

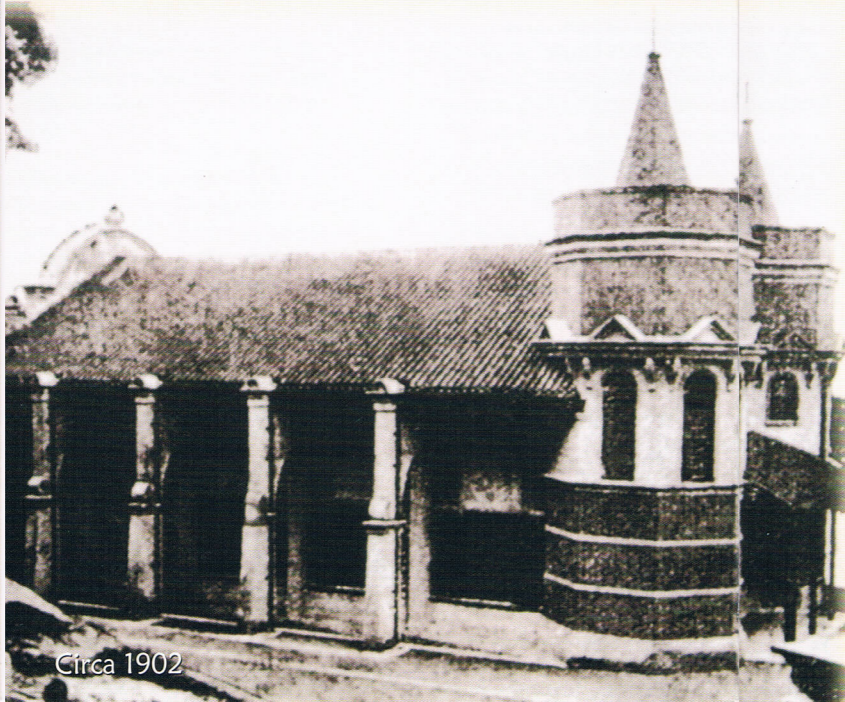


## THE OHEL LEAH SYNAGOGUE Hong Kong

This pamphlet provides a short history of the Jewish community of Hong Kong and the Ohel Leah Synagogue, starting with the arrival of the first Jewish traders and the inauguration of the Synagogue up to the present day.

Hong Kong Island, ceded to the British by the Chinese Emperor Daoguang following the Opium Wars of 1839-42, was dismissively described as a 'barren island with hardly a house on it'. However, it did not take long for the British free-trade policy and assurances of security and protection to attract foreign traders from all over the globe, amongst them Jewish traders from Iraq and India.

By the end of the 19th century, Jewish life in Hong Kong was prospering and the need for a permanent synagogue became clear. The Jewish community was predominantly Sephardi in these early days and comprised mainly the family and staff members of D. Sassoon Sons & Company and E.D. Sassoon & Company, Iraqi merchant houses based in Bombay. Three grandsons of David Sassoon, the patriarch of the Sassoon



Circa 1902

family, purchased land above the city on Robinson Road and gifted this, together with a synagogue building, to the Jewish community of Hong Kong. They requested that the synagogue be named in memory of their mother, Leah Gubbay.

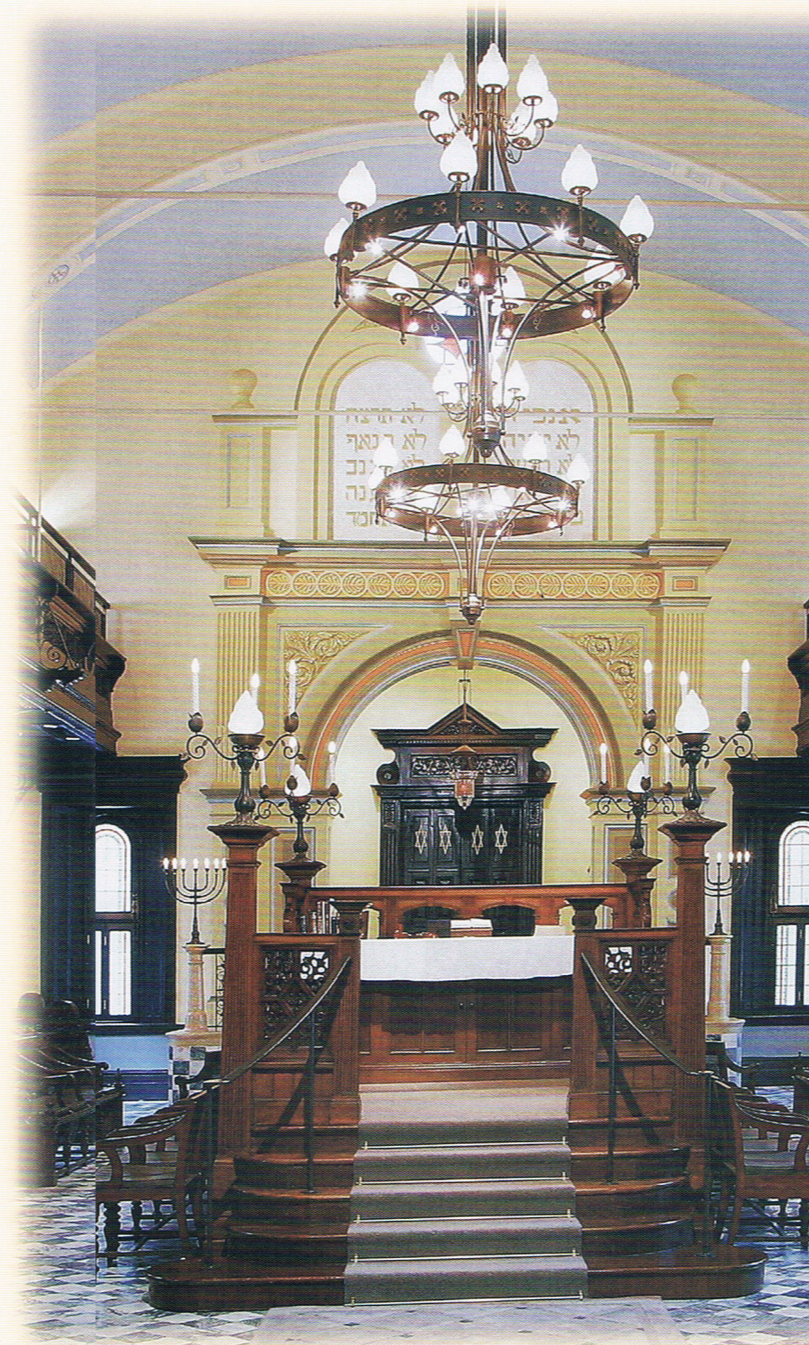
The Synagogue was built by Hong Kong architects Leigh & Orange in Edwardian free-baroque style, which was popular at the time. The exterior was of red brick with white detailing, while the layout of the interior followed Sephardi style. In May 1901, the foundation stone was laid and on 8 April 1902, a formal opening ceremony was held for the new Ohel Leah Synagogue.

In 1905, the Kadoorie family funded the building of a Jewish Recreation Club on part of the Synagogue grounds to accommodate the social activities of the growing Jewish community. The Club consisted of a large hall, a restaurant and bar, library and billiards room. In front, a tennis court and wide lawn provided unobstructed views of Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour.

An influx of Ashkenazi Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe swelled the Jewish community's numbers during the 1880s and 1890s and again in the 1930s. In 1937, a property below the Club was gifted to the community by J.E. Joseph. Named Beth Simcha, in memory of his mother, the property was generously purchased in order to preserve the view of the Harbour, and was used to house the rabbi, with a mikvah on the ground floor.

During World War II, Japanese armed forces occupied the territory and many members of the Jewish community were interned in prisoner-of-war camps. The Synagogue was requisitioned by the Japanese but the Torah scrolls were smuggled out and safely hidden for the duration of the War. While the Synagogue did not suffer serious damage, the Jewish Recreation Club was totally destroyed, and in 1949 the Kadoorie family once again financed the construction of a new Club on the same site.

In the decade following the War, the population of Hong Kong swelled and the Jewish community grew, with many Jewish families fleeing the political turbulence in China to settle in the territory. Hong Kong experienced an economic boom and the area around the Synagogue and Club became a prime residential district. As a result of the extensive construction work in the neighbourhood, the massive granite retaining wall between the Synagogue property and Robinson Road became dangerously unstable. In the late 1980s, following landslides in the area, the Hong Kong government issued a notice requiring the Trustees of the Jewish community to stabilize the entire length of the wall, with the huge cost to be borne by the Trust.



Interior of the synagogue after restoration



Antique Torah scrolls

After much deliberation the Trust decided to develop the land which was occupied by the Jewish Recreation Club and Beth Simcha. The Trust retained the lease on the land and in partnership with a local developer, two residential towers were built. The Synagogue was preserved, and a proviso of the deal was that the retaining wall be stabilized in accordance with government requirements.

A Jewish Community Centre was built in the podium of the new high-rise, and it includes a Jewish day school, a kosher supermarket, meat and dairy restaurants, an indoor swimming pool, function rooms and offices.

At the same time, controversy raged within the Jewish community and spilled over into the Hong Kong community-at-large over whether the Synagogue building should be saved or replaced. Eventually, it was decided to preserve

the original Synagogue and to refurbish it to modern standards while retaining the original feel of the building. In 1997 work began with painstaking care being taken to restore the fabric of the building and its furniture and fittings, including the stained glass windows, shutters, doors and carved teak benches. New tiered seating, better lighting and air-conditioning were added to the women's section upstairs, and the bimah below was moved and raised to improve the acoustics. The work was completed in a year, and on 18 October 1998 a rededication ceremony was held.

In 2000, the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards recognized the 'Conservation and Restoration of the Ohel Leah Synagogue, Hong Kong' as a winning entry for the Outstanding Project Award for Cultural Heritage Conservation.

Today, the Ohel Leah Synagogue remains at the centre of Jewish religious and social life for the vibrant and thriving Jewish community of Hong Kong, and Synagogue membership comprises more than 200 families from over seventeen different countries. The building itself houses a treasured collection of Torah and Haftarah scrolls including some antique ones dating back to the mid-19th century. The Ohel Leah Synagogue retains an atmosphere of spirituality, intimacy and warmth and welcomes all those who pass through her doors.



Interior of the synagogue after restoration

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