

Jewish photographer captures early NZ life

by Michael Clements

The February 1994 issue of the *Chronicle* carried an article about the remarkable find Dr Stephen Levine made in the process of researching "A Standard for the People" (see details of the launch of this book on p. 31).

He found a 1907 "address" presented to Rabbi Herman van Staveren by Mr Joseph Zachariah which had remained hidden behind a cabinet in the room at the rear of the Ark in the Wellington Beth El synagogue.

After this handwritten decorated article was restored to its former glory by the National Library Archive Section, I resolved to find out more about Joseph Zachariah, the man who wrote the illuminated address.

His father was the Reverend Isaac Zachariah who was a popular minister and Shochet to the Jewish community at Hokitika from 1866 to 1870. According to Goldman's "The History of the Jews in New Zealand", Isaac served the Sassoon family in Bombay before coming to New Zealand via the Victorian miner's community of Ballarat.

His English language skills were not so good, but his knowledge of oriental languages proved useful as he often acted as interpreter to the courts.

The town of Hokitika had possibly about 50,000 persons at its peak, but in the 1870's the numbers diminished due to the reduction in the amount of gold found there. After four years of service the Hebrew congregation could no longer afford to pay their minister and Zachariah left for Christchurch. While he was still prepared to travel back for any special religious ceremony, the Shul closed its doors soon after he left.

Isaac was the father of Miriam, Sophia, Adolphus (Dolf), Alfred and Joseph, who was born in Hokitika in 1867.

In 1881 when the Christchurch Boys' High School opened Joseph Zachariah was one of the founding 82 boys and four masters. One subject which brought Joseph top marks practically all the way through school was calligraphy.

On the strength of this, his first job was a five year engraving apprenticeship with A. W. Jones, a Christchurch jeweller.

In the fourth year of his apprenticeship his father Isaac resigned from the Synagogue due to ill-health and took Joseph back to the West Coast with him. He died in 1906. His death was a sad loss to the Canterbury Hebrew Congregation.

When her husband died, Joseph's mother took her daughters and one of her sons to New York where they set up a dress designing firm which became one of the leaders in that line in the United States.

Joe stayed on in Greymouth, continuing with jewellery engraving, producing elegant illuminated addresses for a number of organisations as well as running a pawn broking business.

Joe was also a keen cyclist, a member of the Greymouth Bicycle Club, entering into races and serving on the committee as Hon. Secretary and Treasurer in 1891.

Joe also participated in a smoke concert on the 9th October 1890 (a portent of things to come for Wellington?)

Joe's business premises were destroyed in a 'disastrous' fire in Boundary street, and this may have prompted his shift to Wellington, where he continued with his cycling involvement, serving as a Chairman for the Premier Cycling and Touring Club.

Joseph Zachariah was also keenly interested in performing on stage and had a fine voice. *The Grey River Argus* dated March 1890 describes that at the Greymouth State School Concert, Mr Zachariah gave that 'always amusing piece "Clarence's Dream"'. He continued this interest in Wellington in the 'clever band of amateurs known as *The Alabama Coons*' in Exchange Hall with his brother Dolph and Charlie Zachariah (a cousin?). This group was a great success, and the Coons must have performed for several years as another programme is dated 1900.

Zak continued his money lending business in Wellington until 1905 when he added a photographic agency to his range of business interests.

According to William Main of the New Zealand Centre for Photography (Wellington), it was about this period Joe discovered he could sell more cameras if he displayed a photograph that had been taken by it, alongside in his shop window. From Willis Street,



Left: Illuminated address that sparked research into Joseph Zachariah's life

Right: Photo of Chairman J. Zachariah in the Wellington Jewish Community Centre

he moved his business to Manners Street where he set up a regular photographers studio.

As well as selling cameras he catered for lower cost portraits. Before long he had a staff of half a dozen photographers doing the rounds of football matches and other public events. The results were usually on view in his shop that same evening.

What Zak himself enjoyed most was getting out and photographing groups of people in a whole variety of activities. A number of his early photographs are reproduced in two publications *Wellington Through a Victorian Lens* by William Main (1972) and *New Zealand Photography from the 1840's to the Present* by William Main and John B. Turner (1993).

Joe's non business involvements also included the Jewish community.

An inaugural meeting was held on Sunday June 7th 1903 for the purpose of forming a Jewish men's club. Mr Willie Harris's room in Cuba Street,

Wellington was secured for one month, and then the organisation shifted to Empire Chambers, in Willis Street. After about a year, quarters were secured above Mr Perry's tobacconist shop in Manners Street but soon a further shift was made to Brailsfords in Courtenay Place.

Yet again in 1906 to premises in Lower Cuba Street, and finally to Brunner Buildings Lower Cuba Street where the club remained until 1921. The new premises marked a notable advance in the facilities and amenities accorded to members, and at a general meeting held on August 12th (1906) the club placed on record in its first minute book "its appreciation of the untiring efforts of Messrs J. Zachariah, S. Gordon and S. Sigall in securing the commodious club rooms in Lower Cuba Street."

Obviously an enthusiastic member, Joe delighted in organising many smoke concerts, musical evenings where he performed in the *Yiddische Band*, debates and the like. He was



Left: The Yiddische Band

Right: The Wellington Jewish Club's 1914 Picnic



President of the Wellington Jewish Social Club from 1905, up to and during the opening of the (then) new club premises on 1st May 1921 in Ghuznee Street. He had also been the Chairman and Manager of the Building Committee and worked unceasingly until the opening day.

It is pleasing to note that the Wellington Jewish Community Centre has to this day, a photograph of the Jewish Social Club Executive 1920-21 displayed on its wall with the photo of



Chairman J. Zachariah in the centre.

It was around 1907 that "Zak's Studios" started producing postcards, which are avidly collected today. It seems as though he issued small editions to be sold to those persons featured in his crowd scenes. This way of doing business was different from the general "Street photographer", as by getting as many persons as possible into his shots, Zak had the potential to sell many more photographs. Mr Main explains in an article (for the Postcard collectors magazine) that a considerable number of Josephs postcards turn up with a number of 'x' marks, indicating the persons were featured on the photo and therefore this was an indication that they may like to purchase one for themselves.

Mr Main also poses the question of how much Zachariah charged for his postcards, and suggests that if we interpret his "Zak" trademark as a possible clue we might be led to believe he charged sixpence - "a zak"

was a slang expression for a sixpenny coin.

Zak's last postcard appeared about 1915 and it is probable that up to that date he produced somewhere in the region of 20,000 cards. Unfortunately few of his postcards seem to have survived from so many.

Towards the end of World War I Mr Zachariah decided to join his mother, brother and sister in New York, but by the time he had sold his business and made other arrangements the United States had reduced immigration to such an extent that he found himself a long way down a very long queue.

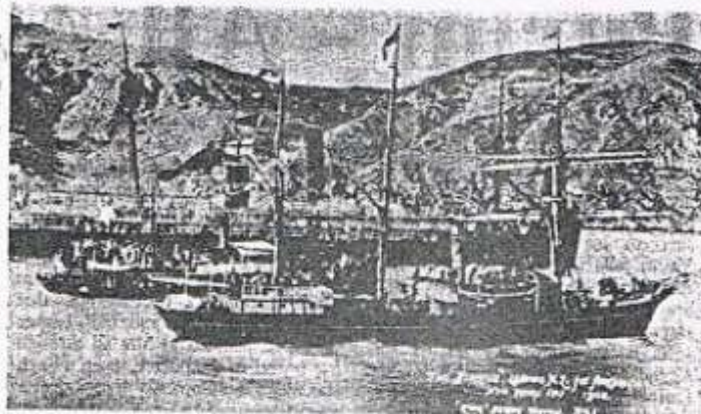
To pass the time waiting he joined the Australian Provincial Assurance Association in a temporary position, but stayed for 25 years! Joe later became manager of the company's Auckland office (and married Irene Connop there in 1926) and then secretary-accountant at its New Zealand Head Office in Wellington.

He continued to participate fully in all aspects of Jewish social life and among other activities was on the executive of the Cricket Club belonging to the Wellington Jewish Social Club. An annual match was held with the Christchurch Jewish Community until the outbreak of World War II.

Joe eventually made it to America in 1947 when he retired but after a couple of years he returned to Wellington and worked as an accountant for the property division of a Wellington company and looked after the books of his wife's Matis real estate business until his death on the 7th April 1965 at the age of 98 years.

Bill Main notes in his *Wellington through a Victorian Lens* that in Joe's obituary it was reported that he treasured his albums of photographs. The Alexander Turnbull Library has a large representation of Zak's work, but the albums mentioned in the obituary seem to have been lost. We are very keen to locate these albums and any other works that may be known to the readers.

Michael Clements lives in Wellington. He is the President of the New Zealand Jewish Archives and a keen photographer, who works untiringly to preserve a record Jewish life in New Zealand.



Most of Zak's photos carried a caption and thus are self-explanatory. Top: The "Nimroo" leaving NZ for Antarctic: New Year's Day 1908 (Photo Main Collection)

Above: Wreck of the S.S. Devon. Hauling in the 1st lifeline from the stranded vessel. "ZAK" series Well NZ 25.8.1913 (Photo Main Collection)

Below: Par of the Wellington Woollen Mill's staff on their way to their annual picnic (Photo Mrs Lilian Richardson Collection)

Bottom: Parliamentary Buildings, Wgton NZ. The fire in progress 11.12.07 (Photo Alexander Turnbull Library Collection)

