in Matlock, a large Victorian mansion at 82 Dandenong Road.⁹² The rooms at the top of a grand staircase in a beautiful house and garden must have reminded him of the student accommodation in the Berg household in Berlin. He had decided to live, deliberately or fortuitously, a few hundred metres from the households of Ted and Winnie Nathan, who lived at 395 Alma Road, and Hymie and Dora Wittner on the other side of the street. His home at Matlock was really a library. Books and magazines filled every available space. It was a man's nest and the smell of cigars lay heavily over his clothes, his books and his desk. The Nathan household became his second home and his chosen family. Ted never lost his wholehearted admiration for his house guest, and, in time, Sanger's relationship with Winnie subtly changed from friendship to love. It was a protective relationship understood by his closest friends but, without a doubt, it cast a deep shadow and complicated his rabbinic role and his own links to the world beyond the family circle.

