**B’NAI B’RITH**

**A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

B’nai B’rith (Hebrew translation: “Children of the Covenant”) is the oldest Jewish service organisation in the world. B’nai B’rith states that it is committed to the security and continuity of the Jewish people and the State of Israel, and to the combating of anti-Semitism and bigotry. Its mission is to unite people of the Jewish faith and to enhance Jewish identity through strengthening Jewish family life, to provide broad-based services for the benefit of senior citizens, and to facilitate advocacy and action on behalf of Jews throughout the world.

B’nai B’rith was founded in Aaron Sinsheimer’s cafe in New York’s Lower East Side on October 13, 1843, by 12 recently arrived German Jewish immigrants led by Henry Jones (Jonas). The new organisation represented an attempt to organise Jews of the local community to confront what Isaac Rosenbourg, one of the founders, called “the deplorable condition of Jews in this, our newly adopted country”. The new group’s purpose, as described in its constitution, called for the traditional functions performed by Jewish societies in Europe, viz: “Visiting and attending the sick”, and “protecting and assisting the widow and the orphan on the broadest principles of humanity. Its founders had hoped that it would soon encompass all Jews in the United States, but this did not happen, since other Jewish organisations were also forming around the same time.

However, despite its fraternal and local beginnings, B’nai B’rith spoke out for Jewish rights early in its history, and used its growing chain of lodges as a way to exercise political influence on behalf of world Jewry. It came to play a crucial role in transnational Jewish politics, and the later spread of the organisation around the world made it a nerve centre of intra-Jewish communication and mutual endeavour.

Just prior to the creation of the State of Israel, President Harry S. Truman, resisting pressure by various organisations declined meetings with Jewish leaders. B’nai B’rith International President Frank Goldman convinced fellow B’nai B’rith member Eddie Jacobson, long-time friend and business partner of the president, to appeal to Truman for a favour. Jacobson convinced Truman to meet secretly with Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann in a meeting said to have resulted in turning White House support back in favour of partition, and ultimately to de facto recognition of Israeli statehood.

B’nai B’rith was present at the founding of the United Nations in San Francisco and has taken an active role in the world body ever since. In 1947, the organisation was granted permanent non-governmental organisational (NGO) status and, for many years, was the only Jewish organisation with full-time representation at the United Nations. It is credited with a leading role in the U.N. reversal of its 1975 resolution equating Zionism with racism.

The history of B’nai B’rith in Australia starts with the institution of the first Lodge in Sydney in 1944, followed soon after by the commencement of the Sydney Women’s Chapter. Melbourne instituted its first Lodge and Chapter very shortly after this. Although, at one stage, Lodges Chapters and Units (where men and women hold equal membership) existed in each State, currently they only operate in Sydney and Melbourne, as well as New Zealand. Activities are very much modelled on the original core values and mission statements mentioned above and include raising money for worthy causes, both Jewish and non-Jewish, active social and cultural activities such as lectures, art exhibitions etc. as well as a very active Anti-Defamation arm which monitors anti-semitic activities both locally and overseas.