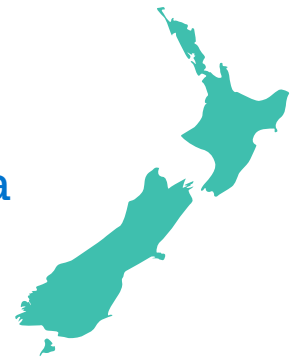


An International Incubator



The Story Behind PJ Library in Australia

(New Zealand too!)



By Justine Saidman

DIRECTOR OF PJ LIBRARY IN AUSTRALIA, SHALOM

THE FIRST TIME I ATTENDED the PJ Library International Conference in 2015, I was one of only six international representatives. There were two others from Russia, two from Mexico City, and one from Singapore. I had traveled the furthest and I was somewhat of a novelty: “You came all the way from Australia?” people asked me. “That’s so far. How long was the flight ... you travelled for 24 hours to be here? Wow!” They applauded when I was introduced, a sense of wonder on their faces, and I could see them all thinking ... there are Jews in Australia? Really? Australia?

While Australia is indeed an island on the edge of the Diaspora, what most people don’t realize is that it was the first PJ Library community outside of Israel, the United States, and Canada. The Australian Jewish community is approximately 120,000 strong. Small by American standards but very active. Some reports indicate that Australian Jews give more money per capita to Israel than any other Jewish community in the world.

The east coast cities of Melbourne and Sydney are home to Australia’s largest Jewish communities with about 55,000 and 50,000 Jews, respectively. Meanwhile, Perth, on the west coast, has the third largest Jewish

community with about 10,000 Jews. The distance between Perth and Sydney is approximately the same as that between Los Angeles and New York.

Overwhelmingly, the Australian Jewish community is made up of Holocaust survivors and their descendants and immigrants from South Africa, Russia, and Israel. In fact, about 10% of Australian Jews speak Russian, and another 10% speak Hebrew at home. The latest research indicates that at least 50% of Jewish children living in Australia do not attend a Jewish day school.

When PJ Library first started sending books to Australia in 2011, our operation was very elementary.

Subscribers registered through an online form and our staff managed their information manually on an Excel spreadsheet. The books were shipped directly to our office in small boxes – sometimes there were 50 or 60 boxes! We stacked them on one side of the office and then, as a team, unpacked them.

Before preparing the books for shipping, we counted every single book, checking our number against the list of books that were sent. (If there was a discrepancy, we went back and recounted or searched for a missing box.) Then a team of dedicated grandparent volunteers spent a morning putting our funder stickers on each book, labeling envelopes, and packaging the books for postage. While books were packaged, someone would read aloud from the various titles. Together we drank tea and ate cake and discussed the merits of one book over another. This was our small inner PJ Library community.

“We absolutely love PJ Library books. Being in Coffs Harbour, it is truly the only contact with Jewish life my son gets besides Shabbat dinner.”

- MELISSA, PJ LIBRARY PARENT

At the end of assembly, there were too many envelopes for us to drop into the mail, so a local Jewish postman came with his car to collect the boxes of packages and mail them for us. He later became the grandparent of a PJ Library child and we hand-delivered his grandchild's first book to him.

In many ways, PJ Library in Australia was a real laboratory for the global expansion of the program. In our tiny office, there was room to try various ways of distributing books, get real-time feedback from a small but very passionate community of readers, and experiment with different models of engagement and community partnerships.

This incubator state was heightened by the fact that in Sydney, PJ Library was fully funded and supported by our dedicated community funding organization The Jewish Communal Appeal (JCA). All operational concerns and engagement protocols were expertly managed by Shalom, a long-standing and successful community engagement organization that has championed programs like Limmud, Melton, and LaunchPad in Australia.

Shalom's openness to experimentation and innovation enabled PJ Library to be open to the various modes of 'doing Jewish' outside of what is commonly accepted in the US. Issues like the absence of a Thanksgiving ritual in secular culture, the lack of snow during an Australian Hanukkah, and the variances of language norms all became important topics of conversation which ultimately strengthened the practice

of PJ Library and the way it operates inclusively as an organization.

Upon reaching 750 subscribers, it sadly became untenable for us to manually manage the packing and distribution of books. We made the switch to a mailing house, which became instrumental in supporting all the growth that was about to come.

In 2017, The Australian Jewish Funders brought three foundations together to support PJ Library's expansion across all of Australia, leveraging existing infrastructure to build an efficient national program. Funders and organizations don't typically partner on continent-wide initiatives so this special collaboration shows just one more way PJ Library can bring positive change to the Jewish community. As we look to continue growing, we will need more committed and visionary funders to join us.

After nationwide expansion, we added New Zealand to our PJ family. We are now serving approximately 2,800 families including eight families living on the tiny island of Tasmania off the southern coast of Australia. The power of PJ Library in remote places like this is demonstrated by the words of one subscriber: "Living in a small regional community, we've learned one of the best ways to share the warmth of Judaism is through stories. Our children have entered the worlds of shtetls, kvetching, and most importantly, mitzvot through the vibrant books we look forward to receiving monthly. For this, we thank PJ Library!"

This year I attended the PJ Library conference with a colleague. There was a large international contingent with representatives from Sifriyat Pijama in Israel as well as teams from Russia, South Africa, Mexico, and the United Kingdom. I was reminded about the magic of Jewish connections, which stretch like elastic across oceans and somehow even through language. We spend so much time focusing on the impact of PJ Library and the people who benefit directly from receiving our beautiful books that we can forget the magic that comes from the community of professionals who have connected through their passion for Jewish literacy and community.



Sharon Arnott Photography

I am honored to now count among my dearest friends those special people who represent PJ Library throughout the world from New Zealand to the UK and beyond. Together we inspire each other to continue to celebrate the richness of Jewish tradition, one story at a time.