



Jewish EXONENT
 April 19, 2007
 Volume 222 Issue 3

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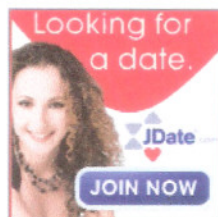
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Singing the Praises of Singapore

April 19, 2007

Jaswinder Kaur Gill

Jewish Exponent Feature

Situated in a corner of the Singapore Botanic Gardens are two bronze sculptures, one of a girl on a swing and another of a girl riding a bicycle. A gentleman named David Marshall commissioned these.

That's nothing extraordinary, really, save for the fact that in 1955, Marshall became the first chief minister of Singapore under British rule. He was also a member of the tiny Jewish community there.



Taking a sculptured ride ...

The Jews first came to Singapore immediately after the establishment of a British settlement here at what is known as the smallest nation in all of Southeast Asia in 1819. In 1841, through the Jewish Synagogue Act, a wooden synagogue was established near Boat Quay. Though the synagogue is long gone, the street named after it, Synagogue Street, which is in the heart of Singapore's financial district, remains as a marker.

The Singapore Jewish community is mostly Sephardic, tracing its ancestry to Iraq. From a small population of 40, the community grew to more than 1,500 in 1939. After World War II, many of its Jews immigrated to Australia, Europe and the United States. Today, the community numbers about 300.



... and swing through the Botanic Gardens of Singapore.

Since colonial days, the Jewish community has contributed to the development of Singapore's economy; some buildings and roads bear testament to their contributions. Names like Nassim Road, Meyer Road, Elias Road, Zion Road and Synagogue Street dot this sunny isle.

Two synagogues stand in Singapore: the Maghain Aboth and the Chesed El. Both — chosen as national monuments in 1998 — are on the tourist trail. The Maghain Aboth Shield of Our Father, believed to be the oldest synagogue in Southeast Asia, is located on Waterloo Street within the colonial district of Singapore. It was established in 1878, when the synagogue on Synagogue Street

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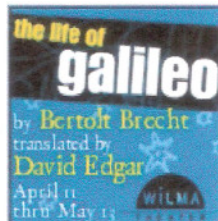
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outgrew its congregation.

Originally a single-story structure, the Maghain Aboth now boasts two floors, and has undergone extensive renovations. In 1978, on its centenary celebrations, a tall, gold-colored, seven-branched menorah was placed at the entrance. Within its compound is a small kosher shop catering to the needs of the community.

The Jewish Welfare Board, staffed entirely by volunteers, manages the affairs of the tiny Jewish community. Rising up beside the Maghain Aboth is a brand-new Jewish community center that will house the country's very first Jewish restaurant.



The picturesque Gill David Elias Building

Sir Manasseh Meyer – one of the most influential Jews of the Far East – established the Chesed El ("Bounty of God") Synagogue along leafy Oxley Rise in 1905. Built in the late-Renaissance style by Swan and MacLaren – the famous architectural firm responsible for many of Singapore's colonial buildings and landmarks – the synagogue is an architectural beauty. It was also one of the first places to use gaslights in Singapore.

Meyer acquired many properties in Singapore, including the Teutonia Club, which his family later converted to the Goodwood Park Hotel. The hotel, with its distinctive tower that's been named a national monument, rests along Scotts Road – a stone's throw from Singapore's version of Fifth Avenue, Orchard Road.



The interior of Maghain Aboth

Meyer, who was knighted by the British in 1906, believed in education and contributed greatly to the building of Raffles College, a predecessor of the National University of Singapore. A wing of the building, atop a hillock along Bukit Timah Road, which now houses the university's law faculty, is named after him.

Along Little India are two prominent buildings with the Star of David on them, alluding to its Jewish past. One is the mustard-colored David Elias Building at the junction of Short Street and Middle Road. A neoclassical building with elements of art deco, it was designed by Swan and MacLaren.

Farther down along Selegie Road stands the Ellison Building. Believed to have been built in 1924 for a Jewish woman named Ellison, this two-storied cream-, green- and orange-colored twin-domed building – the tallest back in the early 20th century – was where the colonial British governors would watch Sunday races at nearby Race Course Road.

Such forms of entertainment, in addition to beauty and history, abound in this place that touts a unique Jewish past.

For more information, go to: [www. visitsingapore.com](http://www.visitsingapore.com).

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