

Jewish Anzacs from Russia: a century of memory

[Presentation by Dr Elena Govor to AJHS(ACT) on 8 November 2020]

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at the Australian Jewish Historical Society meeting. I am honoured to be here and to share with you some of my research and reflections about the past.

You may probably want to ask the question: how came it to be that a woman, an immigrant-woman of non-British background, chose to do research in a field which was traditionally the area of Anglo-Saxon scholars.

Perhaps I need to say a few words about my background and my attitude to military history first. I was born and grew up in Minsk, in Belarus, where each fourth person perished during the Second World War.  I was growing up in the Soviet time with military parades celebrating the might of the Soviet Union, with school excursions to military museums, with numerous books and movies glorifying the exploits of the Soviet people, with the cult of war heroes and the cold grandeur of the monuments in every city square, at the foot of which we joined the young pioneer league. The propaganda was so strong, cast so much in official words, that even as a child I understood that it was propaganda and instinctively backed away, ignoring the war altogether. I was never tempted to bring flowers to a Soviet military monument, but, I remember, that once on the outskirts of a village, where I spent the summer, I came across a mass grave, and at this moment I realised in full that the bygone war was part of our history, not just part of the official propaganda. It was to this grave, with unnamed soldiers or perhaps Jewish people, where I brought my flowers.

And then, in 1990, on a sunny morning in Canberra, our third day here in Australia, my husband and I walked from our hostel along

Limestone Avenue to the Australian War Memorial. I would not have done this of my own volition in any other country — aren't there more interesting places to see than military museums? But I had already heard so much about how devotedly Australians remember their fallen dead, and I wanted to understand why. What we saw touched us deeply. At first glance the exhibits seemed not to differ greatly from what I used to see on compulsory school excursions to Soviet military museums; nevertheless, it was all different. Here, it was all about people, ordinary Australian people, rather than the glorious military past of the country, its commanders and heroes. One of the strongest impressions was left by the gallery on the walls of which were the endless columns of names of all the fallen. Little did I know then how many names of people from the Russian Empire, including many Jewish names I would have found there if I had taken a closer look! And now I could say that my quest for these Anzacs is, in a way, repentance for the brainwashed indifference of my youth.

As for my late husband Vladimir Kabo, he had his own response too. Being much older than me, he was conscripted to the Red Army in 1943 when he was eighteen.  He spent two years on the battlefield as an artilleryman, participating in the liberation of a Jewish death camp in Poland and then of Berlin and Prague in 1945. Being Jewish, four years later he was arrested and was sentenced to the Gulag for 10 years. Released from the camp after Stalin's death, he became an anthropologist studying the origins of the Australian Aborigines, but was allowed leave the country, to go to Australia only in 1990. He did not tell me much about the war, but in Australia, when we settled here, he wrote a book of his memoirs,  *The Road to Australia* and his chapter about the war differed so much from the glorifying two-dimensional accounts I had heard in the official Soviet history.  One of the

highlights of his life was meeting with John Howard on the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. For those who might be interested this is his website with some of his papers translated into English. [\[image\]](#)

When I started my research, 20 years ago, the Anzacs were seen as an iconic marker of Australian history, closely associated with its Anglo-Celtic heritage, with the heritage of the British Empire. Charles Bean, in the opening pages of his *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, asserts of Australia in those years: ‘The percentage of Australians who came of any other stock [that is, other than English, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh] was negligible; the population of this vast unfilled land was as purely British as that of the two islands in the North Sea which had been the home of its fathers’. This British image of Australia was given a particularly Australian inflection during the war - ‘the Anzac spirit’ - which celebrates endurance, courage, ingenuity, good humour, larrikinism, egalitarianism and, encompassing all these qualities, mateship.

Australian Jewry was the first non Anglo-Saxon ethno-confessional and trans-territorial group which demonstrated that people of ‘other stock’, as Bean put it, were not negligible, either in numbers or in their contribution to the war efforts. The Jewish community celebrated it in the ‘Australian Jewry Book of Honour’, compiled by Harold Boas and published in 1923. [\[Image\]](#).

However, my own discovery of the Jewish Anzacs came about as a result of approaching the subject from a wholly different perspective — a Russian one. Since 2000 I was working on retrieving and enumerating Anzacs who had been born in Imperial Russia. It was in the course of this work that I began sifting the stories of the different community groups

resident in 19th century Russia, among whom were the Russian-born Jewish Anzacs, and their stories became an essential part of my book *Russian Anzacs in Australian History*, published in 2005. [Image]. It was followed by my papers about Anzacs from Latvia and Belarus, and a recent book about Anzacs from Ukraine. All these works, and especially the last one, include as an essential part the stories of Jewish Anzacs from these territories. Russian speakers might be interested in my series of papers about Jewish Anzacs published in *Vozrozhdenie*.

Untangling the multi-ethnic complexity behind the iconic image of the Anzacs was only one aspect of bringing the ‘Anzac legend’ into the present. Luckily this legend has not been frozen in time: as the Australian nation grows, each new generation of Australians invests into this tale its own understanding of the past, creating a powerful balance as the nation learns to reconcile the spirit of the legend and the new facts of history. Now, for instance, attention has been focused on the stories of people whose heroism was not limited to the battlefields alone – these men had to prove their bravery in civilian life as well. This is the story of thousands of servicemen, maimed physically and mentally, who tried to find themselves in post-war Australia. Among them were veterans whose lives did not fit into the standard framework of stereotypical heroes, along with those who failed in their fight with post-war life and committed suicide.

In the book I explored the lives of over 1000 Russian-born men who enlisted in the AIF, among whom were at least 148 Jews. [image] This adds a number of new names to Boas lists and provides some new dimensions to the experience of the Jewish participation in the AIF. These previously un-noted names were often of Jews whose military service did not go well or who had a chequered history in the army: men who were discharged or deserted before reaching battlefields, or even just

men whose service was not especially noteworthy. They may not have been awarded military medals or honours but war was part of their history too, and they were part of Australian war history.

A notable example was the flamboyant Louis Brodsky [image], who, as a boy, had fled Russian misery to become a sailor. After years of working on ships he settled in Australia with a young family, but at the first sounds of war he rushed to join up. His son remembered that ‘He ... was repeatedly rejected because of his poor teeth and campaigned against the Army authorities so vigorously that he won newspaper publicity, and he finally won approval from the authorities to create and establish a corps of men rejected only for poor teeth.’ But this was only the beginning of his odyssey.

After being finally accepted into the army, he embarked for Egypt. When he reached there, he realised that the army was not the place for him after all, and sought a discharge. This was refused. So he purchased the identity papers of a Russian refugee named David Lipschitz, assumed this new identity and took French leave. As David Lipschitz he worked as a steward on various merchant ships for the rest of the war, eventually returning to Australia in 1918. There he surrendered himself to the military authorities, but was not prosecuted.

That was not the end of his adventures. During the 1930s he visited the Soviet Union, on the same false passport of course, and even managed to get into trouble with Scotland Yard along the way. When the Second World War broke out, he was one of the first to offer his services to Australia yet again.

Louis Brodsky’s army tales were an essential part of his family’s folklore but none of his family had any idea about the real truth behind his war adventures. It’s hardly surprising that his twin sons, Alexander and Isadore, inherited his nonconformist spirit. [Image]. They both served

during the Second World War and were court-martialled several times for all sorts of typically Australian pranks, in spite of their otherwise perfect service. And although Louis Brodsky was stripped of his war medals and as such quite justly was not included in Boas' book, he shouldn't be excluded from Anzac history. This is the core position of my research: to not exclude any man who applied to serve in the AIF and was accepted.

This approach allows us to probe the notion of the Anzac spirit from different angles, for instance the validity of 'mateship' in application to those who were 'different', or, as we say it in modern ethnohistorical parlance, 'the Other'. Or the role of ethno-cultural and religious identity. Was it important for these Anzacs to preserve it? Or, on the contrary, perhaps they aimed to put it aside. Often when we speak about Jewish people in Australia, we think about them as a community united by religion, irrespective of their original national background. But there is also a question about the cultural specifics that each national group brought with them. We can definitely single out from one other groups such as Australian Jewry which numbered several generations, British Jewish immigrants, South African, German, Polish, and American Jews. So called Russian Jews in Australia were in fact highly diverse groups sharing the same national origin and religion but differing from each other in many other aspects. In respect to pre-revolutionary immigrants I can single out at least four distinct groups. [Image].

The first group are Jewish emigrants who came to Australia as a result of a two-stage migration via Western European, mostly English-speaking countries. They were mainly families from Poland and some Baltic territories. Their children, the future Anzacs, who grew up for instance in the UK and later immigrated to Australia, were readily accepted by both Australian Jewish communities and the Anglo-Saxon

population at large. An articulate member of this group is Frank Bernard Hershon Lesnie, who we will meet again later [Image].

The second group were also two-stage migrants, whose first station was Palestine. Here we find the strongest influence of the ideas of Zionism; while there they also regained their agricultural skills, and often gained the qualities of 'real warriors'. I also include in this group those who stayed in Egypt. Their first port of call was usually Western Australia; their English was not so good and it took them some time to be accepted into mainstream Australian life. You probably know Captain Margolin from this group - we will speak about him soon, but now I want to acquaint you with Ishai Belkind. [Image].

The third group were direct immigrants to Australia mostly from Ukraine and Belarus, who arrived as a result of chain migration mostly to Western Australia, Victoria, and Broken Hill in NSW. They spoke Yiddish, some of them had some Russian but knew hardly any English. Still, their chain migration and great determination to master the language and to succeed in life helped them to settle in Australia. You know them all well through the Meyer family, but here we have young George Breitman, who worked in Australia as a labourer [Image].

The fourth group were Jewish immigrants who came to Australia via Siberia and the Russian Far East. They mostly settled in Brisbane and in Sydney. Although preserving their Jewish religion, they were Russified to a significant degree; some of them were imbued with ideas of radicalism, and, arriving in Australia just a few years before the war, they had no chance to master English, and faced many difficulties finding their way into Australian society. George Ferber was one such man. [Image].

An important question concerns the dynamics of all these groups' arrival to Australia [Image]. While there was a steep rise in the number of

arrivals for all other Russian ethnic groups on the eve of the First World War, for Jews the rise was more gentle. This can be explained by the fact that the pattern of Jewish migration differed from that of these other groups from the Russian Empire: for Jews it was a chain migration that had been taking place over a long time period. That, and their more strongly family-based migration tends also to suggest that on the eve of the First World War the Jewish community as a whole was more embedded into Australian life than other ethnic groups from Russia.

The reasons for all this emigration were diverse. Russian historians of emigration often tend to pigeonhole immigrants into the two categories of economic and political emigration. It is obvious on the example of Jewish emigration that in every case the decision to move to another country was a multifocal process. Of course, people aspired for a better life, for economic prosperity, and as such they can be considered economic immigrants. But factors of a socio-political nature were also ever present and there are no scales which might allow us to see which of them were dominant. And here family memoirs might play an important role. We often look on family memoirs or interviews with descendants as sources for factual information. But then if we find they are inaccurate, as historians we tend to dismiss them outright, but for me these kinds of sources have an additional value even when inaccurate. What my contact with the Jewish descendants of our Anzacs has taught me is that family memoirs are not always about facts; indeed, they can give us something more essential than just facts.

The Lakovsky family from Odessa is a good example for this. Two of their boys, Edward and David,  enlisted in the Australian Army and Dorothy Lazarus, their niece, relates the circumstances of her family's departure from Odessa. Her grandfather Tom Lakovsky, she

says, earlier moved from Ekaterinoslav 'to Odessa, because there was more education and music for the children. Grandfather at 21 built a hotel in Odessa, he had about 250 employees. ... My grandfather spoke Russian and Yiddish. Because my mother was 14 when they came out, she had wonderful memories of Russia, as they were very wealthy people and had a very good life in Russia.' With growing social unrest the situation changed. When her grandfather witnessed the brutal repression of rebel soldiers and sailors in Odessa, 'he said to the family, "If they are doing that to themselves, what will they do to the Jews? Let's get out of here". So my grandfather paid fares for the whole lot of the relatives and brought them to Australia, to Perth.' Another granddaughter of Tom, Leah Jas, told me that her grandparents came here because the Bolsheviks were killing off people. The fear of the past left behind in Russia is obviously resonates in these memories, but in fact the Lakovsky family, according to shipping records, came to Fremantle in 1902-1903, well ahead of the brutal crushing of the revolutionary rebellion in Odessa in 1905, portrayed by the noted film director Sergei Eisenstein in *Battleship Potemkin*, and certainly well before the time when the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia. But these are not just jumbled facts. What the family memory was telling us was something else. As you see the word *pogroms* is not mentioned in these family tales, probably because it was too horrible to pass it on to young grandchildren. Instead the fear of being Jewish in Russia is mixed up here with the fear to be taken for 'Russian Bolsheviks' in Australia: these memories were passed on to grandchildren probably at the time of the red scare in Australia. So, in spite of jumbled up facts, these memories prove that immigration of this family was in essence political, and we would probably recognise them now as political refugees.

A study of the occupational distribution for Jewish Anzacs is also revealing in many aspects. [Image]. The Russian consul in Australia, Alexander Abaza, reported in 1914 to the Department of Foreign Affairs that

Except for the Jews who live in cities and are engaged here, as elsewhere, mainly with various trading matters and light crafts (tailors, shoemakers), almost the entire Russian population in Australia lives exclusively by manual labour.

You can hear the antisemitism in this official voice from Russia. But my study shows that the distribution of occupations was quite different: as you can see, along with people engaged in trades in the service sector, like tailors, cooks, hairdressers, and traders, from commercial travellers to drapers, storekeepers, and merchants, the other half of the Jewish community from Russia had quite different occupations. Quite significant was the professional and white collar sector – engineers, medical practitioners, musicians, a surveyor, and university students; some were engaged in farming; and contrary to the Russian consul's claims, quite a large sector of the Jewish community were people engaged in manual labour – labourers, blacksmiths, carpenters, miner and so on. Furthermore, as a response to Australian conditions we find among Jewish Anzacs archetypically Australian outback occupations - bushmen, swagmen, a rabbit trapper and a fossicker. And finally one very interesting aspect is the significant percentage of seamen – 9 men in our small cohort of 148. It was possible to identify those who were seafarers from the descriptions the enlistment clerks recorded of their distinctive tattoos, some of which were quite striking, such as David Minor's 'Chinaman's head pierced by sword'. [Image].

The well-known Captain Eliazar Margolin [image], commander of the 16th battalion, was one of those who was a bushman. Although he

hadn't always been. When he arrived in Western Australia in 1902, he had left behind a comfortable upbringing in Russia and an education from an elite high school in Belgorod, not far from Moscow, followed by ten years in the newly founded Jewish settlement Rehovot in Palestine. He had no knowledge of English when he arrived in Australia and started off as a navy and teamster, before trying his luck goldmining in Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie, and then as a greengrocer at Lawlers. Over this time he began to master English and developed various business interests. Despite this, however, his 'bush' experience left a noticeably lasting imprint on his personality. The Jewish journalist Zeev Zabotinsky, who came to know Margolin well during the war, remarked of him: 'He thought like a man who had spent his life far from big cities, in Palestine in the time of the first pioneers and at the back of beyond in the Australian bush; slow, lofty, terse, and deep, with a keenly instinctive understanding of life.'

Another outback story, but with a twist, was that of Father Paul Ephraim Zundolovich. [image] He was a Roman Catholic priest but his background was Jewish. He came to Australia in 1892 and travelled on horseback through remote outback areas in Wilcannia, NSW, preaching among first settlers and Aborigines, winning the love and respect of this motley outback community. During the war he accompanied Australian troops to England as a chaplain.

The question of how these Jewish Anzacs identified themselves was another intriguing aspect uncovered in my study of their lives — how they negotiated the complexities of accommodating their Russian and Jewish heritages at the same time as coming face to face with a young Australian nation. Younger community members willingly embraced the new world of Australia. Frank Lesnie, [image] who had adopted the name Frank Bernard when he joined the army after two years of farming in Australia,

decided to give his allegiance to Australia. He was asked why he hadn't instead enlisted from England, where he had lived since early childhood, and replied: 'Australia, the home of workers, will suit me in the capacity of a worker or a soldier. I have a love of freedom which would have been denied me, had I joined a home regiment.' Surviving Gallipoli, he wrote in one of his letters from the Western Front to his relative on a topic that must have been preoccupying him. 'Now to the original subject under discussion. ... Your statement that I would not have my present nature had I been other than a Jew. ... You say only a Jew could die as did the Rabbi at Keshineff. I've seen men die -- game, by gad. The instance of the rabbi is nothing compared to them.' This was the last of his letters to survive; he was killed in March 1917 during the attack on the German trenches. [\[click\]](#) Identity for a Jewish Russian Anzac was sometimes more than a merely formal entry in their attestation papers ... sometimes much more.

Young Samuel Ettingove [\[image\]](#), was a nephew of Sidney and Elcon Myers, the founders of the Myer Emporium, and joined his rich uncles in Australia at the age of 15. Before enlisting in the army, Ettingove wrote to the Australian authorities explaining his deep-seated wish to enlist as a British subject. 'It is my earnest desire', he wrote, 'to enlist as a British Australian soldier, and not as a Russian. I consider myself as of Jewish race (not Russian) and as belonging to the British people, to whom my sympathies and convictions entirely belong, and in whose civilisation I have been educated.' At the time as he was writing this, Russians were being accepted for enlistment in the Australian army without being naturalised. Previously they were required to become British subjects, but from 1915 the Defence department had halted naturalisation for all Russians under the age of 50 years in an attempt to encourage them to join up. But Ettingove wanted to take the oath as an Australian as a matter of

principle. In his case an exception was made and his naturalisation was expedited so that he could enlist with his university comrades.

Haim Platkin [image] was another who made a conscious choice about his identity. He was from the same area of Belarus as his contemporaries, the two Myers brothers, Sidney and Elcon. He left there about the same time they did but Platkin went to England, where he lived for the next 20 years, taking on an English identity, even adopting an English-sounding name, Edward Platt. Under this name he arrived in Australia in 1914 as the impresario for some Russo-Jewish musicians. When the war started he soon became involved in war-charity work, [Image] producing for instance patriotic badges, and even tried to organise a Russian unit within the AIF. Then, he went and enlisted in the AIF; but, in a gesture of solidarity with his motherland, he enlisted under his original, distinctively Russian-Jewish name of Haim Samoilovich Platkin.

Further reassessment of the Anzac legend - mateship, egalitarianism, and endurance - in the context of Anzacs of different ethno-cultural background allows us to see extra dimensions of this legend. The iconic painting by Ellis Silas, "Roll call", captures a glimpse of an army unit after bloody fighting for Queen's Post in Gallipoli on the 9th of May 1915, soon after the landing. [Image] Name after name is called; the reply - a deep silence. The prototype for the commander conducting this roll call was the Gallipoli comrade of Silas - our Lazar Margolin, the commander of the 16th West Australian battalion. The artist Silas's journal chronicled the bond that grew between Margolin and his soldiers after the landing there. Silas records Margolin talking about his men — 'My poor lads', he called them. 'I don't want to lose my boys for nothing'.

Who did Margolin feel himself to be in those hard days - a Russian who grew up on Russian humanistic literature under the tutelage of

teachers at the Belgorod Grammar School, or a Jew who became a warrior and found his roots in the ancient land of Rehovot? No, at that time, first of all, he was an Australian, just like these boys from West Australian farms and mines loyal to the military oath and ready to lay down their lives for their friends. And in spite of the fact that he had been an immigrant, a man with a funny accent, Silas observed how warmly his men responded to him. 'Dear old Margy', they called him, 'a fine fellow and brave beyond compare.' This is indeed the Anzac legend in the making — being reinforced by the palpable 'difference' of Margolin, who is nevertheless readily accepted into it.

But at the very moment Margolin was being absorbed into the legend, there was another side to it, too, as shown in a quite different story unfolding in these first few weeks after the Gallipoli landing. This was the story of Alfred Markowicz, a worldly, well-educated man who as a soldier had showed courage and initiative, saving the lives of his comrades. In his case, however, his foreignness was not seen benevolently: he was arrested merely on suspicion of pro-German sympathies, deported to Australia and discharged.  A pencilled annotation in his service records 'No Crime. Doubtful name'. After the war his life was blighted; attempts to gain justice and clear his name failed and he committed suicide in 1935. When enlisting in the army he gave his denomination as Roman Catholic, but was buried by the Sydney Hevra Kadisha.

Instances of Anzac mateship can be discovered as entries of misconduct in the service records of our Anzacs. One was young William Zavodtchikoff, a Siberian Jew, who was serving in a Queensland depot as a sentry. He had been there several months when he allowed an Australian-born prisoner to escape from the guardroom, whereupon Zavodtchikoff himself was detained. At this, Zavodtchikoff said to the sergeant of the guard: 'You put that man in for nothing. Put me in too.' In Russia no private

in the army, let alone a Jewish private, would ever have dared say anything like that, but clearly Zavodtchikoff was already intoxicated with this newly discovered mateship he had found in the Australian army. Another who took on this spirit wholesale was Norman Myer , another of Sidney Myer's nephews. Norman Myer was, according to his service records, a soldier with exemplary conduct, although he later seemed to enjoy portraying himself as a dinkum digger. 'For leave there were Paris and London. Myer never got the dates exactly. He was prone to stay away until his paybook was exhausted. Then there was the inevitable fine when he got back.'

And again, this seemingly seamless absorption is counterbalanced by another attitude, a tragic one.

In 1948 a story was published in Australian newspapers about someone called "Anzac Harry", who was wounded at Gallipoli while serving with an A.I.F. artillery unit, [and] is in an Arab internment camp at Baalbek (Syria)'. The story related how, after being demobilised at the end of the Great War, this former soldier had gone to Beirut, where he opened 'Anzac Harry's Bar' on the seafront. During the Second World War 'His bar was the first port of call for thirsty men of the 7th Division which fought in Syria and captured Beirut. If a digger were broke, he could always get a drink on the house at "Anzac Harry's".' Harry never said his true name but his photo in the Australian Light Horse uniform on the wall of his bar was the best proof of his authenticity. .

Alas, the archival file revealed that 'Anzac Harry' turned out to be our Haim Samoilovich Platkin, but his experience as a soldier in the AIF had not been a happy one. He enlisted in 1917, enrolling in the Duntroon officer school, where he suffered discrimination as a Russian. After embarking for overseas service, the discriminatory attitudes of his fellow soldiers only got worse. In May 1918 he complained to his commanding

officer that the men 'invariably called me Russian anarchist, Russian spy and [I] am generally considered a suspected person'. He was a cultivated man, who used words as his weapon, and had no real fighting skills - none of this helped allay the mistrust of his fellows. His battery commander's blunt assessment was: 'He is absolutely useless as a gunner being both incapable and unreliable'. His last hope was to be accepted into the Jewish battalion, and he asked for a transfer. ... So, there he was. A man destined to remain an eternal outsider, inventing his exploits in Gallipoli, where he had never fought. And yet. Is this just a story about a stateless Russian Jew assuming a false identity? A story about being ostracised by Australians? No. Rather it is the story of a man who, from the First World War to the Second tried to overcome what he had been denied, and managed to achieve what he aspired to, even if it was only in his imagination. And for the privilege of being called 'Anzac Harry' he was happy to offer free drinks to Australian soldiers ...

In 2016 Kevin Rudd,  visiting my exhibition 'Russian Anzacs: Threads of a Buried History' in Tsarskoe Selo, near St Petersburg, choose to speak at the poster of Lazar Margolin, because he was a hero, and had a high rank. My belief is that for us, and our children and grandchildren, the story of Haim Platkin, a failed, ostracised soldier, must be equally important. They are both part of our history, with all the bright and sad aspects of it.

That is why the story of our Anzacs is not finished. After the publication of my books it continues in my website, which has been built since his young years by my son Raphael. This website aims to tell the story of every Russian born Anzac, including all the Jewish ones. The page of every Jewish Anzac contains links to digitised archival documents, newspaper articles, portraits and blogs. This allows me to find the families

of the Anzacs, with their stories and archives, and to commemorate those who had no family to cherish them.