

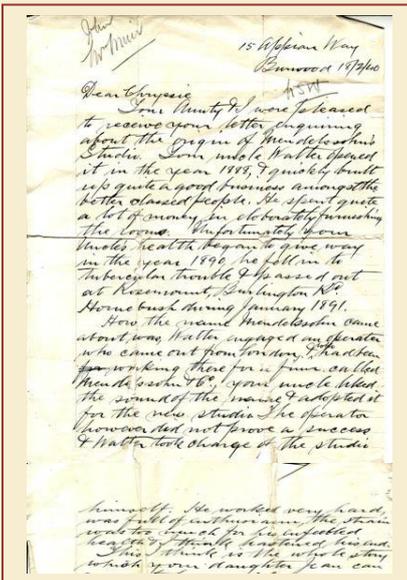
MENDELSSOHN'S PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDIOS

The Melbourne-based photography business known as Mendelssohn and Company, High Art Photographers was established in 1880. It was eventually acquired by Theresa Solomon, who later ran it with her husband, Louis. Popular with actors and entertainers, many of the company's portraits were published in various industry magazines and newspapers. Mendelssohn's did not begin photographing performances or stage companies until 1941, however. A trail blazer for the women's liberation movement, Solomon successfully ran the business after her husband's death in 1926 while also raising their young family.

Situated in the Queen's Walk building at 80 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Mendelssohn and Company, High Art Photographers was established in 1880 by a man named Walter (last name unknown). The business occupied the top two floors of the four storey building. According to later owner Theresa Solomon (nee Greenberg) the name Mendelssohn's was adopted from an unrelated London photographic studio. Even though based in Melbourne, Mendelssohn's also offered its photographic and novelty services around the country from as early as 1890. Solomon was born Theresa Jessie Greenberg in Birmingham, England, on 10 January 1884, the seventh child of Samuel Greenberg, tailor, and Hannah (nee Stibbe). Her family immigrated to Australia the same year she was born, and settled in Melbourne. Greenberg is believed to have been initially employed at Mendelssohn's before purchasing the business sometime prior to her marriage in 1916 to Louis Herbert Solomon (1879-1926).



Information provided by Theresa Solomon's granddaughters, Jenny and Katrina Cowen offers some insight into the company's beginnings. In a letter to a woman named "Chrissie," Solomon wrote:



Your uncle Walter opened (the studio) in the year 1888, and quickly built up quite a good business amongst the better classed people. He spent quite a lot of money in elaborately furnishing the rooms. Unfortunately your uncle's health began to give way in the year 1890, he fell in to tubercular trouble and passed out at Rosemount, Burlington Rd. Homebush during 1891.

How the name Mendelssohn came about was, Walter engaged an operator who came out from London, and who had been working there for a firm called Mendelssohn and Co. Your uncle liked the sound of the name and adopted it for the new studio. The operator however did not prove a success and Walter took charge of the studio himself. He worked very hard, was full of enthusiasm, the strain was too much for his enfeebled health and I think hastened his end. This I think is the whole story...

Shortly their marriage Theresa and Louis expanded the business by acquiring several small studios. In addition to providing photographic services to the general public, the studio was also popular with actors and entertainers. Many of these Mendelssohn's portraits were later published in various industry magazines and newspapers. The company also expanded its business beyond Melbourne, offering its services in several other states.

**TRAVELLERS, AGENTS, Etc.—Smart,
Pushing Agents in all Country Dis-
tricts, Tasmania, for New Special Novelty
Line. Quick selling; large commission.
Write immediately. Mendelssohn's Stu-
dios, 80 Swanston-st., Melbourne. Estab-
lished 20 years.**

The company almost closed down in 1909 when fire destroyed much of the business on 30 April. According to one report the building's caretaker had a narrow escape from death, managing to make his escape but not before being severely burned on the arms (BM: 30 Apr. 1909, 4).

Louis Solomon died on 16 December 1926, leaving his wife to once again run the business on her own. At that time Arthur Rankin was the photographer and Elsie Mc Guinness his assistant. Arthur Peters was the developer and printer, and Ruth Perry the retoucher. The spotter and finisher was Maisie Dent, the colourists were Lilian Nestor, and Ethel Carter. Solomon's sister, Yetta Greenberg, sold her florist shop (which was situated in Glenferrie Road Malvern) and came into the Studio as a receptionist with Valerie Giles.

In correspondence with the AVTA, the Cowen sisters provide some further insight into the company's later decades as one of Melbourne's leading photographic studios:

During the depression years when the people of Melbourne were forced to cut spending on luxuries, and as studio portraits were considered as such, our grandmother and other studio owners introduced coupons. A traveller, Mendelssohn's employed Mr Garland, went from house to house in many suburbs selling 2/- coupons which entitled the buyer to be photographed with one or two proofs to choose from, and then an enlargement and several smaller postcards to a certain value, for an extra amount the photograph could be supplied in sepia or extra again for the enlargement hand coloured in oils and framed.



Joy Cowen (nee Solomon)

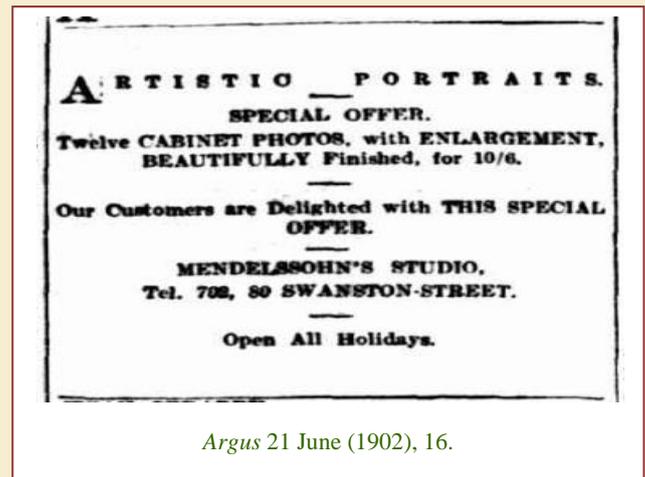
Shortly before the commencement of World War Two our grandmother purchased the Talma Studio from Mr Barry. Talma was also one of Melbourne's oldest studios it was started a few years after Mendelssohn's. Talma was situated at number 79 Swanston Street, on the opposite side of the street to Mendelssohn's. This studio was renamed The New Talma. Our mother, Joy [Cowen], shared the role as receptionist at Talma, with Thelma Robbins. Mr Dick Payne was the operator, as the retouching wizard of Melbourne he was also well known as a photographer. As the studio progressed Elna Larson was employed as a retoucher, and Nancy Hammond as an extra receptionist. All other aspects of the work was done at Mendelssohn's. During the last few years of the war, Mr Dick Payne died and our mother replaced him as the photographer. Miss Jeanne Sutherland was engaged at that time as a receptionist. During this period of time the photography film was mostly imported from the manufacturers Kodak, Ilford and Agfa.

By the time of the Second World War business at the Studios was really booming and the staff was enlarged in every area. Staff worked weekdays, Friday nights and Saturday afternoon. When lighting restrictions were introduced in Australia the Studios' windows were blacked out.

During the war many service men and women came into to the Studios some just to sit and wait until such time as they could board the train to their home city. One sailor pulled down and mended the black-out blinds on the high daylight windows, well beyond the predominately female staffs' reach.

It was not uncommon for servicemen to arrive at the Studios drunk. On one such occasion a young A.I.F soldier insisted that our mother photograph him with two children's toys, one in each arm. When the proof of the picture was shown to the soldier's family, our mother had cut the picture down so that the arms of the soldier and the toys were no longer part of the photograph. It was at this time that an idea was born. The staff of the Studios collected a colour patch or insignia of all the service men that offered them. Each patch had the givers name, number and rank on the back. At the closing of the war several hundred patches, insignia or badges and of course thousands of photographs had been collected.

Weddings played a major part of the photography business in all of the four studios (with another Mendelssohn Studio at 29 Langhorne Street, Dandenong and Warwick Studios in the city) owned by our grandmother. Saturday afternoons were usually the busiest. The police on traffic and point duty in the city had to regulate the bridal cars, therefore these policemen became friends of the Studios staff and tea and coffee was always available to them. Sometimes the photographer would be asked to go to the bride's home prior to the wedding, attend the ceremony and then to attend and photograph at the reception. Prior to the Second World War the most popular wedding day was Easter Saturday, it was not uncommon for the studios to be employed to photograph between ten and twenty weddings on that day alone (12 Apr. 2012).



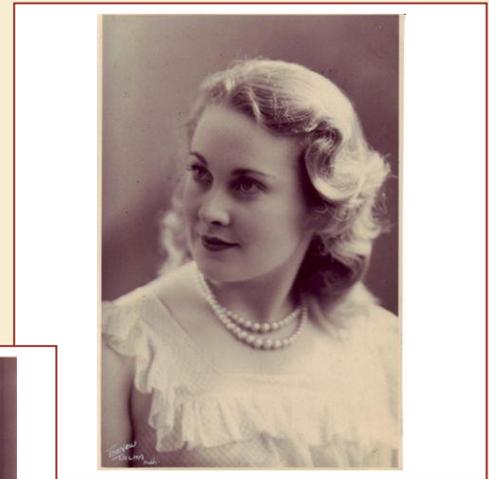
Argus 21 June (1902), 16.

While actors and variety performers had been using Mendelssohn's from the start of its operations, the company did not begin photographing performances or stage companies until 1941. According to the Cowens the performer who gave their mother the most pleasure was singer Mary Miller who won the 1948 *Sun* Aria competition. "Mary from Ormond was a beautiful blonde and blue-eyed girl who was photographed by Mendelssohn's from a very young schoolgirl until her final concert," writes Jenny Cowen. "Sadly she died only one year after winning the *Sun* Aria. She was twenty-three years old. Her win and her death made the front page of the *Sun* newspaper. On Tuesday the 11th January 1949 the *Sun* reported:"

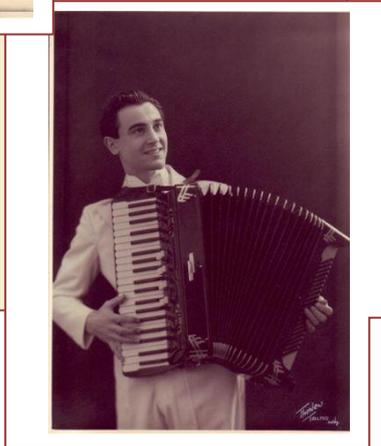
More than 200 cars waited outside the home and others joined in along the route to the crematorium, where 300 people were waiting.... All the shops in North-rd., Ormond, were closed. People lined the streets for three miles from the Miller home. Many took up their positions an hour before the cortege was due.



Maggie Fitzgibbon



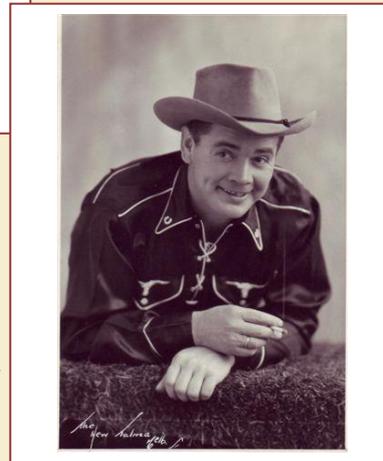
Mary Miller



Lou Topanno



Max Oldaker



Smoky Dawson

A selection of Mendelssohn's theatrical portraits.

Mendelssohn's closed down sometime around 1949 after a number of the buildings housing its studios were demolished and some key family members retired or moved on from the business. As the family had no storage space a great deal of material - including films and plates were sent to the tip.

Theresa Jessie Solomon died on 16th May 1959. A talented photographer and successful business woman, she was in many respects a trail blazer for the women's liberation movement, managing to raise a family (largely on her own) while continuing to run an exceptionally successful business.

FURTHER REFERENCE

Cowen, Jenny. "Picture Perfect." *Inside History* Jan-Feb. (2015), 50-53



Theresa and Yetta Solomon photographed "in character" at Mendelssohn Studio pre-1916



Above: Jeffrey Solomon
Below: Roma Solomon



ATTENTION !

Mendelssohn Studio

have pleasure in advising RESIDENTS of MORWELL and SURROUNDING DISTRICTS that their Photographers will be operating in the Morwell Town Hall (Supper Room) on MONDAY and TUESDAY, JULY 22nd and 23rd.

Clients who wish to take this MARVELLOUS OPPORTUNITY, and have not an appointment, just COME ALONG and we'll be only too pleased to HELP YOU.

"A PICTURE OF FAME CARRIES MENDELSSOHN'S NAME"

Morwell Advertiser 18 July (1946), 11.



WEDDING BREAKFAST

To celebrate the Marriage of
Mr L. Herbert Solomon
with
Miss Theresa Greenberg



Mr R. Greenberg

Dejeuner

Huitres En Cocktail
Tortue Claire Des Indes
Aiguillettes De Sole Tartare
Tournedos Richelieu
Supreme De Volaille "Oriental"
Salade Waldorf
Asperges d'Argentueil Beurre Fondu
Crêpe Suzette
Bombe Framboise
Dessert
Café

Oriental Hotel
8th February 1916

This entry has been sourced from family research undertaken by Jenny and Katrina Cowen (Theresa Solomon's granddaughters). Unless otherwise noted all images in this biography are courtesy of the Cowens.