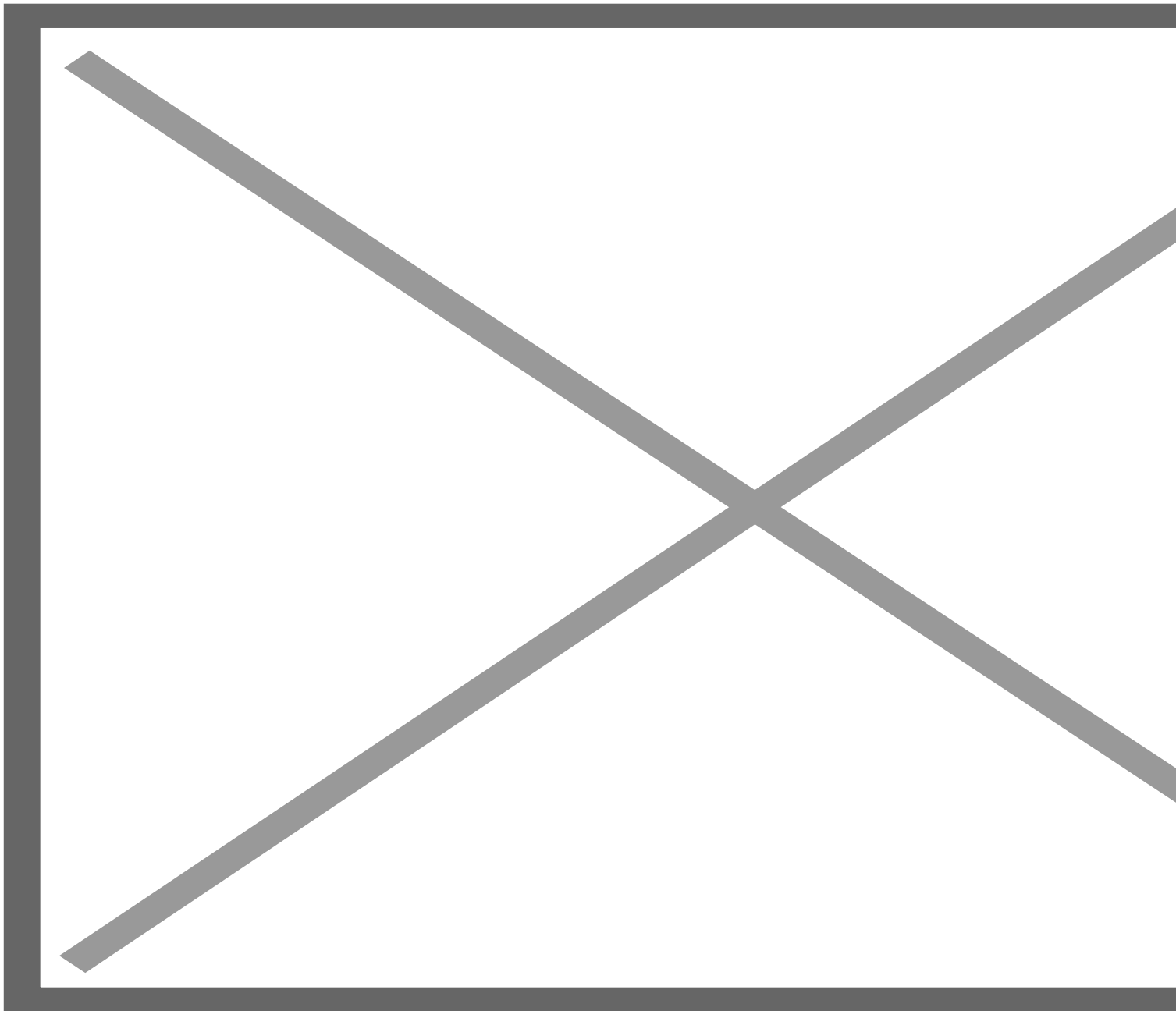


Australia's Jewish community is defined by Holocaust survivors, Yiddishkeit, and immigrants

by [Hannah Feuer](#)

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(Unsplash photo by Robert Zunikoff)

An attack on a Hanukkah celebration at Bondi Beach in Sydney on Sunday killed 15 people and left Jewish communities reeling worldwide. The violence has also drawn attention to the resilience of Australia's distinctive Jewish community, shaped by the world's largest concentration of Holocaust survivors outside Israel, a thriving Yiddish scene, and a large number of [South African](#) Jewish immigrants.

About 117,000 Jews live in Australia, according to 2021 Census figures adjusted for [likely undercounting](#). The community is largely urban, with 84 percent living in either Melbourne or Sydney. Just [over half](#) of Australian Jews were born in the country. Among those born overseas, the largest immigrant groups come from South Africa and Israel.

Religious practice within the community is [diverse](#), with roughly 4 percent identifying as Haredi, 18 percent as Modern Orthodox, 33 percent as traditional or Conservative, 11 percent as Reform, and 21 percent as secular. In other respects, the community is uniquely cohesive: About [half of children](#) attend Jewish day schools—the highest rate for Jewish day school attendance outside of Israel.

Australia has a longstanding, active Yiddish-speaking community. Yiddish is a required daily subject at Melbourne's [Sholem Aleichem College](#), a secular day school with roots in the Jewish Labor Bund founded in 1947. Kadimah, a Jewish cultural center and library in Melbourne founded in 1911, stages plays in the language. The annual Australian [Sof-Vokh Oystralye](#) retreat, founded in 2004, immerses attendees in 48 hours of speaking Yiddish exclusively. In recent years, a revival of Yiddish language and culture among young Australians has also drawn attention, with some embracing it as a "[language of protest](#)."

Being in the Southern Hemisphere, Australians celebrate Hanukkah during their summer, taking pride in being among the first in the world to light the holiday candles due to their early time zone.

The Australian Jewish population nearly [tripled in size](#) from 1938 to 1961. The influx was driven by Holocaust survivors, Hungarian refugees who arrived after the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, and British Jews who migrated under the "Ten Pound Poms" program, which allowed them to move to Australia for just 10 pounds.

In the aftermath of World War II, Australia accepted Holocaust survivors who were living in displaced persons camps, at a time when many countries either refused to take them or imposed strict quotas—including [the United States](#). Not only was Australia one of the few countries willing to accept survivors, it was also just about as far from Europe geographically as one could get, offering a sense of safety in its isolation.

Yet the acceptance of Jewish refugees was at times begrudging. Minister for Immigration Arthur Calwell sold large-scale immigration in the aftermath of World War II not as a humanitarian concern, but under the slogan "[populate or perish](#)," reflecting the need for population growth to boost the economy and enhance national security.

Calwell also covertly introduced [bureaucratic measures](#) to limit the number of Jewish Holocaust survivors allowed to enter Australia, including restricting the number of Jewish survivors permitted on ships leaving Europe to a quarter of all passengers.

But Calwell's efforts to limit Jewish immigration ultimately fell short. In the aftermath of the war, roughly [27,000 Holocaust survivors](#) settled in Australia. As of 2023, about [2,500 of those survivors were still living](#). One of them, Alexander Kleytman, who immigrated to Australia from Ukraine, was killed in Sunday's attack at Bondi Beach while [protecting his wife](#).

Relations between Israel and Australia have been increasingly strained in the past year. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese had been sharply critical of Israel's conduct in Gaza, calling Israel's "[excuses and explanations](#)" for blocking aid to Gaza "an outrage."

Tensions further escalated in September, when Australia was one of about 150 countries that moved to recognize a Palestinian state. In response, Israel [revoked the visas](#) of Australian representatives to the Palestinian Authority.

Yet Australia and Israel have historically been strong allies. Australia's first external affairs minister, [Herbert Vere "Doc" Evatt](#), played a key role in the United Nations partition plan for Palestine and the creation of the Jewish state. In 2017, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu became the [first incumbent Israeli leader](#) to visit Australia, and former Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison had said he was considering recognizing Jerusalem as the Israeli capital. But that position was reversed in 2022 after Albanese, a member of the Labor Party, took office.

Relations deteriorated further after an arson attack on a historic synagogue in Melbourne in December. Netanyahu [sharply criticized](#) Australia's government, saying, "It is impossible to separate the reprehensible arson attack from the federal government's extreme anti-Israeli position."

Following the attack on a Hanukkah celebration at Bondi Beach, Netanyahu doubled down, saying he had warned Albanese that "your call for a Palestinian state pours fuel on the antisemitic fire." Albanese [rejected](#) any link between the two, arguing that support for a two-state solution is a widely held position. —The Forward

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