

Putting an incidental collection to work

Susan Faine, August 2021



The East Melbourne Hebrew Congregation was founded in 1857, and its home is the East Melbourne Synagogue in Albert Street, consecrated in 1877. This is the oldest continuously functioning synagogue building in Australia, listed on the Victorian Heritage Register as a place of historical, social and architectural significance to the State. <https://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/353>. Also known as the Melbourne City Synagogue, under the leadership of Rabbi Dovid Gutnick, the congregation of around 200 families provides visitors to Melbourne with a welcoming place to worship.

I'm putting together a display about the synagogue and its congregation to support a major building fundraiser that will go ahead once restrictions have been lifted and people can congregate and worship together.

Dovid walks me through the building, pointing out boxes, ritual objects, books and framed works that might be used. Most of the congregation's historical archives are in the Australian Jewish Historical Society collection at the State Library of Victoria. What Dovid is showing me is best described as 'an incidental collection', by which I mean there's no collection policy or object register, or other museum-standard collection documentation. But Dovid is knowledgeable, passionate, enthusiastic about the synagogue and the congregation, and his input is critical.

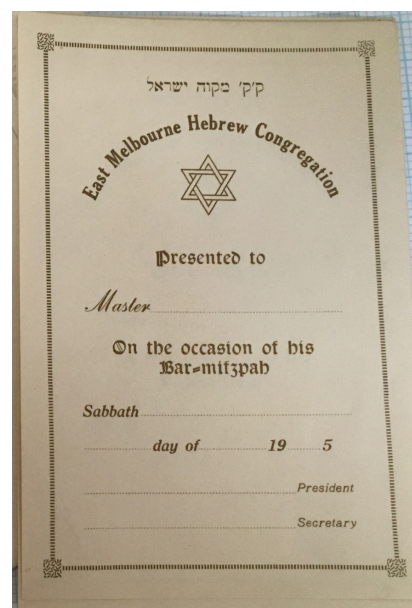
We consider display options, and settle on the unorthodox: the 12 ground floor window sills. These are large, double hung Victorian windows, and I envisage transforming them into display spaces by blocking the panes and lining the sill with archival board.

I prepare a workstation, and as I start to look through the boxes and loose piles of papers, photos and 'memorabilia', the curatorial framework begins to take shape. At this stage I'm leaning towards the themes of 'Building a community', 'Leading a community' and 'Being a community', to embrace what has been and the renewal of the building and the congregation.



Exterior of the East Melbourne Synagogue (EMHC website)

I set up a basic register to document my first selection of about 90 objects, describing, photographing and measuring each one, with notes on how it might be presented. I'll share with John Sheehan (http://www.instagram.com/art_installers_melbourne), who will be installing this display for us. I allocate a theme to each object and begin to think about groupings.



EMHC Bar mitzvah bookplate and envelope
Literally, Bar mitzvah means 'son of commandment'. Traditionally when a Jewish boy turns 13 he becomes bar mitzvah and takes on the obligations and rights of a Jewish adult.



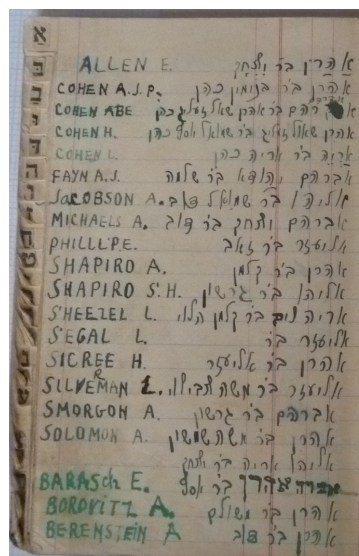
East Melbourne Synagogue interior, looking towards the Ark, Aron Hakodesh, where the Scrolls of the Law are kept

Several weeks later and in lockdown now, working at home, I'm very glad I painstakingly recorded everything! This week I'm reviewing and refining the object selection, and envisaging how to set the objects out across the sills. Since the display is for a well-defined and subject-aware audience there's no need to explain Judaism, or object purpose, so labels can be few and brief. Mostly the objects will be paper and photographs, with a few pieces of ritual Judaica, such as an embroidered velvet Torah mantle or a silver Torah breastplate. These are important because they're often gifted to a congregation in memory of family, and they're the continuum of age-old cultural traditions. But the little things, like the annotated membership cards and notebooks, and photos that document the joys and tribulations of running a congregation, will likely bring a smile to people's faces, as they recall their own similar experiences in this or another congregation.

My display with the incidental collection is just a hint of what's to come. As part of the big renewal project, the synagogue is committed to setting up museum-standard exhibits of important Judaica and artefacts and a catalogued library of Jewish literature to support education programs.



Detail of EMHC blue embroidered Torah mantle. The Scroll of the Law, Sefer Torah, the scroll of parchment on which the first five Books of the Old Testament have been written by a special scribe. The scroll is rolled between two poles, Trees of Life, and each week it is unrolled a little to read the prescribed portion. When not in use, the rolled scroll is covered with a mantle, and stored in the Ark.



The 'call up' notebook. When a person is 'called up' to the Torah during a service, they are called by their Hebrew name. The index on this notebook uses Hebrew letters, and Hebrew names are recorded here accordingly, from right to left on the page.

