

## CHAPTER EIGHT: AUSTRALIA

ZALMEN Komesaroff's efforts to establish himself in business in Australia led him into many and varied enterprises. During the period 1913 to 1915 he worked as a hawker, travelling around the country towns selling clothing. In 1916 he bought a fruit shop. The need to be up early the morning to attend the markets proved too strenuous for him, so he sold this business before the year was out and bought a drapery in Victoria Street, North Richmond. This proved to be the beginning of a thriving business which expanded by 1918 to include a chain of shops in the Victorian country towns of Shepparton, Charlton, Yarram, Kerang, St. Arnaud, Hamilton, Ararat, Mildura, Terang, Traralgon and Ballarat. These shops were operated by a partnership known as 'Komesaroff Brothers'. Initially ZALMEN took into the business his brothers-in-law ALTER, PINKHAS and LOUIS. They were later joined by his brother YAAKOV-LEIB. Then YAAKOV-LEIB went into his own business soon after his return from Russia in 1922 together with his brother-in-law ESAK Sherr, who had taken over ZALMEN's shop in Ballarat.

As time went by, the remaining partners in 'Komesaroff Brothers' launched out on their own. ALTER opened his own shops. PINKHAS and LOUIS gave up the clothing trade altogether and became optometrists. PINKHAS opened a practice in Melbourne and LOUIS in the country town of Bairnsdale where he lived for some years before returning to Melbourne.

For BEILA-REEVA and her family the first few years after their arrival were difficult ones. Their relatives who had been in Melbourne for some years did their best to assist them. Both ZALMEN and YAAKOV-LEIB were able to find jobs for their brothers.

Until such time as the new arrivals learned English their language difficulties often resulted in amusing situations, although they would have been considered far from amusing at the time. On one occasion, KHAIM-VELVEL was trying to catch a tram to get home from the city. He walked along the street until he saw a sign which he thought indicated a tram stop. But in his confusion he read the English characters as Russian ones, a common mistake amongst the new arrivals. He believed that the sign said: "Pasta na vils", meaning that the tram stopped there; whereas it said "Post No Bills". Oblivious to his error, KHAIM-VELVEL stood waiting for a tram. Needless to say the first tram to arrive did not stop, nor did the second, nor any succeeding tram. KHAIM-VELVEL was frantic. He could not understand why these trams apparently did not want him as a passenger. No matter how much he waved they would not stop. As time passed he feared that he would never get home. So he began walking, and as he walked, the tears poured down his face as he silently cursed the trams and regretted the day he had set foot in this harsh land where even the trams were a source of misery to small boys.

In 1924 the new arrivals moved to Ballarat, a country town about eighty miles from Melbourne. Here YAAKOV-LEIB and ESAK had shops, and were able to find jobs for PINKHAS and KHAIM-VELVEL.

In 1927, BEILA-REEVA returned with her family to Melbourne, settling in the suburb of St. Kilda. Her main concern in life was her family. She was particularly interested in seeing her remaining single daughters, BESSIE and LOTTIE (ZLATR) married. BESSIE married NATHAN Rosenbaum and they settled in the country town of Geelong where they had MAX, SHIRLEY and SYDNEY. LOTTIE married BRAHAM Allen and they had one daughter, SHIRLEY.

In 1935, on the 4th of Iyar, BEILA-REEVA died. During the last years of her life she had spent her time devoted to her children and grandchildren. She was very fond of her grandchildren who held her in some awe and referred to her as 'The Babushka' (grandmother). She was the unchallengeable matriarch of the family. Whenever her relatives came to visit her she would be found absorbed in one or other of her collection of Hebrew and Yiddish books. Many happy hours were spent in discussions of religious law and custom with her children who regarded her as an authority on such matters. BEILA-REEVA was also accomplished with her hands and produced delicate crochet and embroidery.

She was a strong woman until a series of strokes weakened her.

During her last days she was cared for by her son-in-law ESAK Sherr whose family lived with her. Such was his devotion that when she was unable to walk he actually carried her around. She called him her 'Itsale'.

BELLA-REEVA was well known throughout the Jewish community in Melbourne. She supported a great many local charities but was more particularly interested in charities in the Land of Israel. In a tribute to her, Rabbi Israel Brodie, later Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, said at the funeral (as quoted in an obituary published in the local Jewish press): "She was a woman devoted to the orthodox traditions of Judaism and she would be sorely missed by the community and her family, to whom she proved herself so kind and loving."

The Economic Depression hit ZALMEN's business early in the 1930's. Gradually shop after shop had to be closed. He opened a new venture, clothing manufacture to help keep his shops running. To start with he opened a small factory behind the Malvern shop. Then the remaining shops failed and had to be closed with the exception of Shepparton. This, together with a new factory in South Melbourne enabled him to survive the Depression.

About 1933, ZALMEN opened a knitting mill trading as 'Klinker Knitting Mills'. This flourished and he sold his last remaining shop in Shepparton to help finance the mill. However, by 1936 the Klinker began to falter and eventually became insolvent. It was after this that ZALMEN opened a door-to-door time-payment business called 'The Major Distributors' which was a thriving business for him for the next twenty years.

ZALMEN and KHANA-REIZEL's prime concern was the welfare of their family and in particular their education. All of their children were educated at leading private schools and were encouraged to pursue academic careers. Their daughter TESSIE studied Pharmacy. She married JOHN RONALD Freedman on August 10th, 1937. Born in 1910 in London, JOHN emigrated with his parents in 1921. Following a Public School education, he graduated from Melbourne University with a degree in Agricultural Science. He was employed by the Victorian State Laboratories in various research programs. Following the birth of their elder son MENAKHEM-MENDEL (NEVILLE) on October 30th, 1939, TESSIE and JOHN spent several periods living in the country towns of Kerang and Shepparton. This was necessitated by JOHN's research into the quality of soil in these fruit-growing regions. In 1940 he completed a thesis on soil salinity to obtain a Masters Degree. Their stay in Shepparton was particularly memorable since there was a small Jewish community there engaged in the fruit industry.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, JOHN was engaged as a food technologist by the Commonwealth Food Control Authority. He was involved in research concerning food canning techniques, in particular for military rations. To this end he was associated with American army authorities responsible for this project.

Following the war, JOHN was employed by the Victorian Department of Agriculture until 1949. He then left the scientific field in order to assist his father-in-law ZALMEN in operating his business since the latter's health would not permit him to continue alone. On December 13th, 1947, TESSIE and JOHN's younger son KHAIM-KOPPEL (KEITH) was born.

MYER, ZALMEN and KHANA-REIZEL's eldest son, graduated in medicine in 1936. Because he felt that the bearing of a foreign surname would hamper his career, he changed his name to 'Kaye'. ZALMEN followed suit, not wanting his children to bear different surnames. In 1938 MYER left Melbourne to pursue post-graduate studies in London. There he married LENNOX Spalding and had JENNIFER and JOHN. In 1946 MYER and his family returned to Melbourne having been awarded a Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons. He had gained considerable experience in leading hospitals in London during the war, two of which were damaged during air-raids whilst he was in the midst of operations. MYER became one of Melbourne's most prominent specialists in the field of Urology until his death in 1975.

PINKHAS (PETER), ZALMEN and KHANA-REIZEL's second son also graduated in medicine. In his youth PETER had served in the Scotch College Cadet Corps and artillery from the age of fourteen. At the university he was a member of the Melbourne University Rifles and was commissioned as an infantry lieutenant. Before attending university he had wanted to pursue a career as a professional soldier, despite the wishes of his parents. He applied for entrance to the Royal Military Academy of Duntroon but was rejected. Only later did he find out that the reason was that Jews were not accepted at the time.

In 1939, following the outbreak of war, PETER enlisted in the 9th Division, 2/32nd Battalion, attached to the Army Medical Corps with the rank of Captain. He saw action in the Middle East, in various battles in the Levant, in Palestine, and in North Africa, including the battle of Al Alamain. In 1943 his division was recalled to Australia to undergo special training for jungle warfare before being sent to New Guinea. He took part in the capture of Lae and the drive up the west coast of New Guinea. A history of the war records his involvement: During the Japanese counter attack on Pabu on the Huon Peninsula, 'A' company 2/32nd Battalion came under heavy mortar shelling from Pino Hill, sustaining nineteen casualties. Two stretcher-bearers were killed and it was difficult to bring out the wounded. When it became too dark to move the last three, 'Captain Peter Kaye, Battalion Medical Officer, came down a rough and slippery track and did what he could in pitch blackness to alleviate the suffering of the wounded, crawling around with a morphine syringe, guided only by the sounds of the wounded.'

In 1944 PETER married MOURA Belkin and they had MELANIE and WENDY. In 1945 he was promoted to the rank of Major and became Medical Staff Officer stationed at Port Moresby until the end of the war. After the war he rejoined the Citizens' Military Forces (CMF) and held various postings. He remained on the army active list and held staff positions in Southern Command Medical Corp, as well as carrying on his private medical practice as a general practitioner.

In May 1965, PETER Kaye was honoured by the Queen in her birthday honours with the decoration of Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in recognition of his valuable years of service to the Australian Army. PETER held the rank of Colonel and was Assistant Director of Medical Services. He was Senior Medical Officer in charge of CMF medical, nursing and psychology units. In the previous year he was responsible for the planning and erection of a special army medical building in Healesville.

ZALMEN and KHANA-REIZEL's youngest son VELVEL (WILLIAM), who like his brothers attended Scotch College, graduated from Melbourne University in Law. During the War he interrupted his course to enlist in the Navy, attaining the rank of Sub-Lieutenant. He served in the Pacific theatre as an anti-submarine officer in corvettes. He married HENRIETTA Ellinson and they had DIANA, ANDREW, STEVEN and JOHN.

WILLIAM pursued a brilliant career as a barrister following his admission to the bar in 1946. He was noted as one of Victoria's leading trial lawyers and was involved in many famous cases. In 1962 he was appointed a Queens Counsel. He was the board of inquiry into allegations of corruption in the police force in 1970. He appeared as counsel in the third party insurance royal commission, the West Gate bridge royal commission and the 'Western Spruce' marine board inquiry. He was chairman of the Victorian Bar Council, chairman of the Australian Bar Association and executive member of the Law Council of Australia. In 1972 WILLIAM Kaye was appointed a judge of the Victorian Supreme Court, the first Jew to be appointed to this position. In addition to his legal career, he was active in the Jewish community in various capacities in particular of a fund-raising nature, both for local and Israeli causes.

In 1955 KHANA-REIZEL contracted a malignancy early in the year. For six months she suffered until her death on the 5th of Sivan. Her husband ZALMEN was grief-stricken by this sudden tragedy. He and KHANA-REIZEL had been devoted to each other from the time that they had been children and he could not imagine having to spend the rest of his life without her. Their home in Kew, Rozalia, in which they had spent thirty-four happy years, and which was full of memories of many parties and family occasions, was sold as ZALMEN could not bear to live in it

without KHANA-REIZEL to share these memories. His daughter TESSIE also sold her home and they moved to a different suburb, Caulfield in order to create a new life. However this was not to be. ZALMEN simply could not keep his mind off his grief. He took no interest in life. His continual fretting eventually resulted in a stroke, four months after KHANA-REIZEL's death.

For two and a half years ZALMEN merely existed, rarely taking any interest in what was going on around him. He had his ups and downs physically; for a while he seemed to be improving and there was hope that he might recover. But then he would get worse again. For a while he lived with TESSIE, but as his condition deteriorated he had to be hospitalised. Again he seemed to improve and so was taken out of hospital and sent to the Warburton Sanatorium to convalesce. Once again he seemed to take an interest in life, especially when his family visited. He became very attached to his radio, and enjoyed listening to broadcasts of parliament.

However his interest in life could not be maintained. In 1958 he worsened, was rehospitalised and passed away on the 18th of Nisan.

It is surprising how history repeats itself. There seemed to be a strong devotion between husband and wife in the Komesaroff family. There are numerous examples of how, when one partner died, the other could not go on living without their life's partner. This was seen in the cases of MEIR and TYBEL Komesaroff, DINA and AVROM-HILLEL Namakshansky, ESTHER and KHAIM-MOSHE Luban, and now it had happened again with ZALMEN and KHANA-REIZEL.

The loss of ZALMEN and KHANA-REIZEL was felt strongly by all their family and friends. They were both well known in the Jewish community in Melbourne as a result of their work for a variety of organisations. Both were ardent Zionists and a number of visiting overseas emissaries stayed with them at 'Rozalia'. They were active in the Jewish Day School movement and held many functions to support the co-educational day school Mount Scopus College which they had fought to establish. ZALMEN was a Life-Governor of the College. They were always ready to support any worthwhile charity. KHANA-REIZEL was a member of the National Council of Jewish Women and ZALMEN was a member of various organisations. In his early years in Australia he had been connected with the Boards of Management of the Carlton and East Melbourne synagogues, and later with the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation of which he was an honoured member for over twenty years. Throughout the garment industry in Melbourne, the name and reputation of ZALMEN Kaye (Komesaroff) was a highly respected one which was remembered for many years after his death.

By far the greatest loss was felt by their family. Because ZALMEN and KHANA-REIZEL were the oldest in their families, they were held in great respect by their brothers and sisters. When the family came to Australia, ZALMEN was considered the head of the family because of the absence of their parents. He was always on hand to give his advice and help. Nothing was ever too much for ZALMEN and KHANA-REIZEL to do for their family. ZALMEN made sure that his brothers and brother-in-law were set up in business, even at the expense of his own financial security. He felt that it was his duty to look after the welfare of his and KHANA-REIZEL's brothers and sisters until they could stand on their own feet.

ZALMEN and KHANA-REIZEL were never happier than when they were surrounded by their family. 'Rozalia' was constantly filled with relatives visiting and enjoying themselves. In some cases, the grandchildren spent more time there than at their own homes. KHANA-REIZEL was a marvellous cook and was constantly to be found in her famous kitchen preparing the favourite dishes of one or other of her family.

The happiest times of the year were the Yom Tovim when ZALMEN and KHANA-REIZEL were to be found in Shule surrounded by their family who would join them at Kiddush at 'Rozalia'. On religious matters ZALMEN was an unchallengable authority for his family. Particularly on Pesach at the Seder, he would capture the interest of all the company by his explanations of the rituals and his anecdotes. By his obvious love of Yiddishkeit, he inspired a love for it in others.

The memories of many precious experiences at 'Rozalia' and the happy times spent with ZALMEN and KHANA-REIZEL will be treasured by all who knew them.

After the death of ZALMEN, his son-in-law JOHN took over the management of the business. After several years JOHN decided to return to the scientific field and began teaching biology at a secondary level in the early 1960's. This he continued until his retirement in 1981.

TESSIE and JOHN's elder son NEVILLE was one of the original students at Mount Scopus College. He matriculated in 1958, having been Dux in his two final years. He graduated in Commerce and opened a private practice as an accountant. NEVILLE was involved actively in communal affairs, having been responsible for the foundation of Mount Scopus Old Collegians Association of which he was first president. He was also the first old-collegian to be appointed to the Board of Governors of the college.

In 1952 YAAKOV-LEIB died. He had led a difficult life. When he arrived in Australia it took him some time until he was able to make a decent living. As a result of this early hardship he became a communist, one of the early members of the party in Victoria. For some reason he changed his surname to Mendelson. YAAKOV-LEIB was a man of changeable moods and beliefs. In his early years in Australia he had been fanatically religious, so much so that he used to stand in a corner of the room, wrapped in Tallit and Tefillin, beating his head against the wall. Then a few weeks later when his brothers visited him they would be surprised to see that he had thrown everything aside and declared that he did not believe in anything. Yet again, in a few weeks he had changed his mind again and when his relatives visited him they would find him back against the wall with Tallit and Tefillin. Nobody ever knew in what mood they would find YAAKOV-LEIB when they next visited him. His erratic beliefs defied explanation.

Because of a lack of formal education, YAAKOV-LEIB strove constantly to better himself. He read whenever he had the chance, anything ranging from geography books and the Darwin theory in Yiddish, to Karl Marx. He had an extensive library including many rare Yiddish books and would often lend his brothers books to read. It used to greatly upset him if they were not interested. He could not understand anyone sitting doing nothing; he felt that everyone should read constantly to broaden their education. For this reason, in the early years in Australia, when he and KHAIM-VELVEL were travelling on business in the country, he would sit reading in the truck and after the evening meal he would settle down and be engrossed in a book far into the night.

Whenever his relatives came to visit him, he would engage them in lengthy discussions involving politics or philosophy. After his embracing of communism, one of his favourite expressions whenever he saw something which did not meet his approval in society, he would say: "Under a Socialist system, this would not happen". He became such a fanatical communist that he had a 'Hammer and Sickle' inlaid into the concrete on his front porch.

YAAKOV-LEIB seemed to be searching for something. What it was is hard to really know. He tried everything, religion, communism and capitalism and found them all lacking. Towards the end of his life he was asked by the leader of the Communist Party in Melbourne whether he still considered himself a Jew. His spontaneous reply was "Of course." Not long after this he was expelled from the party because he was too much of a capitalist; he was making quite a comfortable living out of a number of shops.

Now he had nothing. He had given up religion and communism had given him up. He had spent his entire life in an endless search. He finally died of a heart attack.

Despite his eccentricities, YAAKOV-LEIB was a very likeable man. Most of his family treated his foibles lightly, brushing them off as almost humorous. Many stories are told of incidents which happened to him. One such incident happened not long after he arrived in Australia. Unable to speak a word of English, he set off one day to find somewhere to have a shave. Suddenly he caught sight of a sign on a building which appeared to him to announce 'Berd Rezid', the Russian for 'Shave'. It did not occur to him to wonder how it was that a Russian sign would appear in Australia. He opened the door of the house, marched into the front room, sat down and demanded

a shave in Russian. The tenants of the house were amazed at this madman, bursting into their living-room and apparently swearing at them in a foreign language. They told him to get out, but naturally he could not understand them. Instead he demanded even more emphatically to be shaved. This was more than the tenants were prepared to take. The men picked YAAKOV-LEIB up and threw him bodily into the street. Furious that he should have been treated in such an undignified manner, YAAKOV-LEIB rushed off to his brother ZALMEN loudly complaining of the hooligans living in this barbaric country. ZALMEN tried to pacify him and eventually they went back to the house where ZALMEN was able to explain that the sign advertised 'Board and Residence' and not 'Berd Resid'.

YAAKOV-LEIB maintained an extensive correspondence with various cousins overseas. On one occasion his accountant complained to him that he had sent a letter in a foreign language to him. On checking, YAAKOV-LEIB found that he had sent his accountant a letter in Yiddish destined for his cousin BEREL Komisaruk of New York, and to BEREL he had sent his accountants payment.

YAAKOV-LEIB was a renowned poor driver. He had absolutely no sense of direction. When he was supposed to visit ZALMEN he would often not turn up for hours. When ZALMEN questioned him as to what had happened, he explained how he had got lost. He had set out from his house to go to ZALMEN's house a few miles away. Somehow he had managed to lose his way even over this short distance. But this time he had set a record. Instead of stopping to consult a map he had continued driving, confident that he knew where he was going. At last, after several hours he thought he had arrived. But instead of being in Kew he had arrived in Geelong, some fifty miles away.

YAAKOV-LEIB was somewhat of a scatterbrain. Whenever he had to visit his brother ZALMEN he would arrive late. ZALMEN once asked YAAKOV-LEIB's wife BESSIE for an explanation. She replied: "Your meshuganer brother has to go by way of Graftskoy before he can find his directions to your place". Even after he had left Carlton, the suburb he first lived in, he would drive in that direction in order to get his bearings.

Despite his shortcomings, YAAKOV-LEIB (or YANKEL-LEIB as he was called) will always hold a place of affection in the memories of those who knew him. He was survived by his son NORMAN, a doctor and daughter MINNIE, married to SOLOMON Fisher.

YOKHVED Sherr passed away in 1937. She had always suffered from poor health and during the last years of her life had developed a weak heart. YOKHVED's death was certainly an untimely one. She had been loved and respected by all her family because of her friendly disposition and keen sense of humour. Her death at the early age of forty-four left her two orphaned children, MENDEL-BENYOMIN (BENNIE) who married MIRIAM Friedman and LEAH (LILY) who married SOLOMON Chester.

ZLATR (LOTTIE) died in 1950. She had given birth to a number of children who had not survived long after birth. One daughter, SHIRLEY survived, but LOTTIE was never well again and eventually died of a heart attack.

PINKHAS (PETER) Komésarook ( as he spelled the surname) married BECKY Steinberg and they had MINNIE, BENJAMIN and SAMUEL. PINKHAS who made a living in the time-payment drapery business, passed away in 1975.

The youngest brother KHAIM-VELVEL (WILLIAM) married MARGUERITE Grant and they had BEVERLEY, MICHAEL and DAVID. WILLIAM operated a successful drapery business as well as an investment company 'Mendel Investments' until his retirement. He was greatly involved in communal affairs being a founder of the Caulfield Hebrew Congregation, of which he was a Life Governor.

Of KHANA-REIZEL's brothers, ALTER passed away in 1950 following a heart attack. He had made a living as a draper. Active in communal affairs he had been president of the Carlton Hebrew Congregation. He married RACHEL Cohen and they had MEIR (who died as a baby), MOSHE (MAURICE), TYBEL (TESS) who married MYER Green, NORMAN, DAVID

and MYER.

TSIPORA who had married DAVID Zmood and was subsequently divorced, had TYBEL, MYER and MOSSIE. TSIPORA passed away in 1972.

PINKHAS (PETER) was the most active of the family in communal affairs. He was widely known and highly respected throughout the community. His involvement commenced soon after his return to Australia after being demobilised from the army after the First World War. He joined two organisations, 'Kadimah' and 'Hatchiah' as well as being an active member of the Australian Exservicemens Association. He held strong political beliefs, being involved with the Australian Labour Party throughout his life. During World War Two he was one of the initiators of the 'Jewish War Effort Circle' which worked for the Red Cross and in particular for Jewish servicemen. After the war he was associated with fund raising for the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital. Following the realisation of the fate of European Jewry, he became active in the Welfare Society which helped support the wave of refugees arriving in Australia.

But it was the field of Jewish education which particularly attracted PETER Komesaroff. A staunch supporter of Mount Scopus College, he worked tirelessly to provide facilities for the school.

It was Israeli causes which saw his greatest dedication, in particular the Magen David Adom with which his name was virtually synonymous. Likewise the United Israel Appeal, Melbourne Jewish Philanthropic Association, WIZO, NCJW, and Montefiore Homes all benefited from his organisational skill and participation. In a tribute following his death, a leader of the community wrote in the obituary: "He was one of the most conscientious communal workers whose influence was exercised in many directions and whose advice and participation was eagerly sought by the builders of Melbourne's Jewish communal life. He was a vital force in Jewish life in Melbourne and his memory will be honoured by all who had the privilege of working with him and by the community whose life was enriched by his leadership and efforts."

PETER married SARAH Isaacman and they had TYBEL (THELMA) married to LESLIE Webberly, MIRIAM married to ROBERT Mantel, and JUDITH married to BEN Same.

The youngest brother YEHUDA-LEIB (LOUIS) was likewise active in communal affairs. He was associated with the Australian Labour Party from the days he lived in Bairndale, when he was president of the local branch. At the same time he worked for the Jewish National Fund and was involved with Magen David Adom and the Friends of the Hebrew University. He married FANNY Fineberg and they had MAX, TYBEL (TESSA) married to JOHN Silverberg, and RUTH married to GEORGE

The youngest sister KHAYALAH had not been in contact with her brothers and sisters since the Second World War. Her activities are described in a later chapter concerning those of the family living in the Soviet Union.