

Jewish Life



The Ohel Leah Synagogue
SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTOS

TRAVEL

MUSIC

YID

BOOKS

ART

PARASHAH

Jewish treasures of the Orient



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SPECIAL TO THE CJN

It's easy to understand why many people compare Hong Kong to New York City: both are regional financial hubs, have notable skylines that ignite the evening sky, attract tourists interested in visiting historical and cultural sites and boast outstanding restaurants, bars and shopping.

Since vibrant cosmopolitan cities attract Jewish entrepreneurs, I wondered if Hong Kong had a Jewish history worth exploring. Before I left home, I started researching.

While early historical records are scarce, I did find information about a Jewish community that dates back to the mid-19th century, when Hong Kong was part of the British Commonwealth. The Sassoon family, who were originally from Bombay, were considered the Rothschilds of the East. As successful merchants, they were instrumental in creating the Hong Kong Jewish community. They established a Jewish cemetery in 1855 and donated the land for Hong Kong's first synagogue. The Ohel Leah Synagogue was subsequently completed in 1902.

After reading that the synagogue and cemetery were still in use, I made an appointment with Erica Lyons, the co-chair of the Hong Kong Jewish Historical Society, which was founded in 1984. I met Lyons at the Jewish community

centre, which is housed in a high-rise building, adjacent to the synagogue. We exited doors that led to a courtyard, where the Ohel Leah Synagogue was hidden. The Edwardian classical-style white building with brown trim appeared out of place in this modern complex, but at the same time, it felt well protected. I entered through the tall stained-glass doors, to see the restored, Sephardic-style sanctuary.

Today, Hong Kong's diverse Jewish community of a few thousand can choose from seven different congregations, which are spread throughout the city. In the 1990s, there was a heated controversy over the future of the Ohel Leah Synagogue. The local government had determined that the property's wall was no longer stable. A portion of the membership was intent on restoring the building, while another group wanted to tear down the aging structure and build a new one.

In 1996, the building was totally renovated. A UNESCO Outstanding Project Award for historic preservation acknowledges their efforts. As part of the overall plan, the wall was repaired, two high-rise apartment buildings were erected and the entrance to the synagogue became more secure. The towers house the JCC, a swimming pool, two kosher restaurants, a kosher food store, a Jewish day school and 20 apartments that provide rental income.

Even though the descendants of the

Sassoon family have gone elsewhere, more than 150 people still attend Shabbat services at Ohel Leah. The members originate from around the world and represent both Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions. Following Orthodox customs, women congregate on the second-floor balcony. On Purim, the ladies have a separate megillah reading in the adjacent JCC. To meet the needs of Ohel Leah's diverse population, the synagogue offers three distinct High Holiday services – Sephardic, French-Sephardic and Mizrahi.

As we walked, Lyons, an American expat, talked nonstop about Jewish life in Hong Kong. She also shed light on why my Internet searches had limited results. As it turns out, most of the Jewish records were destroyed during the Second World War. When the Japanese occupied Hong Kong, the synagogue was taken over and many of the Jews were interned. While nobody can say for certain who saved the synagogue's Torah scrolls, they were safely hidden away. Lyons opened the locked Aron Kodesh, to reveal the synagogue's treasured Torah scrolls enveloped in hand-crafted cases.

The Hong Kong Jewish community supports day schools that run from preschool through high school. The secondary school prepares its students for international college entrance exams. After graduation, Jewish students tend not to return to Hong Kong. As a result,

Jewish empty nesters oftentimes choose to leave Hong Kong after their children reach college age.

Had Lyons not described the entrance to the cemetery in Happy Valley, we may have missed the stone pillars with tiny Jewish stars and the turquoise metal gate that led to a narrow passageway. The adjacent Buddhist temple and its school swallowed up the obscure entrance.

As I weaved my way through the rain and deep puddles, I stopped to look at a potpourri of gravestones. Some were ornate, while others were simple. Most of the inscriptions were in English and Hebrew, but I did pass some in Dutch, French, German and Russian. A winding path led upward. I eventually reached the last level, where I looked down on the tiered cemetery. Like Hong Kong's current population of Jewish expats, the deceased came from a multitude of places. Fortunately, the Hong Kong Jewish Historical Society has made concerted efforts to memorialize the departed on its website.

Since the mid-19th century, Hong Kong's Jewish community has opened its arms to a diverse group of Jews who settled in the city. As the Jewish population ebbed and flowed, each generation worked toward meeting the needs of its people. For the last few decades, the leadership has been piecing together its history, so the past will not be lost forever. ■