

# KOSHER IMPORTS

“THE WHY AND THE HOW”

MY FAITH “A WAY OF LIFE”

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## THE BIRTH OF KOSHER IMPORTS

BY JANETTE AILION

To those who don't know me or know of me, allow me to introduce myself. I was born (the 3<sup>rd</sup> of six children) on 13<sup>th</sup> June 1923 in Manchester, a very industrial city in the north west of England. It was a period of hardship for most families that, generally, were much larger than those of today.

The school we all attended in the early stages started in a kindergarten section, and I was 4 years 4 months old when I was enrolled. The month in which you were born was a deciding factor. Aged 5½ in Standard 1 was the start of a more formal education.

At age 9½ years I sat for an examination and a special IQ questionnaire. I did so well that a scholarship was offered to me from the prestigious Dover Girls' Grammar School. Sad to say, family economics did not permit my taking up the offer because of transport costs. (A brother followed the family line for preferential treatment.) I gained a scholarship the following year, aged 10½, but again the same problems arose, much to my disappointment.

During my primary education I continued with 6 classes a week at the Talmud Torah (4 evenings straight from school, Shabbat afternoons and Sunday mornings) deepening my knowledge in the Mishna Torah (beginning with the translation from Hebrew to English); studying sections of the Pirkai'Avort; the works of the Rambam in Aramaic Hebrew with its applications to Halacha/Jewish Law; an in-depth study of History; the major and minor Prophets; the importance of the Shalosh Ragalim; the Lunar calendar; the Paolim-Tables of Hebrew grammar from the Cal onward; with all methods of conjugation by rote.

Because of my zeal toward these studies, and becoming even more Orthodox in my way of life I learned much. Unfortunately, as I've aged I have forgotten a great deal. G-d will have to forgive me.

Another scholarship was offered through the Talmud Torah by the Rev. I. W. Slotki to attend The Jews' College in London as a boarding student, but again economics intervened. The fee of ten shillings per week for food and laundry expenses could not be met by my family. It was too late by the time my mother found out that we could have received help elsewhere, i.e. the Jewish Benevolent Society.

I left school at age 14 and obtained my first employment through a teacher recommendation, to train for the position of permanent Company Secretary for a wholesale grocer, however anti-semitism by the carters (delivery men) forced me to leave the job despite its potential.

Forever looking ahead, I had positions at a mail-order firm, then a wholesale bicycle firm that continued for several years. During this period I attended night classes twice a week, matriculating with credits in Arithmetic, Bookkeeping, Commercial Law and relative subjects.

Again I moved forward and entered the Civil Service. Two years on and we were at War. I applied to join the Navy but unfortunately failed the medical due to flat feet and varicose veins. Determined to be in a uniform I became (after training) a bus conductress on the famous double-decker buses.

Finally, with the end of the War, everyone everywhere were looking for some changes to their lives. Again I completed further study and successfully obtained a Diploma in Accounting (a Degree in Australia) and set up my own practice. We were not allowed, by law, to advertise for clients, so building up a successful practice was a slow and arduous job.

I, like many others in England, felt the need for a complete change in our lives, so many of us (after much discussion) decided to emigrate to Australia. I arrived in Australia after a five-week journey travelling from Manchester to Gravesend by train, then on the P&O ship SS Strathaird that docked at Outer Harbour on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1961.

I had travelled with friends Phyllis and Jessie, after having made our plans to emigrate during the post-War teen period. It was during a strong advertising campaign by the Australian Government of their need to "Populate or Perish" and that was the call to the people of post-War England. The leaflets and films given and shown made emigration to Australia and New Zealand very attractive.

We had medical examinations prior to our acceptance, and we also had to have at least 50 pounds each in cash. Essential also to the Australian authorities was a signed agreement that we were to stay in

Australia for a minimum of two years, or pay back to the Australian Government all costs.

As English migrants our journey cost us Ten Pounds sterling and we were described as the "Ten Pound Poms".

Following our arrival, single people (Phyllis was a widow) were transported by coach to an old army hostel in Smithfield via a single-road system, with no lights, houses etc. Property was very shabby and neglected, the area was extremely agricultural – we were amazed as we came from a very industrial northern city in England. It was necessary for us to travel from Smithfield to Adelaide by train – known as the "Red Hen" - to find employment. For me, being the most religious, it was also important to locate the Synagogue.

We – Phyllis, Jessie and I – decided that as soon as one of us gained employment, we would leave the hostel and rent a place. The unemployment benefit we received from the Australian Government was just over 3 pounds each, which was easily swallowed up in train fares to Adelaide. Within a couple of weeks Phyllis was first to get work (she was a clothing machinist), but reneged on our pact and decided to go to Melbourne where many of our fellow Mancunians had settled, because it was more industrialized.

I was the next to become employed as a managing accountant to an electrical company. (Television sales were escalating in Adelaide at that time.) We rented two rooms behind a grocery shop at Kenilworth Road, Parkside where we lived for several weeks until we were able to obtain a 12 month lease on a house at 298 South Terrace Adelaide, owned by the Matison family.

The most important and relevant reason to write about this part of my life story came about due to experiences encountered during my first few months in Adelaide. It was long before I became closely associated with the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation and long before the starting and building up of Kosher Imports, or of my teaching at the "Sunday School" Cheder – literally "Room of Study". (Many of my then students are now active members of today's community, all married and with growing families.) I also held a weekly class (at no charge) for adults who wanted to learn to read Hebrew, enabling them to follow the services.

There was no intention of creating a business that would flourish to the extent it has and there was no intention of creating a business for gain or for income. It was my personal need for the kosher provisions I was used to that urged me to do something. What followed was the almost unbelievably rapid expansion that developed very much by word of mouth. The taste for a better quality and variety of products (particularly for Passover) developed my enthusiasm to help the community.

My first personal need was for a Yartzeit candle in the middle of February 1961 for the memorial of my late father. Obviously I went to the Synagogue to obtain a Yahzeit candle and arrange for Kaddish to be said. It is hard to believe now, but I was told to write to a supplier in Melbourne, or to purchase a tea light from a shop on Hindley Street, Adelaide. I did neither, instead leaving an electric light bulb on for the statutory 26 hours.

My second need was to apply for membership to the only Orthodox Synagogue in the whole of South Australia. Jessie and I became members of the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation in August 1961. Our fees were One Pound Seventeen Shillings and Sixpence each – I still have the receipts for both of us.

My third real need was to develop a more satisfactory food supply that was Kosher, particularly for Pesach, especially matzot and other products. Although Matzot was available from Myer's store it was of poor quality and presented so badly it was enough to turn you away from the celebration! I placed an order with Myer's for Matzot and Matza meal and, from memory, nothing else apart from wurst was available. I was able to obtain eggs, also fish from Cappo's, and oil and margarine from Nuttelex. The Matzot, mostly broken sheets, came wrapped in brown paper. Matza meal was very coarse and came packed in little hessian bags tied at the top with string. I wondered how much worse could things get?

Kosher meat was prepared by the Shochet (the late Rev. Berman) and supplied through Metters butcher (previously Kitters or Kettters), a shop in Rundle Street opposite the Synagogue. This I felt confident with.

My first service, which was Shabbat at the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation, was very enjoyable with the atmosphere warm and friendly. It was in the Ashkenazi tradition, with which I was not overly

familiar. (My religious education was of pure classic Hebrew – History, Religions, Festivals, including the T’Nach – Torah, Ni’viim and Cetuvim. - later combined as the Mishna Torah, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Torah.) Shachrit was followed by Mussaf and then, having been introduced to several other congregants (some of whom were also from Manchester) we entered the Memorial Hall for a Kiddush.

What I encountered, beyond belief, were cakes and wine. The wine provided by Rev. Berman was Kosher. The cakes and pastries – non-Kosher – were supplied by Balfour’s Bakery, from their retail outlet on Rundle Street. What made matters worse for me was to find out that they were delivered by Balfour’s on Shabbat then brought into the Synagogue, fresh from the ovens so to speak.

I went to visit Rev. Berman and his wife to obtain information on the availability of wine and possibly other goods for Pesach. They invited Jessie and me to their two Seder services and to dinner several times. Rev. Berman and his wife provided half of the community with a joyful Seder both nights. On average there were as many as 30 plus people attending the Seder service.

Within weeks of the 8 days of Pesach I became very determined to improve conditions wherever I could for my own sake as well as for others. Our home life was becoming reasonably settled but money was still very short, and many things were still needed if our every-day living was to be improved upon.

My next move following Pesach was to contact English friends who had settled in Melbourne several years before, Mr. & Mrs. Michael Salfas. Mrs. Salfas (nee Eunice Green) lived two minutes from our home in Manchester with a Synagogue mid way. With the help of the Salfas family I became aware of Solomon’s Matzot factory in Sydney. They also arranged an introduction to the late Solly Pose who, in turn, introduced me to bakers, Jewish book and artifact sellers, and a variety of businesses which dealt in a range of Kosher products, including wines.

Having left my position as office manager, I commenced teaching Commercial subjects at a Technical High School. Now entitled to school holidays, I took advantage of this. I went to Sydney to meet Vic

Solomon who owned and operated his matzot making business – started originally by his father and earlier family members.

While in Sydney I met up with Mr. I. M. Goodman and his family. Mr. Goodman was Secretary of the Great Synagogue in Sydney. He was also from Manchester and was my Rebbe (Teacher) at the Talmud Torah school, teaching me the Rambam in Aramaic Hebrew along with the laws of Shechita.

I met the Beth Din Rabbi who was in charge of Kashrut and spoke with Vic Solomon who was happy to oblige and took an order from me, and which I hoped would interest others in doing likewise. His products were superior to those from Melbourne, and also included potato flour, ground almonds and prunes, certainly making things much brighter.

My second Pesach was obviously very much improved. Having very little finance available, I decided to take a chance and proceeded to the Business Names Registrar and thus “Kosher Imports” became a registered business. I was unsure of Australian Law in this regard.

With the financial support of Rosa Conway who contributed the sum of sixteen pounds, along with two UK gentile friends of mine now living in Western Australia lending me sixty eight pounds, added to my sixteen pounds – making our working capital One Hundred Pounds, we were able to (through Rosa’s family in England) obtain a Hecksher from Rakusens of Leeds and an agreement with them to supply us with their Matzot - but only if a pro-forma account would be paid in time to catch a cargo ship to Adelaide. All went well with the limited funds we had. However, not thinking about wharf charges and the need for an agent to get customs clearance, money proved to be tighter than expected. I approached a few English people who were delighted to place a small order and prepay.

Several of these congregants took a chance on me and ordered and prepaid for a limited quantity and this helped to make our order larger than originally estimated, and financially much easier for me to cope. During Chol Hamoed the telephone never stopped ringing with calls from people I had never met who had tasted Rakusen’s products at the homes of people who had purchased goods with that first order.

Rosa withdrew her interest approximately six months later around June 1963 as she decided that a rapid growth business was not for her.

In 1963 I designed an order form listing all the goods I had now been able to obtain. My customers were instructed to send a deposit with their completed order form. This had to be done well before Rosh Hashana as there was much to be done in collating orders and finding time to make other contacts. I lost money on this first consignment due to the aforementioned wharfing and agency fees.

Later I contacted Holland for cheese prices and minimum quantities that could be ordered. I also contacted a U.K. pickle factory I had grown up with. Chocolates for Pesach were also available and imported from Ringers of Holland. Having grown up in an Orthodox community, both Sephardi and Ashkenazi, where there were Synagogues on every street corner, my memory of those days and all of those products served me well in providing contacts for obtaining Kosher goods. Butter and margarine from Sydney, including Nuttelex and oil was organised through Solly Pose in Melbourne, who also manufactured Jenny's Schmaltz. Wines and other products were obtained from Serybyanski to whom Solly Pose introduced me. He also introduced me to other trades-people to buy chrane and other items. This led me to spending much time in the Carlton and St Kilda areas where plentiful supplies were available for the Orthodox Jewish customers.

While on one trip to Melbourne I saw a delivery van with the name Eljon on the side panel. I noted the address and visited the firm to discover Mr. Eljon was Dutch and, although the spelling of the name differed, there was an ancestral connection. Mr. Eljon was the import agent for Osem and other Israeli products. Many of my problems would now decrease and I would be able to enlarge my range of kosher goods. His son-in-law, Mr. Benedict, carried many other products as well, and he came over to Adelaide to discuss business opportunities.

To keep down the costs of freight from Melbourne to Adelaide, along with my travelling costs around Melbourne in search of all the products that would be necessary to build up a successful business, I changed my car for a Ford Transit van big enough to carry a load.

A very good friend of ours from early childhood (Eunice Salfas whom I mentioned previously) and who had settled in Melbourne some years before, offered her home as a receiving depot for goods ordered from

the many suppliers I was now dealing with. This receiving and storage depot for one week every three months gave me a big advantage as I could then load my van in a safe and balanced manner, eliminating the need for too many trips to Melbourne and back. Eunice's receiving and storage facility, especially before Pesach and all major Chagim, was a tremendous support for me. Eunice also provided me with comfortable hospitality and a bed for my tired body.

In Carlton I called upon a Jewish bookshop and obtained Siddurim and Machzorim with a 10%/15% discount. I had to do better than this! My next move was to write to the English printers – publishers of the standard 4 volume Machzorim for Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, and the well-known and popular Singers daily prayer book. From them I received correspondence advising the address of the book wholesaler who had the rights of sale for all English Siddurim and Machzorim, plus other books of interest.

In St Kilda I made contact with Kantors, a well-known business dealing in all necessary items of Jewish religious needs: Tallasim, Arba Kanfort, Yahtzeit candles, Shabbat candles, Menorahs, and artifacts of all kinds. I purchased several items, again negotiating a discount off their retail prices.

Variety in general food supplies that were Kosher for year-round use, not just for Pesach, led me to Southern Food Supplies in Preston, an outer Melbourne suburb. They had supplies of the Telma Israeli products and were prepared to take me on as a new customer. They also had smoked mackerel that I didn't purchase because I was unsure regarding Kashut.

Pesach products from Rakusens in England, with a new Hechsher, continued to arrive regularly. Each year the consignments had to be enlarged. However, this had to be discontinued (possibly around 1967/68) due to mounting costs - shipping costs plus the agency fees, wharfing and stacking them locally at Outer Harbour, then on to me. This would have been tragic if other decent products (Israeli and American) had not started to arrive and be distributed by Mr. Eljon and his son-in-law Mr. Benedict.

The confectionery and cheese from Holland continued for another two years but I had to cancel these eventually because some of the boxed

chocolates travelled below water level on the ship and had to be destroyed, due to some insect infestation. A Customs official carried out the destruction on the patio at the rear of my home by pouring kerosene over the contaminated items.

With the increase in Israeli products being stocked by Benedict Imports, most of the required Pesach necessities and luxuries were becoming more obtainable.

Walking down Balaclava Road where many Jewish businesses operate, I came across a butcher shop run by the Machziki Hadas. They had for sale ready-to-eat chicken cooked on a spit, fresh meats and, more importantly for my interest, tinned kosher meat products - beef and goulash. Prices were extremely cheap but of course this was in the 1960's. I entered the shop with an enquiry of purchasing some of these kosher canned meats at a reasonable discount for a quantity purchased for cash. This proved successful and a new product was available for ourselves and other interested Orthodox Jewish people.

I should state at this point that I did none of the aforementioned just to benefit myself. It was wholly carried out to benefit the whole community. Any purchases made by community organizations were given a 10% discount. Yes, it was hard work, but it was also most enjoyable. All profits made were put back into the business to help increase the many varieties of products that we were now able to access.

Two second-hand refrigerators were purchased, and an extension was added at the rear of my home with shelving and storage cupboards to display all the products that I had available.

Jessie passed away in July 1969. Nevertheless, I carried on, making trips to Melbourne during each of the school holiday periods to pick up my stock stored at the home of Mr. & Mrs. Salfas.

As I grew older the business activity became more demanding, and the many good friends I had made kindly helped me make up Pesach orders, for delivery at the business' busiest time.

In 1973 I decided to transfer my interest to anyone willing to take over the stock, refrigerators, etc. Mrs. Miriam Millingen (nee Zimmet) took

over and ran the business for approximately five years in a similar way to that which I had developed. I understand that it was then transferred to Anna and Harry Fishman who operated the business from the Synagogue in the city.

The last change of ownership was to the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation Inc., operating initially in the city until moving to the new Synagogue at Glenside and since their take-over, Kosher Imports has continued to operate very successfully under the supervision of Mrs. Miriam Zimmet. It was hard work but it gave me great satisfaction. I enjoyed and felt fulfilled in doing it all.

I end this report with a quote from the 1963 Adelaide Hebrew Congregation A.G.M. when the late Gus Hines, the then President, said that to cancel the Myer's arrangement would be "premature", and that "we will keep an open mind on the progress of Kosher Imports". Needless to say, I was absolutely delighted that all my efforts proved to be so successful.

I would like to extend my sincere and very grateful thanks to the following people:

- Eunice and Michael Salfas who offered their home in Melbourne as a delivery depot for me.
- Huguette Hasda and other members of WIZO NIRIM who assisted me in my endeavours to get Kosher Imports into operation.
- Following Jessie's death, when I found it difficult to keep up my enthusiasm, my niece Maurissa Ailion and her friend Marie Pearson stepped in and gave me a tremendous amount of assistance with compiling orders, and then packing and delivering prior to Pesach.
- To all the Congregation of the decade 1963-1973 for their supportive encouragement, many of who have now, unfortunately, moved on or passed away.
- To Maxeen Jenkin, former A.H.C. Secretary, for her patience and assistance over many hours with visits to my home, with the editing and typing, and for providing stationery and postage to send each of the drafts to me. Her ability to read and interpret my hand-written transcripts helped immensely.

My sincere apologies if I have omitted thanking others along the way.