

# BRUCHIM HABAIM AND SHEHECHEYANU!

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In June 1941, the SA Jewish Board of Deputies brought out the first issue of Jewish Affairs. Intended as being no more than a news and information bulletin, this soon developed into a popular general interest Jewish cultural, historical and current affairs journal, providing a forum for discussion and original research on a wide variety of topics of Jewish interest. It has since become an essential information resource on the South African Jewish community, covering topics from Apartheid through to Zionism.

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In publishing JEWISH AFFAIRS, the SA Jewish Board of Deputies aims to produce a cultural forum which caters for a wide variety of interests in the community.

JEWISH AFFAIRS aims to publish essays of scholarly research on all subjects of Jewish interest, with special emphasis on aspects of South African Jewish life and thought.

It will promote Jewish cultural and creative achievement in South Africa, and consider Jewish traditions and heritage within the modern context. It aims to provide future researchers with a window on the community's reaction to societal challenges. In this way the journal hopes critically to explore, and honestly to confront, problems facing the Jewish community both in South Africa and abroad, by examining national and international affairs and their impact on South Africa.

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# JEWISH BITTEREINDES OF THE ANGLO-BOER WAR

David Saks

30 August 2019

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***Editor's note:*** To mark the centenary of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, *Jewish Affairs* devoted its Spring 1999 issue to examining the Jewish role in the conflict. The issue quickly became one of the most popular ever brought out by the journal, which went on to publish further articles on the subject during the following decade. This year being the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the commencement of the war, it is an opportune time for *Jewish Affairs* to revisit this perennially interesting topic, and accordingly, the remaining issues of 2019 will include further items relating to it. We hope readers will forgive the editor for kicking off the series with one of his own pieces, which looks at some of the Jews who not only served on the Boer side, but chose to do so long after the war was lost – in the parlance of the time, “to the bitter end”. An earlier version of the article appeared in the Chanukah 2009 issue of *Jewish Affairs*.

The Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of which falls on 11 October this year, was the last and by far the greatest of the many conflicts that wracked South Africa during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The result of the war, which pitted the forces of two small[1] Boer republics, the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* (ZAR) and the Orange Free State, against the full might of the British Empire, was never seriously in doubt. Even so, during its opening months, it was the British who were firmly on the back foot as they struggled to expel Boer invasion forces in Natal, the Eastern and North-Western Cape and Bechuanaland. Typically, the Boers settled for besieging British garrisons, in Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking, and in attempting to relieve them, the British suffered a series of embarrassing reverses. By the end of February 1900, however, the tide had turned decisively. Within a few months, the Boer capitals of Bloemfontein and Pretoria had fallen and those Boers still under arms were being driven steadily eastwards towards the Mozambique border. It looked all but over, but in reality, the Boers were far from finished. Too outnumbered to continue waging a conventional war, they now split up into smaller units

that roamed the countryside and harried the British invaders at every opportunity.

## The Jewish Boers

While native-born Afrikaners comprised the vast majority of those who served in the Boer armed forces, between two and three thousand were from other backgrounds. They included Dutch, German, Irish, Scandinavian and other foreign volunteers who made their way to South Africa to fight for the republics. A small number, perhaps 300 in all, were Jews. Some were themselves volunteers from European countries while a handful, including members of the pioneering Baumann family in Bloemfontein, had been born in the republics. The majority, however, were recent immigrants from Lithuania and other East European territories forming part of the then Russian Empire. Being citizens, Free State Jews were conscripted like everybody else; in the ZAR, where few Jews had *burgher* rights, most of those who served would have done so as volunteers.



Unlike the foreign detachments, Jews never comprised a distinct corps, but were spread throughout the Boer forces. The advantage of this from this writer's point of view was that when writing my book *Boerejode: Jews in the Boer Armed Forces, 1899-1902*, I was able to bring in all the main features of the war through referring to the role that individual Jews played in them. There turned out to be a Jewish angle, however small, to all the major battles and sieges, the guerrilla war, the home front, the POW camps and even to a limited extent the tragedy of the concentration camps. At

least eight Jews were killed in action and four more died in captivity.[2] Nearly a hundred became POWs (sometimes on suspicion of assisting the Boers rather for having actually fought with them).

For the most part, those Jews who appear on wartime lists – as new recruits or POW records – are just names. Little or nothing is known of what they did during the war. The remainder of this article will look at some of those who did make an impact and whose stories have at least been partially recorded.



**Jewish Boer POWs, l-r: John Weinberg (Cape Town and Ceylon), Veld-Kornett Herbert Baumann (St. Helena), Aaron Pincus (Bermuda), Hermann Jaffshitz (Ceylon)**

## **The elusive N D Kaplan**

More than half a century after the war, war veteran F Zeiler described his old comrade-in-arms Niklaas David Kaplan in the following terms:

*Nou ja, hy het wel soos n bondel wasgoed op n perd gesit, maar waar verstand nodig was om die Engelse te uitoorle, was Kaplan se plan altyd van die bestes. Hy het baie maal vir ons die treinspoor gelaai, en waar hy die skoot gepland het, was die ontploffing ook n seker ding.*

Roughly translated, it means that while Kaplan resembled a pile of laundry when astride a horse (!), when it came to outwitting the English, his plan was always the best. On many occasions, it was he who mined the railway tracks, and wherever he laid the charge, a successful detonation was sure to follow.

Kaplan features in Roland W Schikkerling's journal *Commando Courageous*, a vivid record of the guerrilla campaign in the Eastern Transvaal: "Kaplan was a Jew and he was no coward [sic!]. Among other daring enterprises, he once crept up to a blockhouse with two bombs slung around his neck in a saddle wallet". Kaplan was a favourite of General Ben Viljoen and, as a singer and comedian, was a popular member of his

commando. Indeed, as Schikkerling further notes, Kaplan (“with the true instinct of his race”) acted as a bookmaker when the commando entertained themselves by staging horse races, held in Pilgrim’s Rest on Christmas Day, 1901.[3]

The Jewish *oudstryder* (war veteran) Sascha Schmahmann also met Kaplan, whom he remembered well “because he had one brown and one very blue eye”, when he arrived at Slypsteendrift with a report that General Trevor (to whom he had been Adjutant) had been killed. “The Boers said of Kaplan that he was a very brave man. They admired his efficiency in the use of the Pom-Pom, a gun he had learnt to use in Russia,” Schmahmann told his interviewer. He added that Kaplan fought in the war to the bitter end, and by its conclusion had been promoted to Commandant. Regrettably, nothing is known about what happened to Kaplan thereafter, apart from a vague reference to his setting up a business in Springfontein.



### **Jacob “Paul Kruger se Jood” Arnhold**

Jacob Arnhold was one of the very few Jewish career soldiers in the Boer forces. Born in Leipzig in 1871, he was orphaned at an early age and settled as a teenager in the ZAR. In 1894, he joined the *Staats-Artillerie*. His pre-war activities including taking part in the defeat of Dr L S Jameson and his luckless raiders in 1896, and to the end of his days he relished the memory of the three pom-pom guns captured.

Arnhold took part in most of the important engagements in the Natal theatre, including Dundee, Ladysmith and Spioenkop. Known as ‘Paul

Kruger se Jood' because of his loyalty to the legendary Afrikaner leader, he was later one of Kruger's bodyguards during the latter's journey into exile. Arnhold fought throughout the war, finally laying down his arms at Wakkerstroom after peace was concluded, and remained a *bittereinde* until the end of his life. Interviewed by Chief Rabbi Louis Rabinowitz in the late 1940s (see photo), he poured scorn on the *verraiers* (traitors) who had 'hensopped' ('upped hands', i.e. surrendered) and spoke with pride about what the Boers had achieved:

"It was a great war. 60 000 Burghers who were not soldiers fought against 400 000 British soldiers and 3000 Indian Lancers [sic]. And still we might have beaten them had not Lord Roberts instituted his pernicious blockhouse system. At every mile they set them up, it was too much for us".



### **Jacob Leviton**

Like Arnhold, Jacob Leviton could claim to have served continually in the Republican forces from the Jameson Raid right through to the conclusion of the Anglo-Boer War. In between, he took part in the Malaboch (1896) and Mpefu (1898) campaigns in the Northern Transvaal. He fought in all the major battles in Natal, and during the guerrilla campaign, with the rank of corporal, participated in various guerrilla operations in the Eastern Transvaal.

Leviton's reminiscences of this final period were darkened by his witnessing the devastation wrought by the enemy's scorched earth tactics. On one occasion, he saw Boer children lying on the ground looking for grain at a siding. Reports of the tragedies in the concentration camps were constantly filtering through to the menfolk in the field, generating lasting bitterness.

Jewish *bittereindes* were largely spared this ordeal, being mostly young and unmarried. However, a number of Jewish families were interned and several Jewish children are recorded as having died in captivity, amongst them two of the children of Solomon Bernstein (Heilbron) and the infant daughter of Joseph Horwitz (Klerksdorp).

During the bitter winter of 1901, Leviton's section moved to the Lowveld to spare their horses and find forage. That year, Leviton participated in the hard-fought Boer victory at Bakenlaagte. He finally surrendered on 18 June 1902, three weeks after peace was made.

### **The Dutch Die-hard: J C Duveen**

Joel Charles Duveen was a Dutch Jew who arrived in the ZAR during the 1890s. His gallant conduct during the conventional phase of the war, particularly at the battle of Spioenkop, was long remembered by those who fought alongside him. During the guerrilla stages, he continued to display the reckless gallantry for which he was by now well known.[4] His feats during this time were communicated to Rabbi Rabinowitz many years later by his old comrade-in-arms Major Mauritz Domisse (whose mother was Jewish).

“He was a real dare-devil and never satisfied unless he was in some scrap with the enemy” Domisse wrote of Duveen. It was these qualities that brought him to the notice of General Beyers, who selected him for intelligence work behind the enemy lines. This he usually carried out himself, but sometimes did so in the company of a small patrol. Duveen's luck ran out in October 1901, when he was severely wounded in the stomach during an attack on a fortified camp at Prusen near Potgietersrus. He was removed to the Potgietersrus hospital, where he was made a prisoner and sent to India for the remainder of the war.

### **A Pilten Pairing – Wolf and ‘Jakkals’**

Joseph ‘Jakkals’ Segall was only seventeen when he joined the Phillippolis Commando. By then, Bloemfontein had fallen and the guerrilla war was underway. General JBM Hertzog was at first reluctant to enlist him, believing him to be too young, but yielded when Segall let him know that he was determined to remain in the field and “defend the freedom of his Afrikaner friends”. Within a short time, Hertzog's misgivings evaporated as the young recruit's dedication and abilities became apparent.

One wartime incident Segall liked to recount in later life concerned the conclusion of General Hertzog's famous raid into the Cape, which in turn

was bound up with the dramatic climax of what came to be called the ‘Second Great De Wet Hunt’. De Wet was also in the Cape, having invaded in the vain hope of provoking a Cape Dutch uprising. Hertzog joined up with him at Sanddrift near Phillipstown, on the southern bank of the rain-swollen Orange River. They were trapped there, unable to find a place to risk a crossing, and the pursuing British columns were closing in from all directions. Segall persuaded Hertzog to allow him to try to swim across. “I am going back to the old Free State” he said and dived into the water, just making it to the other side. He was pulled out, more dead than alive, by his old friend Adrian Schoeman and his black servant. When he revived, he saw that they were already starting to fight on the Cape side of the river. The British could be seen approaching and shells were bursting all around. De Wet and Hertzog made a fighting retreat, eventually finding a usable drift and crossing back into the Free State. Rosenthal remarks in his interview with Segall that it was thanks to his warning that the *Vrystaatse Hoofkwartier* could come to their aid and take them over the Colesberg bridge.

There were two particular engagements that Segall used to recall, Vegtkop near Phillipolis and a second clash on the Kroonstad-Bethlehem line. His good friend Nicolaas Havenga was wounded beside him on both these occasions. In November 1937, Segall, Havenga (by then Minister of Finance in the Hertzog government) and another veteran, Jac du Toit, attended a commemorative ceremony at the Vegtkop battlefield and spoke of their experiences there.

It was Segall’s turn to be wounded, and in his case captured, towards the end of May 1902, less than two weeks before the war ended. On a pitch-black night, the Boers were cutting their way through barbed wire protecting the railway line against sabotage when a fusillade broke out and Segall was hit in the leg. It is not correct, as was subsequently claimed on his behalf, that he was the last casualty of the Anglo-Boer War, but he was certainly one of them.

For a long time it was asserted that Segall’s famous nickname derived from his skills as a scout and spy. Actually, the real reason was the presence in the commando of another Jew, Wolf Jacobson. *Wolf en Jakkals* are a legendary pairing in Afrikaner folklore. A correspondent to *Die Volksblad*, Bloemfontein, identified as “Oom Holster of Ladybrand”, wrote (9 September 1948): “*Omdat daar toe ’n ‘wolf’ in die kommando was, het die burgers gedink dat daar ook ’n ‘jakkals’ moet wees en so is Segall toe ‘Jakkals’ genoem*”.[5] Another reason for this particular pairing must have been because the two men were together a great deal, both because they were Jews and because they had come from the same shtetl in Latvia, Pilten.

What of the second half of the Wolf-Jakkals pairing? In contrast to Segall, who lived long enough to be interviewed when people were belatedly starting to take an interest in Jews who fought for the Boers, Wolf Jacobson was never approached to tell his story, and hence only the bare facts of his career are known. At the start of the war, he enlisted in the Fauresmith-Phillipolis Commando, serving first under General Hertzog and thereafter under his successor, Chas. Niewoudt. He was on Niewoudt's Staff-Corps and remained in the field until the end.



**Wolf Jacobson and Joseph Segall , aka 'Wolf and Jakkals'**

### **Max Goldman and the Bushman's Kop *Sefer Torah***

Max Goldman's journey to South Africa commenced with his fleeing Russia after falling asleep on guard duty and losing his rifle. Still in his teens, he arrived in Port Elizabeth and took up '*smousing*' (peddling). In the course of his travels, he met and married a Boer farmer's daughter and took to farming himself.

Goldman remained loyal to Judaism, and this nearly cost him his life during the guerrilla campaign in the Free State. He was doing patrol work when he heard that the British were about to attack Bushman's Kop, where he knew a Jew named Michailsky kept a shop in which there was a *Sefer Torah*. Goldman, accompanied by his brother-in-law, made his way to Bushman's Kop to rescue the *Torah*, which he duly obtained and stowed into his saddlebag. On their return home, the two men were accosted by a British soldier, who accused them of being spies and threatened to shoot

them. Even as he had his rifle against Goldman's chest, an officer arrived on the scene. Goldman explained that he was carrying a Scroll of the Law "which the Christians had rejected but the Jews held sacred", opening his bag so that the officer could see for himself. They were allowed to continue on their way.

Goldman still had the *Sefer Torah* after the war ended. The nascent Wepener Jewish community held services in his home, and he was one of two candidates for the position of *gabbai* when the time came to formally establish a congregation. Prior to the election (which Goldman won), his wife let it be known that whichever way the voting went, she would not allow the *Torah* to be taken from her house since it had saved the life of her husband and her brother.

### **Who was the 'Cohen' in Deney's Reitz's *Commando*?**

On 17 September 1901, during his famous invasion of the Cape, General Jan Smuts led an attack on a British camp at Modderfontein some fifteen kilometres northwest of Tarkastad in the Eastern Cape. It was manned by some 200 of the 17<sup>th</sup> Lancers, relatively inexperienced and, as it proved, no match for their battle-hardened opponents. Denys Reitz was in the thick of the fight, and in his classic war memoir *Commando* recorded how it unfolded:

"The place we were fighting in was an outcrop of loose rocks, jutting up like a reef, nowhere much higher than a man, although the rear slope fell somewhat more steeply into the English camp. In this narrow space, where we were facing each other almost at handshake, a grim duel began. As the soldiers raised their heads to fire, we brought them down, for they were no match for us in short-range work of this kind, and we killed twelve or thirteen and wounded several more at a distance of a few yards. We did not suffer a single casualty, except for a few men hit as we rode in. Of these, one was .... a Jew named Cohen with a smashed ankle. These two had been able to crawl through to the firing line and were taking part in the attack".

The British camp was quickly overwhelmed and plundered, but when it was time to move on a day or two later, Cohen had to be left behind as his wound had turned gangrenous. Wrote Reitz, "Besides from being a brave man Cohen must have been a bit of a wag, for I subsequently read in an English newspaper that when he was captured and asked by a British officer why he, a Jew and an Uitlander, was fighting for the Boers he replied that he was fighting for the Franchise".[6]

Here, Cohen was alluding sardonically to how denying the vote to British settlers in the ZAR had been used by Britain as a pretext to provoke the war

in the first place. At the same time, he was also speaking the literal truth, since Jews in the republic likewise could not vote but could gain burgher status if they volunteered for armed service.

Cohen features at greater length in *Kommandojare*, the memoirs of J H Meyer who had taken part in Smuts' invasion. It describes the Modderfontein engagement and includes a lively portrayal of the Cohen referred to by Reitz:

*Ou Heimie was 'n karakter van sy eie. Hy was nie meer'n jong man nie; naby die sestig, met a groot bleskop, 'n paar tamaai wenkbroue en 'n mankerige linkerbeen. Hy was vir ons 'n gedurige bron van vermaak, altyd opgeruimd en vol grappe en met die hande aan die beduie wanneer hy sy eie soort Engels of Afrikaans praat. Ons was almal baie lief vir hierdie Jood. Hy was 'n goeie vriend en 'n aangename makker. En hy was 'n vuurwarm Kruger-man.[7]*

Meyer confirms that Cohen ('Heimie' must have been a nickname, since his real forenames were David Louis) was in the forefront of the attack on the Lancers' camp, despite being wounded. He goes on to relate that during the scramble for booty afterwards, he hurried over to a group of horses to obtain a new mount for himself and there found Cohen sitting on the ground with about twenty horses tethered together with a long leather thong. Clinging as hard as he could to the rope, Cohen called out, "Dese are mine! Dese are mine! Dey're all mine!" When Meyer next looked, he saw a group of burgers descend upon them, and a moment later Cohen was left, sorely protesting, with just the tether in his hand.

Cohen's smart retort to the question why he had joined up with the Boers has its parallel in an exchange between another Jewish prisoner and his captors (Springs, July, 1900). When scornfully asked by them, "Is this what you call a free country?" he responded, "It is free enough for me! I come from a country of real oppression – from Shadova in Lithuania".



Unveiling of monument to Jews who died in the service of the Boer Republics, Ladysmith. 6 August 2012: It was erected by the SAJBD in partnership with the Ladysmith Siege Museum Trust. Pictured: Linda Nathan, Mary Kluk, Rabbi Moshe Silberhaft, David Saks, Ronnie Herr.

[1] In terms of population, of course, not area

[2] By comparison, 127 died serving in the British forces, whether by enemy action or disease.

[3] Schikkerling R W, *Commando Courageous - A Boer's Diary* (Johannesburg, 1964), p338

[4] For more on Duveen, see Rabinowitz, L I, 'Joel Charles Duveen: Another Jewish Hero of the Boer War' in *Jewish Guild Annual*, Sept 1952

[5] "Because there was already a 'wolf' in the commando, the burghers considered that there must also be a 'jakkals', and so Segall was named 'Jakkals'.

[6] Reitz, D, *Commando, A Boer Journal of the Boer War*, London, Faber 1929, p234.

[7] Meyer, J H, *Kommandojare*, Human & Rousseau, 1971, pp256-7 ("Old Heimie was a character of note. He was no longer a young man, nearly sixty, with a big, bald head, a pair of enormous eyebrows and a lame left leg. He was an enduring source of comment for us, always cheerful and ready with a joke, gesticulating with his hands when speaking his unique brand of English and Afrikaans. He was a good friend and a pleasant companion. And he was a fiery Kruger man")

# ISRAEL'S WOMEN WAGE PEACE SHOW THE WAY

Yanir Grindler

04 September 2019

**Yanir Grindler** is the Political Liaison officer at the SA Jewish Board of Deputies. He has an honours degree in Psychology from the University of Witwatersrand and, as a passionate mental health advocate, devotes time to counselling at a special needs school in the Johannesburg CBD. He is a former chairperson of the SA Union of Jewish Students at Wits, and won four student leader awards during his tenure.



The author introducing the Women Wage Peace delegation. From left, Yasmin Rubin-Cooper, Hyam Tannous, Manar Abu Dahl and Vered Eyal-Saldinger.

Coinciding with South Africa's Women's Month, the SA Jewish Board of Deputies recently hosted a delegation from the Israeli peace movement 'Women Wage Peace'. Consisting of two Jewish, one Christian Arab and a Muslim Arab woman, the delegation engaged with government, civil society, academia, business, young people and the media, sharing their important messaging of peace-building through dialogue. Their visit, we believe, was an extraordinary success in terms of shifting the SA-Israeli narrative and how Israel is perceived in this country.

## ***Who are Women Wage Peace?***

WWP is a grassroots civil society movement founded in the aftermath of the 2014 Gaza conflict. Today it has over 40 000 members from across the religious, ethnic, social and political spectrum who come together to call for peaceful solutions, through monthly demonstrations, lobbying weekly in the Knesset and holding regular marches and campaigns throughout Israel. The movement is not affiliated with any political party. Its members include women from diverse communities within Israeli society: right, centre and left; religious and secular; Jews, Arabs, Druze and Bedouin; young women and older women; women from the centre of the country and from the periphery. The movement does not support any one particular solution to the conflict.

The movement has 2 main goals:

- \* To promote a political agreement as a strategic solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.
- \* To include women in all aspects of decision making as mandated by UN Resolution 1325.

This resolution recognises that women are a key to promoting sustainable peace processes and ending violent conflict, and therefore, it is obligatory to include them in all aspects of decision making, especially regarding issues of peace and security.

## ***Why the SAJBD chose to host them in South Africa.***

The SAJBD brought out WWP to interact with people across a wide spectrum of racial, political, and religious backgrounds during Women's month. It was strongly felt that their message of peace through dialogue rather than division and boycott was important for South Africans to hear. We also believe that South Africa is a model of justice and reconciliation through dialogue, and so the WWP message would strongly resonate with the local narrative. In just a few days, we believe that our guests significantly shifted the way Israel and its relationship with its neighbours is perceived in South Africa. By bringing out this delegation, we also wanted to show the common desire for peace among ordinary Israelis, despite the problems the country faces. The delegation comprised four women from diverse faith groups, all situated at different points on the political spectrum but bound together by a mutual commitment to bringing an end to the conflict. Each member of the delegation shared their own unique stories, challenges and reason for being part of the organisation.



‘Women in Dialogue’ engagement hosted by the Human Sciences Research Council.

Part of the movement's strength lies in its not being affiliated with any political party, and by the diversity of a membership drawn from a broad spectrum of Israeli society. This gave the SAJBD an opportunity to engage with a diversity of stakeholders, many whom we hadn't been able to connect with previously. We divided the women's programme into seven sections: engaging the youth, government, influential South African business people, civil society, academia, interfaith and the media. While the women were here, we also felt it necessary that they engaged in different aspects of the South African story. The lessons that they were able to draw from the South African experience wasn't simply a personal exercise for members of the delegation, it also gave them the opportunity to elevate their level of engagement when interacting in different environments. By drawing lessons from our own history, they were able to speak directly to South Africans, contextualizing their important message within our unique context.

### ***The programme***

On the youth front, we used the opportunity to share a message of peace through dialogue to those often exposed to an opposing BDS message of polarization and boycott. We hosted three well-attended interactive discussions with the youth in Johannesburg and Cape Town, and further set up a more intimate meeting in which the WWP were able to personally interact with youth leaders of the ANC and EFF.



Women Wage Peace delegate Vered Eyal Saldinger engaging with Graca Lekola-Modiba at the youth event.

Together with influential businesswomen in the community, we co-hosted two hugely successful women's month events with key women business leaders. We also met with key government officials, including members of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (Dirco). This was indeed very encouraging. The theme of South African's women's month gave us the opportunity to engage with a number of stakeholders involved in the 'Peace, Women and Security Agenda'. In Pretoria, the SAJBD co-hosted an intimate dialogue with Professor Cheryl Hendricks and the Human Sciences Research Council on the topic of Women's role in peace-building. In attendance were leaders of UN Women, the SA Women in Dialogue, leaders from the National Interfaith Council of SA, the Commission of Gender Equality, the SA National Defence Force, the Zanele Mbeki Development Trust and other civil society leaders. Charlotte Lobe, the focal point of Women, Peace and Security from Dirco was also in attendance. Attendees were inspired and encouraged by the compassionate first-hand stories they heard, afterwards sharing contact details and committing to continue the engagement, bringing Israel into the South African conversation from a more nuanced direction.



Women Wage Peace delegates and Muslim women from the Turquoise Harmony Institute showing off their solidarity bracelets.

Of the four people in the delegation, Vered and Yasmin are Jewish, Manar is Muslim and Hyam is Christian. Given their diversity, we were able to engage in a number of interfaith spaces. In Johannesburg, we co-hosted an interfaith dialogue with the Gauteng Department of Sports, Arts, Culture and Recreation, at the Women's Jail at Constitution Hill. The event was facilitated by the previous chairperson of the CRL Commission, Ms Thoko Mkwanazi-Xaluva and gave us the opportunity to engage with diverse interfaith women, many involved in South African civil society. The WWP also attended services at Church and at Shul. They were welcomed by the Impact for Christ Church in the Johannesburg CBD, where they spoke in front of 4000 passionate congregants. In Cape Town, we co-hosted an interfaith lunch with the Turquoise Harmony Institute, inviting the WWP and members of the Cape Town Muslim community. Finally, on the media front, the general level of engagement was encouraging. There was none of the hostility that visiting Israeli groups are so often confronted with. Rather, our visitors were received with enthusiasm and their key message of negotiation through dialogue rather than boycotting was warmly received.

The SAJBD thanks the generous donors who made it possible for us to host this remarkable group of women in our country.

# THE BIRZAI/BIRZH MEMORIAL PROJECT, LITHUANIA

Veronica Belling, with Glenda Levitt

04 September 2019

*Dr Veronica Belling is the author of Bibliography of South African Jewry (1997), Yiddish Theatre in South Africa (2008), and the translator of Leibl Feldman's The Jews of Johannesburg (2007) and Yakov Azriel Davidson: His Writings in the Yiddish Newspaper, Der Afrikaner, 1911-1913 (2009). This article was prepared in consultation with and the input of Glenda Levitt, who with her husband Abel headed up the Birzai/Birzh Memorial Project.*

On 16 June 2019, a new memorial for the victims of the massacre that took place near Birzai, Lithuania, was unveiled. Located in the Astravas Grove in the Pakamponys forest four kilometres outside the town, it is the third memorial in Lithuania to bear the names of the victims at the massacre site. It is also the second memorial wall of names that Abel and Glenda Levitt, former South Africans living in Kfar Saba, Israel, were instrumental in creating. The previous memorial, in the Kausenai forest where the Jews of Plunge, including Abel Levitt's family, were murdered, was unveiled in July 2011. The Levitts were also indirectly instrumental in inspiring the creation of a second name memorial to the murdered Jews of Kedainiai, unveiled a couple of months later in 2011. Their work culminating in the Birzai project was acknowledged with the award of the Lithuanian Medal of



**Glenda and Abel Levitt receiving the Medal of Honour from Lithuanian Ambassador to Israel Edminas Bagdonas.**

Honour of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the “Lithuanian Diplomacy Star.” It was presented to them by the Lithuanian Ambassador in Israel, Edminas Bagdonas, “for fostering relations between the Republic of Lithuania and the State of Israel and the commemoration of historical memory.”

## Origins of the project

It was the Levitts’ involvement in the establishment of a Tolerance Education Centre in a high school in Plunge that first brought them to Birzai. They were invited there by Ingrida Vilkiene, Project Director of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet regimes, to meet history teachers at the local high school, Vidmantas Jukonis and his son, Merunas, who had a great interest in the history of the Jews who had once resided in their town. However, the idea of creating a memorial bearing the names of the victims at the Birzai massacre site was born after the Levitts visited their old friend Benny Rabinowitz, lawyer, businessman, and philanthropist, in Cape Town in 2014. They approached Ben for help in sponsoring a talented young Lithuanian student whom they had undertaken to assist in studying law in Israel. Ben unhesitatingly agreed. When they then asked if he would help with their ongoing projects in Plunge, he said that he would rather do something for his own ancestral shtetl of Birzh, the birthplace of his grandfather, Faivl (Philip) Rabinowitz.

In early 2015, Ben approached me to become the local coordinator of the project. My first task was to compile a list of Birzh descendants in South Africa, starting with my own large family, which includes four main branches – Klitzner, Rabie, Bloom and Orelowitz. Among the descendants I found the name of Joseph Rabie, son of Monty and Ada. By strange coincidence, he had visited Birzai for the first time only a month after my own visit in August 2013. Joe, an urbanist living in Paris, studied architecture at the Technion in Haifa. We had both submitted articles describing our respective visits to *Jewish Affairs*, which later appeared in the same issue of the journal in 2014.<sup>[i]</sup>

The next step was a cocktail party of descendants at the Jewish Community Centre in Hatfield Street, Cape Town, on 30 July 2015. Some 44 guests attended. A committee, consisting of the Levitts, Benny Rabinowitz, Cyril Ferber and myself was formed to discuss fund raising, a design for a memorial, soliciting photos and letters from Birzh descendants for the museum and the establishment of a Tolerance Education Centre at a Birzai high school.

Glenda approached Joe to submit a design for the memorial, which he enthusiastically undertook to do. At the end of February 2016, he submitted a design that took the form of a suspended walkway above which was a ribbon of metal sheets on which the names of the victims would be inscribed. However, when he visited Birzai to inspect the site and meet the local architects, he was forced to modify his design. He reported:

The terrain is more complex than I had envisaged... The ground is not flat at all - there is a gully about 1.5 meters deep running through the central part, and the ground slopes down towards it, below the road level... Also, the vegetation is luscious, an intense dark green, this being high summer... What this means is that in order to maintain the ribbon as a horizontal band, it will be necessary to construct a light footbridge with a metal structure and a light handrail, winding through the forest and going over the gully, at the same level as the road. Thus the ribbon will appear to float amongst the trees inside the forest, seeming to be detached from the ground as the bottom is not easily visible, a ribbon that is bright and shiny, to commemorate life, and pay tribute to what lies below. This effect will be reinforced as one walks along the ribbon, elevated above ground level and close to the names receding in perspective. ... If we decide to cut out the names, the greenery and shadows of the ever-moving forest would be seen to shimmer through the lettering, and the effect would be soothing and reflexive...[ii]

At a meeting in Birzai attended by Abel and Glenda, Vidmantas and Merunas Jukonis, Birzai Mayor Irute Varziene (who had originally invited Abel and Glenda to undertake the project), the town architect and other municipality representatives, Joe's design was unanimously approved. In November 2015, the Levitts arranged to have a geophysical map drawn up of the site of the mass graves. Prices were obtained for the creation of a monument, including construction, inscription and landscaping. In February 2016, a list of the names of some 1700 of the 2400 victims of Birzai was obtained from Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

When the Levitts visited Cape Town in June 2016, the project was officially named "The Birzai (Birzh) Memorial Project." Its objectives were to erect a memorial at the site of the massacre in Pakamponys; to create a permanent exhibition of Jewish life in the town in the Birzai Museum; to support the Tolerance Education Centre at the Saules Gymnasium; to commission the writing of a book describing the contribution made by immigrants from Birzai (and surrounding towns) to the Jewish world, South Africa, the US, UK, Canada and elsewhere; to commission the translation into English of the Russian book, *Jews on the Map of Lithuania: the Case of Birzai*; to encourage Jews around the world to enrich the memory of their ancestral *shtetls* and to hold a ceremony at which the Memorial would be unveiled. A target of 200 000 Euros was set. The projected unveiling of the monument was 8 August 2017, the anniversary of the mass murder.

Already at this early stage an idea was conceived of a tour to Birzai to coincide with the dedication of the memorial. A bus-load (about 40-45 people) was envisaged. The Levitts secured an experienced guide, Regina Kopelovich in 2016. There were ongoing challenges finding enough accommodation for all the prospective participants. The Levitts, together with Merunas, visited every option

of possible places where about 50 plus people could stay within the area of Birzai. About 13 km away was the Sodeliskis Manor House, which had seven rooms and catering facilities, as well as a venue for a Shabbat service and Friday night dinner. An advantage for some group members was that it had an elevator, the only one in Birzai. There was also a rented house within walking distance which could be used by our member Louis Zetler, who would be conducting the Friday evening Shabbat service.

### **In Planning...**



**Veronica Belling (left), with Glenda Levitt, Ben Rabinowitz and Abel Levitt**



**Joe Rabie and Abel Levitt, in Lithuania, 2016**

## **Problem of the location of the memorial**

All seemed to be progressing smoothly when Iruta Varziene was informed that Joe's plan was situated on privately owned land. The municipality arranged a meeting between the owner, an elderly lady, her two children and Abel at the site, but it was clear that the owner was not ready to give up her rights for a narrow strip of her land required for the monument. It seemed a logical solution that the design be amended and the monument built on public land on the opposite side of the road. Although the vegetation there was not as dense, the metal ribbon would cross a body of water, historically a symbol of the passage from life to death.

In February 2017 Abel and Joe appealed to the Israeli ambassador, Amir Maimon, for the new design to be dealt with expeditiously so that the monument could be inaugurated as planned that same year. They pointed out that many of those who would be attending were aged and a year's delay would seriously affect their ability to participate. Unfortunately, there were problems concerning the new site that caused considerable bureaucratic delays. Only on 28 March 2018 was approval for the Birzai/Birzh Memorial Project finally received.

Throughout 2018, Joe continued to work with Edgaras Mendelevich and his company, Senamiescio, in Vilnius, refining the project, drawing up the technical documents and tendering for the building company. They chose Judantys Projektai, which specialised in metal construction. The problem of the land was not solved. The municipality and other local and state institutions still had to approve the building permit. Problems were also faced regarding permission by the National Forestry Department to build on forestry land. This took a long time to come through. There were other bureaucratic obstacles to overcome, and final permission was granted only in February 2019.

## **Victim's names on the memorial**

Along with the land problem, a new difficulty had surfaced - that of the names on the memorial. Professor Jonathan Dorfan, a former South African physicist living in Palo Alto, California, realised that the final list of 1700 names that had been obtained from Yad Vashem in Jerusalem was for Birzai the district rather than for Birzai the town. In fact, the town with the most names on the list was Pasvalys, with others from Vabalninkas, Joniskis, Vaskai and Pumpenai. These victims were unlikely to have been murdered in Pakamponys. Thus the memorial, designed to record 1700 of the 2400 victims, was now left with a little over 400 names! What was to be done?

An option would have been to change the designation of the memorial to Birzai the District. However at a meeting in Israel of the Levitts together with Prof Dorfan and Dr Carol Hoffman, President of LitvakSIG, on 27 April 2018, this idea was rejected. It was decided instead to make a last ditch effort to collect more names of victims for Birzai the town, and to intersperse these on the memorial with Stars of

David to represent the unknown victims, with larger stars for adults and smaller ones for children. Prof Dorfman performed miracles and a final total of 522 names were obtained.

On 12 November, the Birzai Jewish Culture and Historical Society was formed. It included both our representatives and Birzai community members, who would play an active part in organizing a program of activities during our four day visit. Around this time an executive committee was formed endorsed by Ben Rabinowitz. The members were Mannie Olswang Israel, responsible for controlling the finance, Jonathan Dorfman, Abel and Glenda Levitt, and Joe Rabie. The group worked in close consultation about the construction of the monument with Joe, Merunas Jukonis and Edgar Mendelevich, with skype calls of progress reports, problems and discussions once a week for many months.

On 25 November, Abel visited Cape Town to assist Ben in fundraising. Within several days four donations were obtained matching Ben's contribution and several other smaller donations were also received. By that time 48 people had subscribed to the tour, now scheduled for 10-16 June 2019. The date was chosen in anticipation of the Memorial being completed, the ground being sufficiently dry for commencement of construction after the winter snow and to fall in the last week of the end-of-year term to enable participation of school children.

## **The Tour**

The group was made up of over fifty participants. Not everyone participated in the whole tour. Some only joined in Birzai, others just came for the weekend of the dedication, while several hired their own private transport so did not travel on the bus. By far the largest contingent came from Israel followed by the United States. Six each came from Cape Town and the UK, three from France, and one from Canada. The two largest family groups were that of the Dorfman/Olswang family and the Levitts. Although a few had no prior South African connection, by far the majority did, particularly to Cape Town. As Gail Loon-Lustig, a medical doctor from Israel formerly from Belville expressed it, "Besides the predominantly South African accent of those who found their places in the bus, it was as if...[we were] transported into a space where we naturally knew one another..."



Also in the group was documentary maker Michael Kretzmar, a former South African living in the UK whose ancestors also came to South Africa from Birzai. A cousin of Danielle Lockwood (nee Kretzmar), the project's UK representative, he came with a vision to make a documentary about the tour. The six Capetonians included Benny Rabinowitz (accompanied by his brother and sister-in-law from Israel, Jack and Esme Rabin), Cyril and Moira Ferber, Corinne Abel, Johnny Copelyn and myself.

The group constituted a microcosm of Eastern European Jewish history. Some, like Glenda Levitt, her children, Ari and Mia and grandchildren, Alon and Maya, Michael Bien, Cyril Ferber, the Dorfman and Olswang families, Danielle Lockwood, Michael and Mrs Kretzmar and their son, Sheryl and Lynn Silberg and Doris and Marshal Greenberg and their daughters, Rachel, Adena and Judith, Denyse Kirsch and her son Joel, Riva Friedman and her daughter Yael Daraby, David Israch, Linda Levy, Louis Zetler and Joe Rabie, had family members who were murdered at the site and whose names were on the memorial. Others like Benny Rabinowitz, Jack and Esme Rabin, Gillian Kay and I had grandparents or parents who were born in Birzai, and who left for South Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Then there was Florence, daughter of a Birzai-born survivor of the Shavli ghetto, accompanied by her husband Dr Joseph Levine, son of a survivor from Raseiniai/Rasin. Joseph was born in prison in Raseiniai, where his mother was incarcerated before being exiled to Siberia. He spent his early childhood in the

city of Syktyvkar, began his schooling in Lignitza, Poland, and immigrated to Israel when he was nine and a half years old! Today he and Florence live in New York. Another person with a direct connection to the Lithuanian massacres is Sylvie, Joe Rabie's French wife whose grandfather had been in one of the convoys of French Jews transported from the internment camp in Drancy in Greater Paris to the Ninth Fort in Kaunas, where they were murdered.

The tour began in Vilnius at the Artis Centrum Hotel on the evening of 10 June. At the opening dinner Abel Levitt welcomed the group, commenting that it was the biggest Jewish tour to visit Birzai since the tragedy. Following dinner the group was addressed by a gentile descendant of a Birzai family, Professor Jurate Baranova, who recounted her mother's memories of the day of the massacre - the shootings, the horror and the fear, believing that it would be their turn next, how she had not been able to eat for weeks afterwards. She recalled the day that the Jews' clothes were brought back from the forest to the town square and distributed to people who stuffed them in their sacks and took them away. The family had a Jewish doctor, Dr Levine, who had once saved Jurate's mother's life. He was the first to be shot, in the street after leaving the house to deal with a reported medical emergency. He was used as an example because he was a prominent Jewish figure. Dr Levine was a relative of Jonathan and Mannie Dorfman and Mannie Olswang. His murder took place three weeks before the Pakamponys forest massacre.

On Tuesday there was a guided coach tour of Vilnius. The bus passed the old Jewish grave stones piled up by the river behind a metal fence accompanied by a memorial. There is a continuing debate about what to do with them. We visited the Museum of Tolerance and saw an exhibition of paintings by Samuel Bak. This building, once Vilnius' Jewish Theatre, has been beautifully restored with a substantial donation from UNESCO. We then visited the very modest Green House Holocaust Museum, which records with unflinching reality the horror of what happened to the Jews of Lithuania. A very moving experience. We saw in the garden of the museum the powerful sculpture in honour of the Japanese vice-consul Chiune Sugihara, who against the orders of his government issued transit visas to between 2000 and 3500 Polish Jews who had taken refuge in Lithuania. This was followed by a visit to the surviving Jewish cemetery in Snipishok. We then went to the Ponar forest where 100 000, 70 000 of them Jews, were murdered - the largest number in one site in Lithuania. On our return we were taken on a tour of the old Vilna ghetto.

The following morning the group left for Birzai. We stopped in Kedainiai to have lunch, after which we were addressed by Rimantas Zirgulis, Director of the Museum of Diversity located in a beautifully restored building which was once a synagogue. Today the downstairs serves the local Kedainiai community as a theatre, art exhibition venue and for concert performances. The upstairs, once the women's section, is a museum to the Jews of Kedainiai. The second restored synagogue is used as an Art centre. These two buildings are in the town centre near

a very impressive memorial constructed in the shape of a giant triangle filled with symbolism honouring the murdered Jews of Kedainiai. Unfortunately we did not have time to visit the old Jewish cemetery which has some unusual and interesting tombstone designs.

From there we made our way to Kaunas, capital of independent Lithuania between the two World Wars (1919-1938). We drove through the old Jewish ghetto area of Slobodka (Vilijampolis in Lithuanian) and then proceeded to the city where our guide Regina pointed out the names of roads of Jewish interest, such as that of Mapu, the Hebrew novelist of the Haskalah period, who lived in Kaunas. We then stopped at the Seventh Fort, a fortification used as a Jewish concentration camp during the Second World War and where up to 5000 were murdered between 30 June and its closure on 10 August 1941.<sup>[i]</sup> The fort contains an exhibit on the Jews who were incarcerated there.

Thus we made our way to Birzai, where we were dropped at our respective hotels or lodgings. Our first evening was spent together at the Sodeliskis Manor house with a welcome dinner and an address by Jonathan Dorfman. The next morning we met at the park in the centre of Birzai adjacent to the old market, where we were addressed by a Lithuanian historian on the Jewish history of Birzai. Thereafter we went on a walking tour of the former Jewish quarter. Not much remains of Jewish Birzai, other than a former aged home on which very faint Hebrew letters spelling “*Moshav Zekenim*” are visible, and a couple of former synagogues so rebuilt as to be unrecognisable.



Former Jewish aged home in the old Jewish quarter.

A unique feature of the tour was the interaction with local inhabitants that preceded the unveiling. The first event was hosted by the Birzai Museum Sela located in the

old Castle. Emilija Raibuzyte–Kalniniene and Edita Lansbergiene arranged for classes from five schools from surrounding villages to participate in talks by five members of our group. Glenda approached five tour participants whom she thought would be able to present subjects of interest to the students, and each addressed one of the visiting groups. We offered a wide and diverse range of subjects. As Lithuanian students are generally extremely shy and do not display emotions, for us as speakers it was difficult to gauge their reactions. It was explained that it is very typical Lithuanian cultural behaviour and not reflective of a lack of interest.



Glenda Levitt with Lithuanian student group at the Castle

A conference on the history of Birzai Jewry organised by Edita and Emilija of the Birzai Museum Sela was held after lunch. It included presentations by two Lithuanian doctoral candidates whose theses dealt with the history of the Jews of Lithuania. Julijana Leganovic spoke on “Jews in Interwar Lithuania: Between Cognition, Love to Lithuania and Antisemitism” while Ruta Anulyta spoke about Jewish death records. From our group, Yael Daraby spoke on Jewish laws, customs and traditions, while I spoke about our Litvak heritage. This was followed by the opening of an exhibition of the artist Esther Lurie, a survivor of the Kovno Ghetto and a renowned Holocaust artist. Her sketches are not only well drawn but constitute an accurate and poignant record of life in the ghetto. It was introduced by Assia Gutterman a Jewish woman from Kaunas. She was accompanied by Moshe Beirak, leader of the Kaunas Jewish community and *Gabay* of the Kaunas Choral Synagogue. At the evening meal held at the Castle restaurant, participants were invited by Michael Bien to share their connections to Birzai and exchange stories. The evening was a great success.

On Friday morning, we visited the old Jewish and Karaite cemetery where we were addressed by Merunas and Vidmantas Jukonis. Vidmantas, who had discovered the Jewish cemetery as a young boy swimming in the lake, spoke with passion and

dedication of the role he has undertaken to preserve the memory of the Jews of his town. Between 2011 and 2013, with students from the local high school, they had set about clearing the cemetery. In this they were assisted by a Lutheran congregation from Germany, and between 2013 and 2014 they partnered with the Russian Jewish Research and Teaching Center ‘Sefer’ to decipher the names on the cemetery’s 1600 tombstones. The list of names is included in the book, *Jews on the Map of Lithuania: the Case of Birzai*, published in 2014. This enabled some of our group to find their ancestors tombstones and to say *kaddish*, a very moving experience.



Merunas Jukonis and father Vidmantas at the Jewish cemetery

We then continued to the Birzu ‘Saules’ Gimnazija, whose principal Dainius Korsakas spoke on the history of the school, and about their attempt to identify Jewish students killed in the Holocaust. Out of the 200 students who graduated in 1941, they had identified fifty who were possibly Jewish. This was followed by the history of their Tolerance Education Centre presented by two of the students. It was started in 2015 when they began visiting a social service centre where they interacted with children with disabilities. Their then history teacher, Vidmantas Jukonis, introduced the subject of “Our Neighbour Jew.”

After the lectures, we were entertained with Lithuanian folk dancing and songs by the school’s outstanding prizewinning choir, accompanied by folk instruments. The dancing of the young boys in particular was reminiscent of Israeli dancing that we learned in the Habonim movement. We were appreciative and touched by the enormous effort that was put into the performances on our behalf by the students and the organization, direction and training by the teachers involved in the production.



Thereafter eleven of our group spoke to senior classes of students sufficiently conversant in English to understand us. In my group was a student who attributed her proficiency in English to watching cartoons on television! It was again difficult to gauge the reaction to our presentations, but the headmaster told Glenda how delighted he was with the very positive feedback he had received from them.

In the evening we were transported to the Sodeliskiu manor estate where a Friday night service was conducted by former South African Israeli Louis Zetler. It was followed by a Sabbath dinner, attended by Lithuanian dignitaries and local Jewish guests including Israeli Ambassador Amir Maimon, the mayor of Birzai, Vytas Jareckas, the representative of the Siauliai Jewish community Sania Kerbelis, people involved with the project over the past four years and representatives of the high school student body. Writes Glenda:

The Friday evening was of momentous importance. We were participating in a communal Shabbat service that had not taken place in Birzai/Birzh since the Soviet occupation in 1940. We shared this with about 50 local guests, allowing them to enter the world of the spirituality of Jews and our connection to our Sabbath. The meal was purposely as traditional as possible, including gefilte fish and chicken soup, and the candle lighting ceremony with all our women participants lighting in unison, covered in headscarves and chanting the prayer together, was a moment of great beauty, spirituality and sadness. The white cloth over the long table, the table covered with the flickering of so many candles reflecting in the large glass windows captured our purpose for being in that town, in that place, at that moment in time, remembering a world that was no more, but that we were there.



On Saturday, non-Sabbath observers had the option of a bus tour to Rakiskis (Rakishok), Kamajai (Kamai) and Kupiskis (Kupishok). In Rakiskis we stopped to explore the road where the Jews once lived and where the synagogue had been located and visited the cemetery to see the marble memorial and new fence with Stars of David, constructed in late 2013. From Rakiskis we drove through Kamajai, the tiny maternal ancestral shtetl of Benny Rabinowitz. We made our way to the larger city of Kupiskis, where the former synagogue building today housing the public library was being renovated. Finally, we returned to Birzai via Panevezys, the third largest city in Lithuania, where the famous Ponevezh Yeshiva building has been converted into a bakery and coffee shop.

A special feature of the Saturday evening dinner at the Alaus Kelias restaurant was the gift to every participant of a small jar of honey made by Vidmantas accompanied by a message of Biblical quotes referring to honey and its symbolism to our journey in Birzai.

The dedication ceremony began at midday on Sunday in a clearing on Zemaite Street, where a tree planting ceremony was held to honour the families of “Savers of the Jews” who hid and protected the Jews at the risk of their own lives. Guests included Mayor Jareckas and the ambassadors of Japan, China and Israel. All participants were given yellow stars to wear in solidarity with the murdered Jews. Glenda Levitt as well as representatives from the families of the Savers addressed the crowd. Writes Glenda:

The ceremony took place at the site of what had been the Jewish Ghetto where the Jews were forced to congregate before being taken to the Pakamponys forest to be shot. Today it is a clearing near the building that was a *Mikveh* and is being

restored into a small hotel. This tree planting ceremony to honour those Lithuanians who saved Jews is so far only the second time that this acknowledgement is taking place at an outdoor venue. The first was erected in 2006 at the mass graves in the forest of Kausenai near Plunge at the initiation of Abel and me. The proposal was enthusiastically accepted by the two ladies of the museum, Edita and Emilija, who devoted much time to researching for information and together with the municipality and gardening department under the continued care of Merunas, arranged a beautiful meaningful ceremony that was deeply appreciated not only by the descendants of the Savers but of the local community.

From there, some 500 people walked the four kilometres to the site of the massacre, the same route that was followed by the Jews who were murdered there. The school children dressed in national Lithuanian dress carried pots of yellow flowers which would be used to create a Magen David at the site of the massacre.

The idea of creating a Magen David out of yellow flowers to be placed on the mass grave by school children was put forward by Glenda to Edita and Emilija and municipality representative Irute. They again responded with great enthusiasm. The flowers were carried from the site of the tree planting ceremony by children walking the three miles along the route that the Jews were marched to the forest in Pakamponys where they were murdered. Upon arrival they children placed the little pots of bright yellow flowers pre-marked into the shape of a large Magen David.





The ceremony was very moving. There were inspiring addresses by Ambassador Maimon, Merunas Jukonis, the extraordinary young man without whom this whole Birzai event could not have happened, Jewish member of the Lithuanian parliament, Immanuel Zingaris, Abel Levitt and Jonathan Dorfman. The shofar was blown and the Birzu 'Saules' Gimnazija choir sang two Israeli songs, *Lu Yehi* (Let it be) and the Kabbalistic prayer *Ana be-kho'ah* with aplomb. Louis Zetler concluded the ceremony with the *kaddish*. The Jewish community was represented by Gennady Kofman chairman of the Panevezys Jewish community.

The unveiling of the memorial was of course the high point. All those who had family who had been murdered were called up to unveil the eleven sheets of metal of the memorial with names. This included the descendants of the last Jew of Birzai, Leta Vainoriene, daughter of Sheftl Melamed, and her family, and Birzai-born Sonia Segal from Israel. The list was carefully constructed and divided so that all could participate. The honour of unveiling the first tablet went to Ben Rabinowitz, the second to Corinne Abel and Johnny Copelyn and the third to Joe Rabie, architect of this remarkable and unique memorial, and his wife Sylvie and daughter Eleonora. The whole ceremony was recorded on Lithuanian national television.



**Crowd in the Pakamponys forest**



**Ben Rabinowitz by tablet listing the donors**



**Memorial to the 2400 Jewish victims of Birzai, Pakamponys forest.**

The whole vision of the Birzai journey - the connecting with our Birzai heritage and with the municipality and locals, working with the ladies of the museum, involving students, working with the headmaster, the Friday evening, the ceremony of the Savers and the ceremony at the forest - was that of Glenda and Abel Levitt. This of course could only have taken place with the roles played by Ben Rabinowitz, Joe Rabie, Merunas and Vidmantas Jukonis and all the others who gave unstinting support. Also moving for me was meeting Jewish Lithuanians, the children of Holocaust survivors born after the war who had never left and with whom I was able to communicate in an authentic Litvish Yiddish. For the first time I felt a strange sense of identification with the city of my grandparents and feel that I left a small corner of my heart over there among the forests and the lakes.

[1] Veronica Belling, "Lithuania: a very personal journey." *Jewish Affairs*, 69, 1, (Passover, 2014): 10-17: Joe Rabie, "Landscapes of my fathers." *Jewish Affairs* 69, 1, (Passover, 2014): 18-25.

[2] Birzai Report, E-mail Joseph Rabie 1 Jul 2016

[3] Seventh Fort, Wikipedia,  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seventh\\_Fort#World\\_War\\_II](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seventh_Fort#World_War_II)

# THE ROLE OF SWISS BANKS DURING THE HOLOCAUST

Marlene Bethlehem  
04 September 2019

**Marlene Bethlehem**, a long-serving member of the *Jewish Affairs* editorial board, has held numerous Jewish communal leadership positions in South Africa, including as National Chairman of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies. She is a former Deputy Chairperson of the Cultural Religious and Linguistic Commission and was recently re-elected President of the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.

***Background:** In 1995, the World Jewish Congress instituted a lawsuit to retrieve deposits made into Swiss banks by victims of Nazism prior to and during World War II. In 1998, a settlement was reached, which as of 2015, had seen \$1.28 billion USD disbursed for 457 100 claimants. Then SAJBD Chairman Marlene Bethlehem represented the South African Jewish community in the discussions and here shares her thoughts and recollections of that time - Editor.*

In January 1997, as chairman of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies, I was sent to London to take part in one of the most important meetings of the post-Holocaust era. After eighteen months of tortuous and often secret negotiations that occasionally flared up into much bitterness, the Swiss government had finally agreed to the establishment of a “Holocaust Memorial Fund”, the purpose of which would be to compensate Holocaust victims and their families and ensure that there was full transparency regarding these distributions. The money would be distributed through an organization set up during the London meeting that I was privileged to attend.

Only the previous year, a high ranking Swiss official had rejected talk of a Holocaust compensation fund as “extortion and blackmail” by Jewish groups, mainly the World Jewish Congress (WJC). Edgar Bronfman, the President of the WJC, had put millions of dollars into researching evidence after the opening of World War II archives. The official who made the ugly remarks later apologized to Bronfman.[\[1\]](#)

This major shift showed Switzerland's concern that adverse publicity concerning both its gold trading with Nazi Germany during the war and its obstructive post-war attitude towards claims on dormant Jewish owned bank accounts would seriously damage its banking industry. Banking

officials in Zurich said it represented the first time that Swiss commercial banks had offered their own money in connection with the long running efforts by Jewish groups to seek compensation related to Switzerland's financial relationship with Germany. A statement by the three banks Credit Suisse, the Swiss Bank Corporation and the Union Bank of Switzerland expressed the hope that the initiative would “clear the way for the Swiss Government, their financial organizations and the Jewish organizations to work together to find a just and equitable solution”.

After the lengthy discussions referred to above, an initial offer of 32 million Swiss francs was made. This offer, of course, was ludicrous. At one of the most important meetings during the negotiations Alan Heversey, Financial Director of New York City threatened to pull funds out of the Swiss banks. In response to those claiming this would cause unemployment in New York due to the many that would lose their jobs, he replied that such people would be absorbed by the American banks into which he would place all the New York funds.

Until January 1997 the Swiss government had resisted the idea of a Holocaust compensation fund.

The final amount agreed to was 284 million Swiss francs (almost \$185 million USD), financed by donations from the three Swiss banks, other Swiss companies and the Swiss National Bank. The agreement stated that the fund would be used to “support persons in need who were persecuted for reasons of their race, religion, political views or otherwise were victims of the Holocaust”. This included non-Jewish victims such as Gypsies, people persecuted for political beliefs, homosexuals and Jehovah Witnesses.

The Swiss have now shown a willingness to “face their past” said Edgar Bronfman at a joint news conference with Swiss Foreign Minister Flávio Cotti in New York. Cotti stated, “We must answer questions openly”. Those questions dealt with the nature of Switzerland's wartime ties to the Nazis.

Until January 1997 the Swiss government had resisted the idea of a Holocaust compensation fund, being prepared only to use only dormant accounts left by victims for such a purpose. This idea was an outrage to the Jewish world. However, after a security guard discovered officials shredding archives at the Union Bank of Switzerland, on 23 January the government finally announced that it would take the lead in setting up the fund.<sup>[2]</sup> The decision taken at the London conference was firstly to allocate money to survivors of the Former Soviet Union, who had suffered under both Nazism and Communism. These would receive extra funds relative to survivors in the rest of the world. Part of the agreement, however, was that survivors had to prove that they were needy. I was completely taken aback

by this announcement and argued vociferously that all survivors of the Shoah were 'needy'. The authorities in Israel subsequently determined that anyone with less than 6000 shekels a month to live on was considered needy.

As chairman of the South African fund I decided to adopt this amount in Rands, i.e. R6000. This, however, was refused by the Swiss banks and hence I was compelled, with the help of my vice chairman the late Harry Schwarz, to conduct a South African cost of living assessment. Harry's own family had been turned away from Switzerland when they tried to enter in 1939. Fortunately, they managed to get to England, thereafter making their way



**Harry Schwarz (1924-2010)**

to South Africa. In the course of a thorough and exacting investigation that took many months, during which time we held discussions with the Association of Holocaust Survivors chaired by Don Krause, we found that there were 39 local survivors who qualified for this financial assistance. The payments were based on how much each country was allocated from the fund, and the amount was paltry in the extreme. Each South African survivor received a once-off payment of R3400, something I can easily attest to as, with the help of SAJBD Financial Director Harry Chaitowitz, I was required to write out and sign every cheque.

As I have mentioned on numerous occasions over the ensuing years, whenever I am asked to speak about this compensation fund, I always stress that these delicate negotiations were never about the money. Rather, they were about compelling the Swiss, who while ostensibly neutral, had served as Germany's banker to the world, to confront their history. It was a question not of money, but of moral justice. Harry Schwarz and I were later

invited to the Swiss Embassy in Pretoria, where the Ambassador offered us an apology on behalf of the Swiss government.

Further evidence of Swiss involvement was to follow.

The next vital international conference that I attended was held in London in December 1997 and concerned Nazi looted gold. Representatives of 41 nations participated, including France, the UK and the US, three of the allied countries that fought Nazi Germany. The conference was called in the wake of the Meili investigation that exposed the cover-up of Swiss banks participation in laundering Nazi assets. It was the idea of the US Undersecretary of Commerce Stuart Eizenstadt, and was supported by British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and the incoming Blair government.

The gold looted by the Nazis did not just come from central banks, but from individuals who died in concentration camps. The Nazis not only confiscated personal gold assets such as jewellery, but harvested gold from the teeth of their victims. It is generally believed that Germany had gone through its own gold reserves by the start of World War II, and gold possessed and sold by the Germans after 1939 was war booty. Neutral countries, including Portugal, Switzerland and Sweden, were used to sell looted gold.

A United States study undertaken three years earlier thanked the WJC and criticized Switzerland for banking gold during and after World War II presenting gruesome evidence that that some gold the Nazis sold to the Swiss had been taken from Holocaust victims.

“The Swiss were handling vast sums of looted gold” in trading with the Third Reich, said the long-awaited report, compiled by Stuart Eizenstat. The study further found that at least a small portion of the gold that entered Switzerland included “non-monetary gold” from civilians in occupied countries and from concentration camp victims. It became very clear that the bullion banked in Switzerland included some of the jewellery and even gold dentures were sold or smelted into gold ingots.

“This is about justice, not only for material but also moral restitution”.

Eizenstat recommended an international conference on the flow of Nazi assets after the war. Britain's Labour government offered to host such a conference and Switzerland agreed.

Robin Cook arranged for the meeting to be held in the “Moses Room” in the House of Lords, a magnificent venue with a mural taking up an entire wall showing Moses carrying the tablets down from Mount Sinai. I was there, together with then WJC Chairman, the late Mendel Kaplan. This historic international conference aimed at providing a measure of justice to

Holocaust survivors. Addressing delegates from 42 nations, WJC President Bronfman, declared “we are not here talking about gold or other material



**Mendel Kaplan (1936-2009)**

assets. We are here in a resolute desire to make clear the truth, to ensure that history is written correctly or else we shall lose it. This is about justice, not only for material but also moral restitution”.

Eizenstat, who headed the American delegation, urged the nations present to act within two years to bring closure to all issues related to the fate of Jewish assets lost during the World War II, saying “We must not enter a new century without completing this unfinished business”.

I sat in awe as these distinguished leaders addressed the conference. Over the following three days, we listened to documents detailing each country's response to Nazi Germany's systematic plundering of European banks and Holocaust victims' assets. Few nations emerged unblemished.

What we heard on the third day of the conference, as presented by Rabbi Henry Sobel from Sao Paulo, Brazil, shocked us all and the details will remain etched in my consciousness forever. Rabbi Sobel had accompanied the head of a bank in Rio de Janeiro to open safety deposit boxes of Germans who had fled to Brazil. This instruction had been given to all banks by the Brazilian government. In one box they found the following: \$4000 USD, three false passports and a white envelope. Rabbi Sobel hesitated before continuing so as to wipe his tears away. The envelope contained gold dentures, which he held up for all to see. The Jewish world had always suspected this atrocity but here was the proof, smuggled to Brazil.

One of the tangible results of the conference was that the US and UK announced the creation of a new international compensation fund in recognition of debts owed to Holocaust victims. All 42 countries present, with the exception of the Vatican, agreed with this proposal.

At the close of the conference, Jewish officials praised all the countries that had participated reserving their criticism for Switzerland and the Vatican

delegations, who had attended as observers rather than participants. Documents from the American archives contained charges that the Vatican played a significant role in handling looted gold. The Vatican delegation responded by saying their archives were sealed for 100 years.

Looking back on the two conferences that I was privileged to attend, I realize that I was at the coal face of not only Holocaust history but of events as vitally important for their symbolic value as for their concrete achievements.

[1] Born to first generation immigrants to Canada, Bronfman worked for the family distilled beverage firm Seagrams, later becoming its CEO. In 1981, he was elected President of the WJC, an international federation of Jewish communities formed in Geneva in 1936 in order to act as “the diplomatic arm of the Jewish people”.

[2] The security guard later lost his job and was forced to leave Switzerland.

# HERBER HOUSE: “A HOSTEL FOR JEWISH CHILDREN” (Part 1)

**Stuart Buxbaum**

03 September 2019

**Stuart Buxbaum** holds an honours degree in Sociology from Wits University (1970) and an honours degree in Judaica from UNISA (1984). After working in the social research unit of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies in the early 1970s, he farmed for many years in Mpumalanga. He and his sister Beatrice were residents of Herber House.

“The ten fateful years between 1939 and 1948 changed the Jewish people and the course of Jewish history (M E Katz)”[\[i\]](#)

It was during this disruptive, destructive and chaotic decade for European Jewry that, in a historical contradiction, there was a flowering of creative and brave leadership in the South African Jewish community. To quote Katz again, “The instrument that emerged to meet the educational needs of Jewish group life in the open society of the post war western world was the Jewish day school”.[\[ii\]](#)

This piece looks at the establishment, running and final closure of a Jewish hostel for schoolchildren in Johannesburg, formed in that historic decade. The essential source for the article are the accumulated minutes of the hostel’s executive committee, originally formed as a subcommittee of the SA Board of Jewish Education (SABJE), later becoming part of the Institutions Committee of the Board. This hostel enabled Jewish schoolchildren from the South African country communities, from farms and villages, from medium-sized towns and isolated trading stations to attend higher grade schools in the city, receive a more structured Jewish education and eventually, with the establishment of the day schools, to be the beneficiaries of an educational ethos which would otherwise have been unavailable to them.

R Misheiker outlines three well-defined periods in the history of the SABJE:

1) The first, from 1928-1937, was a period characterized by the gradual building up of experience in the education field and also one of considerable ideological differences.

2) The second, from 1938-1949, was an era of bold planning and execution which led to the establishment of the King David Schools in 1948.

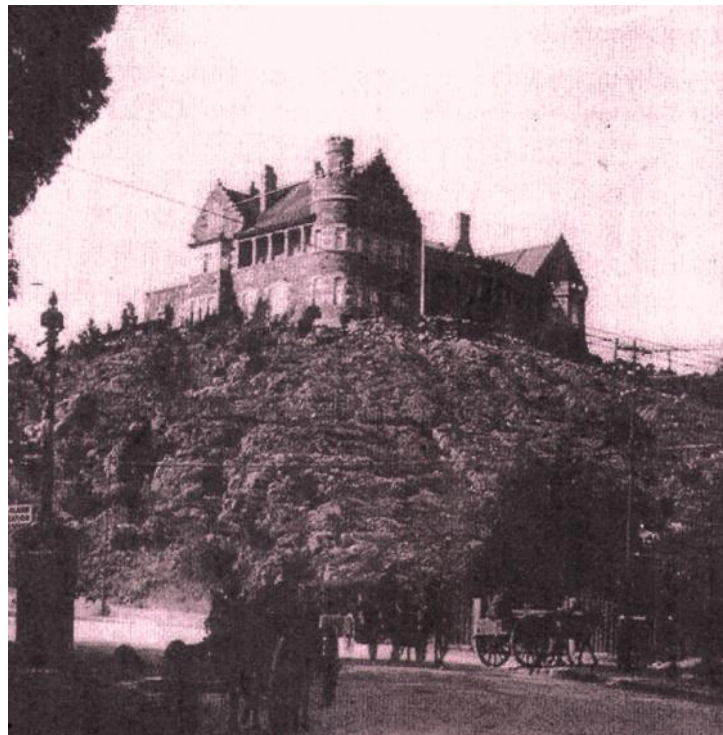
3) The third, dating from 1949 until the writing of his article in 1973, Misheiker characterized as one of implementation, growth and consolidation.[\[iii\]](#)

Misheiker's second period dovetails neatly with that outlined by Katz. It would prove indeed to be a decade of "bold planning and education".

## **Establishment of the hostel**

The earliest minutes found of the hostel sub-committee's meetings are dated 26 January 1943. The foundational charter for the hostel was being articulated while negotiations for the purchase of a suitable property and residence for this purpose were being finalized. On 17 July 1943 the deed of sale for the property and the building housed upon it at 6, South Street, Yeoville, was signed by Mrs Raphaely, the seller, and by the purchaser, a representative of the SABJE.

The building that would become the new hostel was known as "Eastington Castle". It was bordered by Charlton Terrace and Harrow Road and, according to information obtained from the Heritage Foundation in Johannesburg, was sold at a price of £8000. Eastington Castle was built on a rocky outcrop and gorge, the "Koppie" (Kopje) of the Yeoville ridge, in 1896.[\[iv\]](#) In his book *Pioneer architects of Johannesburg*,[\[v\]](#) Michael



**The original Eastington Castle, early 20th Century**

Walker records that the architect was the prolific Mr McCowat, a designer of homes for the increasing number of entrepreneurs in bustling pre-Anglo-Boer War Johannesburg. Eastington Castle, described as a ‘mansion’, was built for John Dowel Ellis and his wife Doris.

Ellis, a mechanical engineer born in Hertfordshire, England, had arrived in the Transvaal at the time of the discovery of the gold reef in Johannesburg in 1886. In relatively short succession, he would become a member of the Johannesburg Town Council and then mayor of the city in 1910, 1911 and 1912.[\[vi\]](#) The castle would become the mayoral residence.

There is extant a fine picture of Eastington Castle showing landaus in the foreground. The mayor was presiding over a municipality beginning its transformation into modernity. According to the transport census of 17 August 1909, a plethora of conveyances was available to the city dweller: horse buses, cabs, market trolleys, rickshaws, motor cars, motor cycles, traps and carriages, and motor taxis.[\[vii\]](#)

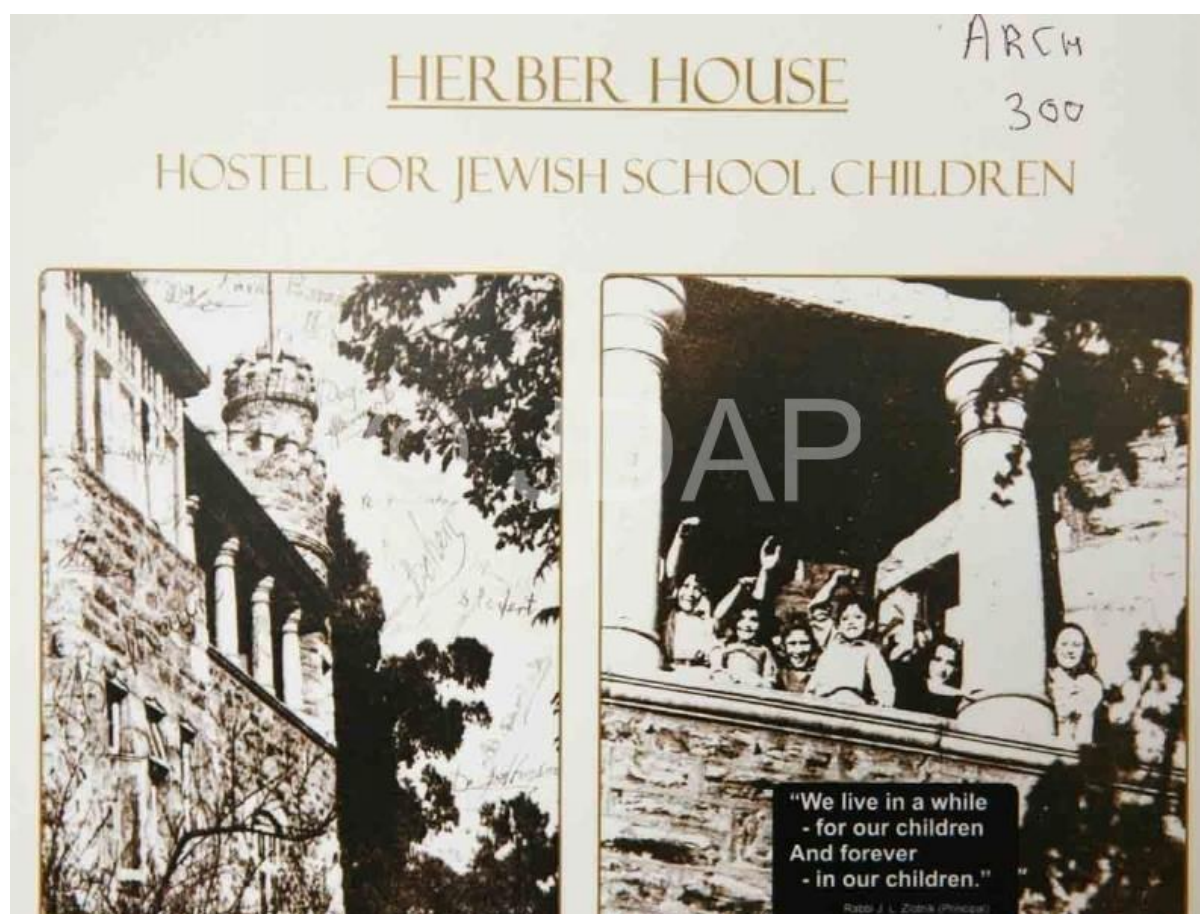
What did this future hostel look like? Prominent in the early views of the Yeoville ridge, Michael Walker describes it well: “Constructed of koppie stone on the site, the interior was full of nooks and crannies. Little light filtered through the stained glass windows in the hall. A visiting Scot remarked “Aye! The place is only fit for bats, bugs and bonfires.”[\[viii\]](#) Methinks most future hostel dwellers would agree with that sentiment over the coming years!

## **Early Jewish Educational Institutions in Johannesburg**

Jewish educational institutions in Johannesburg started hesitantly and conterminously with the organic growth of the city and its fledgling communal structure. Noteworthy were the *chedorim* and Talmud Torahs, the latter usually attached to a synagogue. According to Margot Rubin,[\[ix\]](#) many institutions necessary for communal life were in place by the time of Union. Her map of Johannesburg synagogues and schools in the years 1903-1910 show a number of ‘Jewish schools’ and *chedorim*. Larger institutions were the Hebrew High School[\[x\]](#) and the Jewish Government School.[\[xi\]](#) In a later map referring to the years 1920-1929, more educational institutions are enumerated, viz. the L.M. Lifschitz Cheder, Ferreirastown Talmud Torah, Union College (secular and Jewish), Hillel College and, intriguingly, “a Jewish Hostel for Boys”.[\[xii\]](#)

Especially in the rural areas and backwaters of the Union, the situation was dire. According to Katz, the country *chedorim* were “practised by the unqualified, lacking any semblance of an organized curriculum or an orderly environment, devoid of any system of authority or guidance,

shunted to the end of the school day.”[xiii] Would a generation of mainly Litvak-born parents, ambitious for their children’s general and Jewish education, especially as Barmitzvah age approached, be satisfied with the status quo? To the big city (many of) the children would have to go!



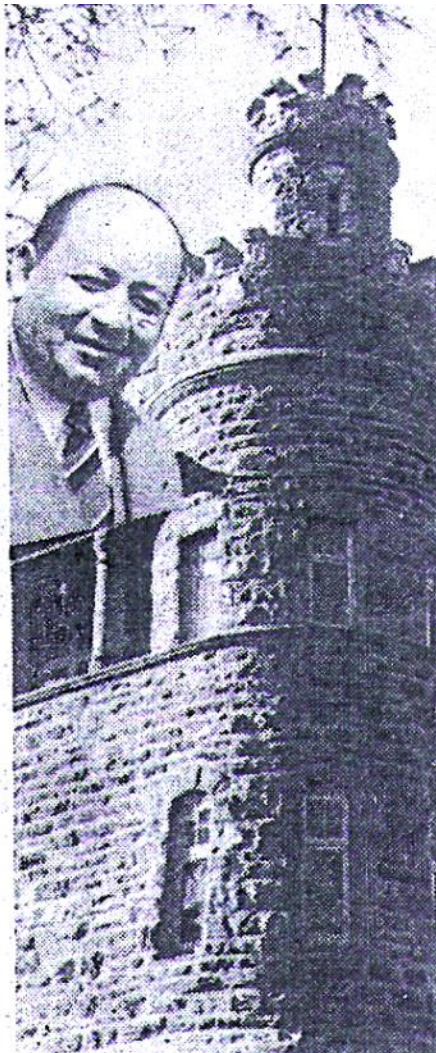
From a brochure promoting the Herber House hostel, clearly showing the turret, pillars and stone walls.

## From Eastington Castle to The Herber House.

Named in honour of the SABJE chairman at that time, Harry Herber, the hostel’s appellation was officially preceded by the definite article. (Henceforth the *hostel will be referred to as Herber House.*) As the deed of sale was running its course under the watchful eye of Philip Porter, an attorney who would later become President of the Board of Deputies and who was quite aware of the need for transparency, “it was unanimously agreed that the matter be treated with the greatest of care since the Board was using public money” (7/1943).

Simultaneously with the purchase of the castle on the hill, the appurtenances for the hostel were being assembled. Steel cabinets, presumably the same narrow lockers that the current author and his cohort of hostel dwellers would use with so much disdain well into the 1960s, were being sourced. These were obtained at £4 to £10 each, and an extra five

shillings for the lock. Boarders' fees were set at £15 per term. Applications for admission told the story of parental agony at taking the step of sending their children to boarding school. Places were being sought for children aged between six and twelve years. Already, requests for financial assistance were being received from parents. These were very straitened times for rural Jewry in particular. Many had recently arrived as immigrants from Europe. It was almost postwar South Africa, and ten thousand Jewish soldiers who had seen active service in North Africa and Italy would need to regain a foothold in society, socially and economically. Things were not easy in the *platteland* during the 1940s.



**SABJE President Harry Herber, after whom Herber House was named, imposed upon a detail of the 'Castle', the hostel's main building.**

Such requests for assistance were meticulously mentioned and discussed on merit and are a constant refrain in the minutes over the years. Some fees were reduced to £10, others even to £8 10s. A matron, a Miss Rutstein from Bulawayo, was appointed. By year end 1943, it was decided that a *Chanukath Habaith* ceremony be held for the opening of the hostel, and that the SABJE open a special hostel account with £250 introduced for current expenditure.

## **Establishing a hostel is not child's play**

It had been hoped that the hostel would open at the beginning of the 1944 school year, but it was decided to delay this until the second term in April. Existing facilities for Jewish education were considered and found wanting. The hostel needed to be augmented with a formal Hebrew education program of its own, to be advertised as such in the Jewish press (18/12/1943). Fees would then be increased to £21 per term. To this end, important appointments were made: Mr M Dison was to be the housemaster and would give Hebrew tuition. He would also "supervise the natives and see to their passes" (ibid). Mr Himmelstein, a liturgist, was

appointed to present himself twice a week to train the children in choir singing. Additional Hebrew instruction was paramount. Philip Saltzman, who later became housemaster, was to supervise the cheder.

These classes were scheduled for 3-5.30pm, at the fag-end of the day. Mr Solomon of the Jewish Government School would offer 'coaching' for hostel boarders at five shillings an hour.

By November 1944, Solomon could report that together with two assistant teachers, coaching of boarders in subjects such as Hebrew, music, and 'coaching' was proceeding apace. This model institution, so envisioned by the committee and the board, would cater for the cultural upliftment of the young small-townners. A library was to be created, and to this end Rabbi Zlotnick promised to acquire and donate one hundred books. To recognize the importance of the Chief Rabbi's office, the United Hebrew Congregation was requested to present the hostel with a portrait of the late Chief Rabbi, Dr J. L. Landau. The hostel was seen as a "creatio ex nihil", indeed a stately, model institution. Would the dream be fulfilled?

Education programs aside, rules of conduct for boarders had to be established. These would be formalized, adapted and extended in future years. Over time, however, they would be accorded scant respect by parents and boarders alike! Still, that was not foreseen in those heady, early days of the enterprise. The committee had already, in June 1943, sought guidance from the previously established Jewish Hostel in Cape Town ("Upon a suggestion by Mr Spitz, it was decided to write to the Cape Town Jewish Board of Education asking them for detailed information regarding the running of their hostel"). Some rather harsh rules were decided upon. It was suggested that "parents could only visit their children fortnightly on Sunday afternoons between 3-5 pm". To lighten this regulation, however, the restrictions would not apply to country parents, who could by arrangement with the matron, visit without restriction.

### **Naming and Opening the Hostel is hard work**

The formal decision to name the hostel "The Herber House" was taken at the 26 April 1944 meeting. That done, a fairly lavish, grand ceremonial opening was planned. In celebration, there were to be two functions. On 28 May there was to be a public viewing of the hostel, and on Sunday, 18 June (a few days after the Allied landings on the beaches of Normandy), a dinner for approximately 300 people was envisaged, with speeches, a buffet and a musical program. However, there were second thoughts. It was decided instead that a one-day event would suffice. A catering firm would provide tea (at 2s 6p a head) and erect a marquee, a visitors' list would eventually be bound into a souvenir book and a souvenir program would be printed.

Not done yet! An elaborate procedure to open the hostel was to be followed: keys were to be handed one to another which would eventually be passed on to Mr Herber who would ceremoniously unlock the hostel's large, heavy front door. Led by Cantor Backon and Chazen Alter, the Great Synagogue (Wolmarans Street) Choir would then burst into song with Hamelech, Ma Tovuh and Mizmor Shir. Mrs Landau was the guest of honour and Mr Herber, Rabbi Kossowsky and Rabbi Zlotnick would address the opening. The late historian of South African Jewry, Gus Saron, described the construct of the community as being one of Litvak wine poured into an Anglo glass. How appropriate a description on this occasion!

## **Back to business**

Applications for enrolment and financial assistance requested by parents would become a feature of very many committee meetings. In August 1944, an application for financial assistance for hostel fees was made by a mother on behalf of her 15-year-old son. The application was supported by the Jewish Immigrants Help Society. In February 1945, the Ladies Benevolent Society would assist with the payment of fees for two applicants. There was discussion too about what the appropriate age of admission to the hostel should be. Isaac Goss felt that all ages of children from country communities should be catered for. This was an "open arms to all", generous and meritorious approach, but it remained problematic. In hostel parlance, these very young children were referred to as the 'pics'. They were often anxious, tearful and needy – as were we all really, at times.

Despite the cavernous size of the castle-turned-hostel, it proved almost immediately to be inadequate; such was the demand from rural Jewry for access to better education, particularly coupled with a significant Hebraic component. The discussions would centre on the need for greater dormitory space, and there were some unrealistic suggestions. For example, it was suggested at the above August 1944 meeting that an additional wing to house a minimum of sixty children should be built. There was a brief discussion about the possibility of purchasing a double story property in South Street. Priced at £6000, the idea was rejected. Soon after, however, in early 1945 (11/02/1945), it was reported that the previously discussed building had been purchased. This would alleviate the overcrowding for the time being. A warning was issued in this respect by a member of the committee, Mr Cowan. "If the children were uncomfortable, the reputation of the hostel would suffer," he said. A perceptive comment indeed.

Discussions in November 1944 centered on a topic which would arise with monotonous regularity for more than a decade: the building of a swimming pool. It was left to Dr Percy Yutar to pursue this matter. Dr Yutar was also tasked with another matter: "As the matron experienced difficulty in

obtaining suitable native labour for the garden, Dr Yutar undertook to secure convict labour for this purpose” (12/11/1944).

A new matron and a superintendent, a Mr and Mrs Beresinsky, were appointed in March 1945. Mr Saltzman would continue as housemaster. There is little doubt that this would be a recipe for conflict. Saltzman was dogged in marking out his territory.

Details of the catastrophe in Europe filtered through. Tersely, it was “resolved that a day of mourning be observed at The Herber House”. In the following month, the venerable Dr Harry Abt was elected to serve on the committee.

### **Finances: Good intentions don't pay the bills**

By the middle of 1945, and soon after the acquisition of an additional dormitory facility, the problem of overcrowding again became a concern. The third term of that year would see about 105 boarders being housed. Again there was talk about the need for, but restriction on, expansion. Costs had to be kept under control as overheads inevitably would rise. The swimming pool, a project which never eventuated, was again being touted, this time emphatically (10/06/45): “The swimming bath must be completed before the new season commences” (!).

Staff salaries and payments were under scrutiny and discussion. The program of ‘coaching’, presumably to soften the rough edges of country and rural children raised the question of whether the Board or the parents were liable for these costs. There were some staff changes and additions. Mrs S Stein was now the Hebrew teacher, Mrs Sive taught music and Mr Himmelstein still gave singing lessons. Requests were being made by the staff for salary adjustments. In time- honoured tradition a subcommittee was formed to look into this. At the same time, however, the chairman suggested a salary increase for Mr Saltzman “owing to his excellent work at the hostel”.

At the 12 August 1945 meeting, SABJE treasurer Mr Coll tabled the income, expenditure and balance sheet for the previous five months to end June 1945. “The running of the hostel cost the board £1650 in this period. This was extraordinarily high considering that this amount had to be advanced by the Board in addition to all the hostel fees received”. In total, fees paid by the parents for their hostel children during those five months amounted to £2742 10s.

But that was not the only intrusion of a harsh administrative reality. A letter from the board's accountant introduced a cautionary note, indeed a rebuke. Discussing the revenue and expense account, he said, “I have to

report that I was unable to carry out a complete audit". And not only that! "I must bring to your notice that the records kept at the hostel are very unsatisfactory and I must insist that a proper system of petty cash and stock records be installed." Indeed, the devil is in the small details!

Was the hostel then a viable financial proposition? From a balance statement two months later, (14/10), it was running at a loss of £100 per month. This was not viewed as a serious problem and Mr Froman, referring to the monthly deficit, felt that by the following year there would be no shortfall at all. To assuage concern it was pointed out that the Cape Town Hostel was also under some strain and that with only 27 boarders, it was being run at a loss of £50 per month.

The many requests for financial assistance by parents can be seen as a barometer of the struggling material condition of many in the Jewish community. Even more troubling, however, was the request by some parents to allow their children to remain in the hostel over the school holidays. Their reason: "The number of parents who have no homes find it difficult to accommodate their children for the holidays and were persistent in their demands to keep the children at the hostel" (14/10/1945).

### **Bringing home some good report card cards**

On 10 June 1945 the chairman presented a glowing report. And with good cause. Establishing the hostel was a significant achievement by a determined and ambitious board of education, at a difficult time for South African Jewry. Describing Herber House as a source of pride for the community, and especially praising "the Hebrew school ... a highlight in the achievement at Herber House. Thanks to the superlative pedagogic qualities of Mr Berezinsky, the cheder is an outstanding success". In the same report, however, it was announced that Mr and Mrs Berezinsky, after a short but productive tenure, had resigned.

Feeling confident, Mr Saltzman provided a somewhat effusive report concerning the spirit at the hostel and the well-being of its boarders. "It was evident," he said that "there was in the house a happy and homely spirit." There were 68 boarders, comprising 41 boys and 27 girls and ranging in age from 6-12 years of age. (It had earlier been reported that in the third term, there were 105 boarders). They dwelt in three close locations in South Street, 37 in the old Eastington Castle. The sporting life was not neglected either. Three houses were established: Maccabi, Hillel and Trumpeldor. These names would echo through the Jewish educational institutions over the coming years.

### **Three little stories tell the tale**

David A came from Lobatse in Botswana. As a five-year-old he was sent to the convent across the border in Mafeking. One fine day he was in discussion with his uncle. "What do you want to be when you are big, David?" his uncle asked. "A Catholic," David answered, without hesitation. ·

Joe D came from Vryburg, in North-West Province. He came to Herber House in the late 40s, as a twelve-year-old. In a recent conversation with him, the author asked what he thought about his days in the hostel. He replied: "I thought I was in heaven when I arrived! To be among so many Jews! Look, I had been at boarding school in Kimberley, among all the gentiles. That wasn't much fun" (Expletives deleted).

Desmond L, from Bethal, as a 5 or 6-year-old attended the convent in Ermelo. He has described his confusion at this strange environment, compounded by the unsympathetic staff. Two years later he would be at Herber House. His career path would see him as a partner in a large accounting firm in Toronto, Canada.

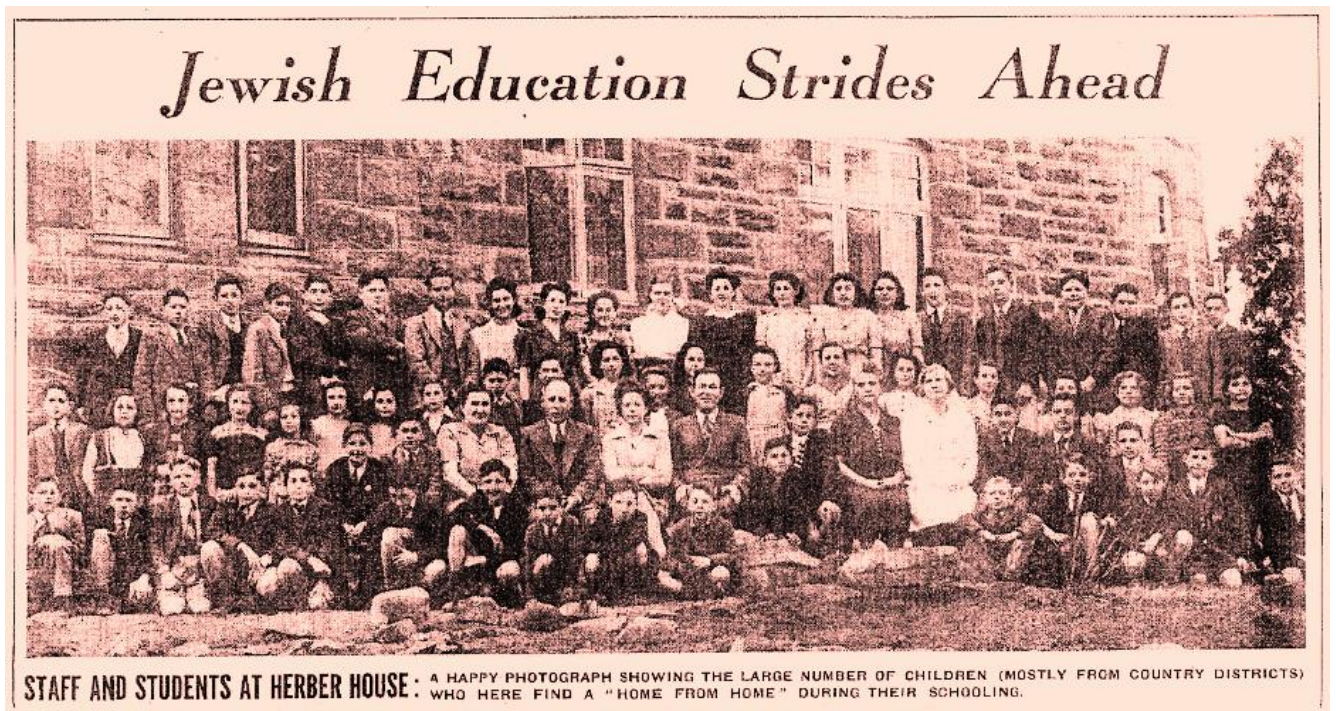
These three accounts in retrospect lend credence to the thoughts expressed at the report-back meeting of 6 June 1945. Thanks had been expressed especially to Mrs Lubner and Mr Misheiker, who had felt that there was a need for "a home for children who would otherwise be forced to go to non-Jewish hostels, and would be lost to us before even having a chance to think for themselves".

### **Teach the children well....**

Finding suitable staff to run the hostel would prove to be an Achilles heel of the enterprise. Looking at a set of requirements for the position of a boarding house matron, recently advertised, is instructive. "The post requires someone who likes and understands young children ...a parent figure who is generous with their time and responsive to the needs of the pupils...They should (be) a good listener, flexible in outlook, reliable, warm and friendly in disposition, with sufficient sensitivity to show tact and diplomacy...a sense of humour and an even temper..." These qualities were, and would be generally absent, except possibly only in two later appointments.

In July 1945, a prospective matron whose name would become synonymous with early Herber House myth and fact was interviewed for the position. She was Mrs Dubin. Her duties, she was informed, would be defined by (predictably) a sub-committee. Her salary would be £25 per month, inclusive of a cost of living allowance and board and lodging for her

daughter. Hardly possessed of “an even temper”, she would prove to be a doughty, strict and feared matron for more than a decade.



HH Boarders and staff, circa. late 1940s

## Palestine could provide the answer

In the pre-Jewish day school era, part of the *raison d'être* of Herber House was to inculcate a specifically Jewish consciousness and knowledge of basic texts, of Hebrew and of Jewish history. How better to do this than by invoking the spirit of Zionism in its pre-State ideology? This was Rabbi Zlotnick's motivation. To this end, and soon after the appointment of Mrs Dubin, he argued strongly for the importation from the then Palestine of a highly qualified man to take charge of the hostel (12/8/1945).

This provoked considerable discussion and somewhat heated debate. Mr Froman offered a counterview, saying that “only a South African could take charge of South African children.” Mr Cowan too wished to record his disagreement with the idea. But Rabbi Zlotnick was not easily moved from his position by the dissenting arguments. On the contrary, since it seems that the idea of the Board was to bring out from Palestine two girl *madrichot*. The Rabbi stated that “he wished to turn the hostel into a piece of Palestine” (12/8/1945). He envisaged the creation of a different type of young Jew, a type of *Halutz*, modern and confident. The minutes show no further progress of this idea. Nevertheless, in the new year of 1946 Rabbi Zlotnick, ever keen to strengthen the association with Palestine, was in

discussions with the head of the Palestine Council Physical Culture Department, to introduce a program of physical fitness at the hostel (12/5).

There is brief reference to the end of World War II and its consequences for family life. A certain number of boarders could well have been there as a result of the disruption of the family unit caused by fathers being in the Union Defence Forces. It is recorded that a certain Mrs Rodkin “would be taking out her children from the hostel owing to her husband’s return from active duty” (12/9/1945).

## **Torah, Trade Tools and Training**

Until almost the mid-1960s, the synagogue formed a pivotal role in the boarders’ daily lives. All three daily services were attended by the boys, while girls attended on Friday nights and Saturday mornings. By the end of 1945 the synagogue, originally the stable of the then mayor’s estate, had been enlarged to accommodate over 100 people. Much of the services were said aloud by Mr Saltzman, helping the boarders become familiar, via repetition, with all the daily prayers. “The Friday night service was tuneful and chanted word for word from beginning to end based on the traditional nusach hatefillah”.

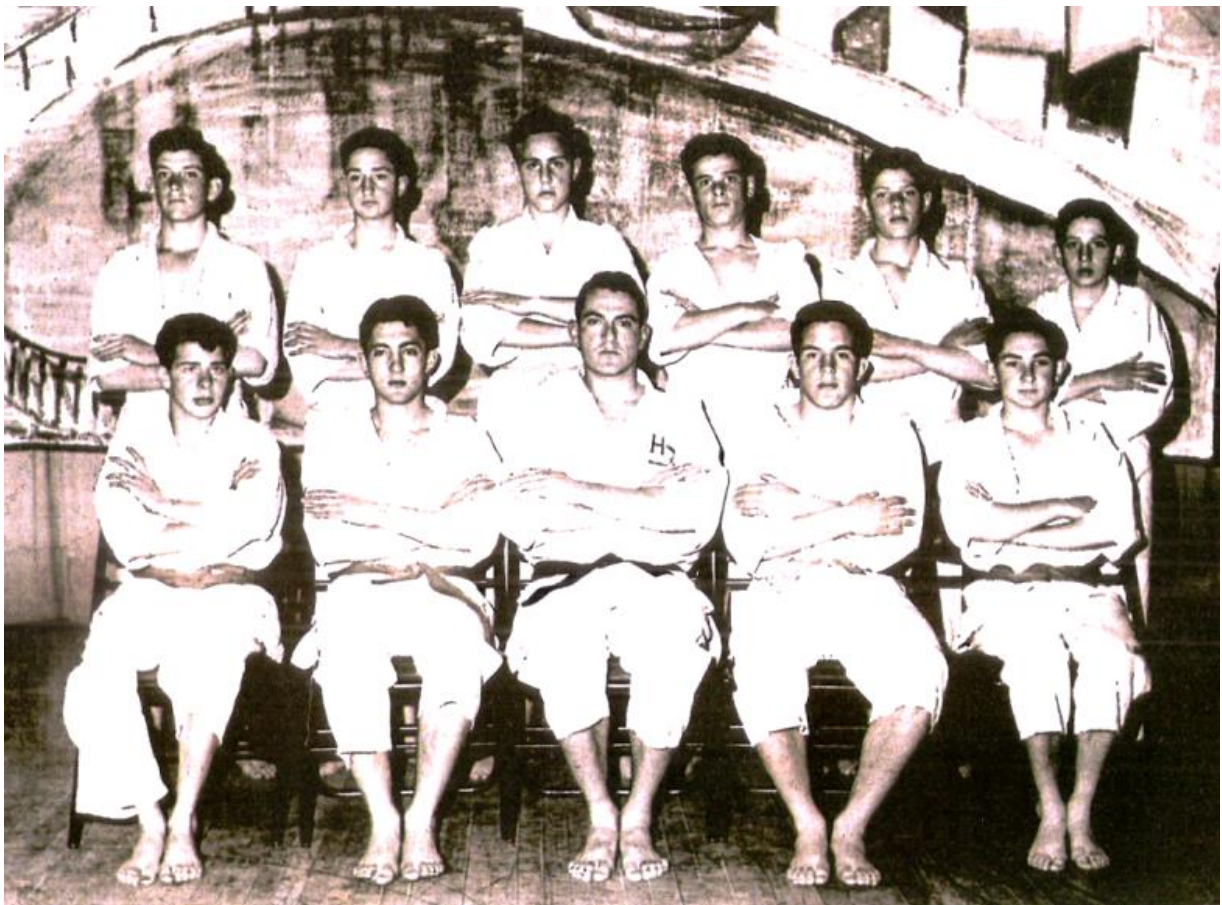
There was no shortage of ideas from committee members, who tried to ensure that boarders were provided with an all-encompassing skills training program. It was suggested that the basement of the South Street annex be converted into a workroom for the boys. Work benches and tools would be provided as well as woodwork training. These early years leave one almost breathless with all the ideas, projects and programs suggested. Many of these would over the years slowly fade off the radar, and the lives of the boarders would chug along in their own informally created friendship groups and self-made forms of entertainment.

In an effort to showcase the hostel to schools that many of the boarders attended in the pre Jewish day school era, it was resolved that the principals of both Jeppe and Athlone High Schools, with their wives, be invited to a Friday evening dinner at the hostel. Scheduled to take place early in 1946, it was then postponed to a later date. It is uncertain whether the dinner took place, but the intent was clear, and commendable.

## **Would the Beth Din approve?**

The hostel was an encapsulated Jewish environment. To what extent should halacha prevail? The question arose in connection with Sabbath

observance. Would the hostel boarders be allowed to go to the public swimming pools (presumably the Yeoville or Ellis Park baths) on a Saturday, if payment had been made on a prior date? Dr Harry Abt remained conservative on the issue, yet sought some leniency. He felt that the Beth Din would not allow the boarders the luxury of such an excursion, suggesting rather that the children “be allowed to play and conduct their games in the hostel grounds on Saturdays although it was not with the strictest compliance of the religious requirements” (14/10/1945) Dr Abt also suggested that the children regularly write to their parents. The Beth Din would certainly have agreed with that request.



The Herber House judo team at a Zionist Federation function , old Zion Hall. The author is standing, far-right.

In July 1951 (10/9/1951), a resident of Rooiberg in the then Northern Transvaal made application to the hostel for his three children, two boys and a girl aged between nine and thirteen years. As his wife was a gentile, it was resolved to approach the Beth Din for a ruling as to whether they could be admitted. It is not clear from the minutes what the Beth Din’s ruling was. Much later, in April 1956, a boarder requested permission to attend school sports on a Saturday at Athlone Boys High, a considerable distance away. He undertook to recite his prayers before walking to the school (imagine that!) and to carry no money with him. Mr Saltzman, predictably, opposed the request as he feared it would open a floodgate of requests. Mr

Froman stressed that many of the children came from a “non-Jewish” (i.e. a non-observant) background. He did not want them to feel that being Jewish was a ‘restriction’, resulting in their growing up with “a dislike of everything Jewish”. Saltzman referred to the much earlier decision reached by Dr Abt that all forms of sport were permitted within the grounds of the hostel on Saturdays. Rabbi Lapin undertook to refer the matter to the Beth Din (17/4/1956).

And then again, in 1960, a signal honour befell Joel L, a Herber House lad of about fifteen from Bethal who was a particularly gifted and physically strong rugby player. Playing for King David High in the bruising Administrator’s Cup League, his talent and prowess were spotted, and he was chosen to represent Southern Transvaal Schools in a curtain raiser to a South Africa/New Zealand match at the hallowed Ellis Park ground. The Board refused to make an allowance for him to trot onto the field on a Saturday. Mr Sandler, the headmaster of the High School at that time, sensed that he needed to intervene. The honour bestowed on the lad and the grandness of the occasion required a Talmudic side-step. Whereas the official program named the schools that each of the other players represented, Joel was entered as an independent player. Truly a Solomonic decision!

*Look out in the next issue of Jewish Affairs for the second part of Stuart Buxbaum’s history of Herber House.*

[1] Katz, M E, *The History of Jewish Education in South Africa 1841-1980*, Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education, University of Cape Town, 1980 p396

[2] Ibid, p 397

[3] Misheiker, R, ‘Jewish Education in Johannesburg. A brief and historical survey’, *Jewish Affairs*, October 1976

[4] The price of the property progressively declined. Sold in 1913 by Ellis for £6780, Mrs Raphaely paid £4000 for it in 1934 (Johannesburg Heritage Foundation, Heritage Data Base)

[5] Walker, M, *The Pioneer Architects of Johannesburg and their Buildings (1886-1899) with postcard illustrations*. Kalk Bay Historical Association, 2013

[6] Smith, A H, *Johannesburg Street Names*, Juta & Co. Ltd, 1971, p140

[7] Neame, L E, *City Built on Gold*, Central News Agency Ltd, SA,1960, p176

[8] Barry, M, Law, N, *Magnates and Mansions-Johannesburg 1886-1914*, Lowry, Johannesburg, 1985.

- [9] Rubin, M, *The Jewish Community of Johannesburg, 1886-1939: Landscapes of Reality and Imagination* , MA thesis, University of Pretoria, 2004, p81
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Kaplan M, and Robertson, M (eds), *Founders and Followers: Johannesburg Jewry 1887-1915*, Vlaeberg, 1991, pp 231-284
- [12] Rubin, op. cit, p120 (appendix xv)
- [13] Katz, op. cit, p164
- [14] “in appreciation of the services rendered to the Board by Mr Harry Herber, the Board’s President at the time, the hostel was named “Herber House”, Misheiker, op.cit, p23
- [15] Feldberg, L (ed), *South African Jewry, 1965*, Fieldhill, Johannesburg, p 279. Born in Posvil, Lithuania, in 1887, Herber came to South Africa in 1902. In 1926 he founded Greatermans, the future retail giant.
- [16] Dates of minutes of meetings are indicated in brackets where applicable.
- [17] Throughout the Herber House committee minutes and those of the subsequent Institutions committee of the SABJE, the housemaster is referred to as *Mister* Saltzman. Rabbi Philip Heilbrunn in his memoir uses the title *Rabbi*. At the hostel, Saltzman was referred to in everyday encounters as the former. He was in fact, Rabbi. I have followed the appellation as per the sources applicable, in this article.
- [18] References to *Mister* Isaac Goss refer to the period prior to his ordination. In 1957, at the establishment of the fledgling Linksfield-Senderwood Congregation, it is recorded that “Dr Shippel obtained an introduction to Mr Goss (*before he obtained smicha*)”, in ‘History of Linksfield-Senderwood Hebrew Congregation’, <https://www.linkshul.co.za>
- [19] “Boarding and day house Matron. Job Description.” ACT/AJO/DTP 2016. <https://www.Cliftoncollege.com/...> (last visited 23/06/2019)
- [20] Heilbrunn, P, ‘Herber House : A Memoir with Pictures’, unpublished , p7

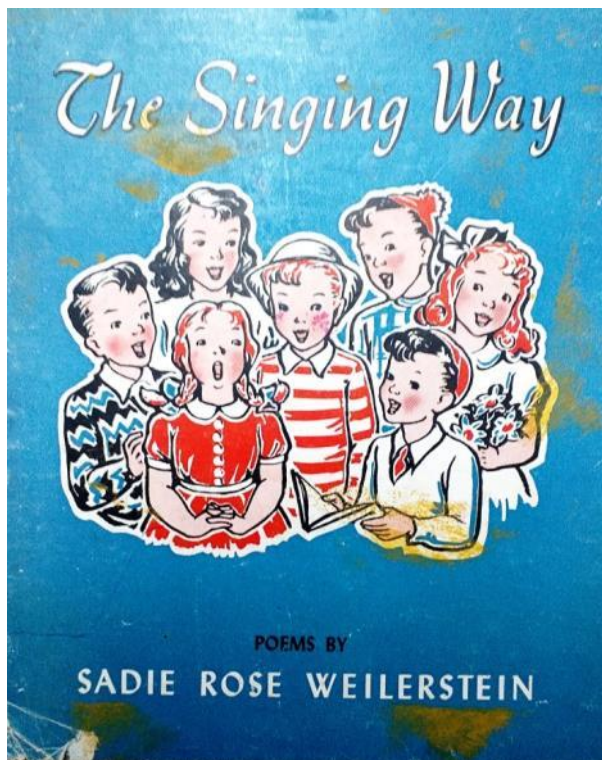
# QUIRKS AND CURIOSITIES

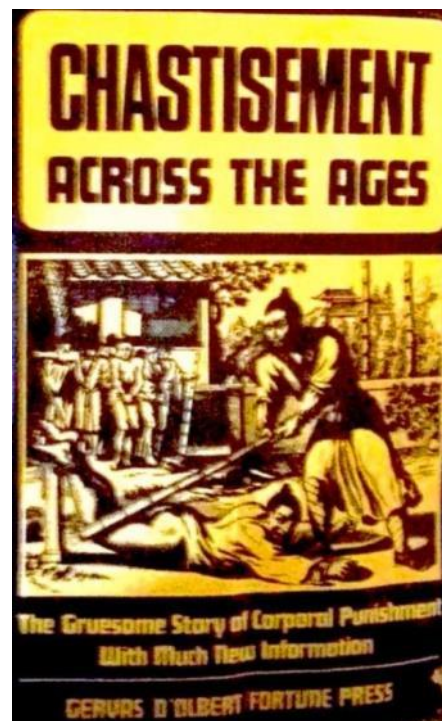
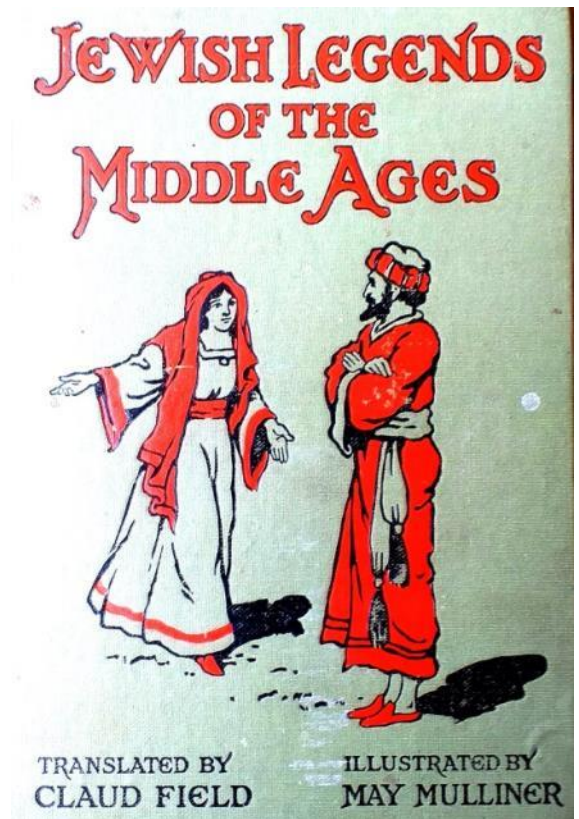
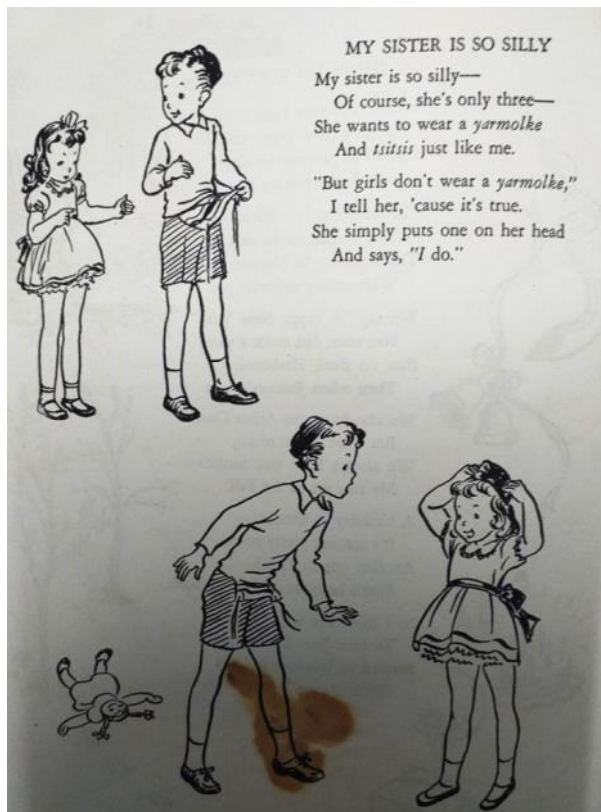
03 September 2019

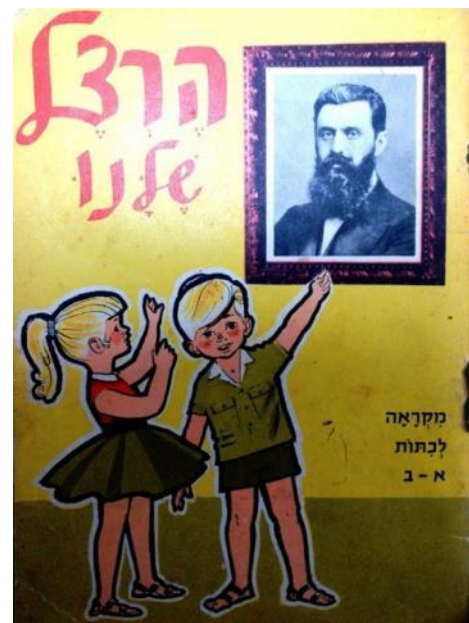
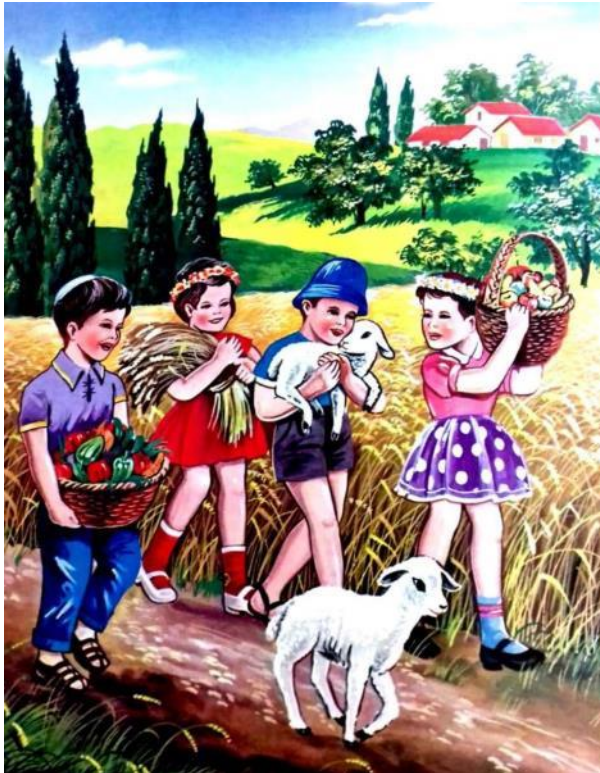
Welcome to the first *Jewish Affairs* 'Quirks and Curiosities' feature! It is envisaged that this will be a regular item looking at some of the more unusual, even eccentric aspects of the Jewish South African legacy.

Located directly opposite the Sydenham shul, the Yad Aharon and Michael Jewish Food Fund has grown into one of Johannesburg Jewry's most important social welfare organisations. Much of the wherewithal for carrying out its mission comes from donations in kind from the general public. For those moving house, emigrating, conducting a pre-Yom Tov clear-out or, sadly, required to dispose of the possessions of the recently deceased, Yad Aharon ensures that whatever is no longer needed will be used to benefit those who do.

For more information on Yad Aharon, including its vintage shop at 50 Durham Street, Sydenham, call 011 485 2076/640 2106 or go to [Facebook.com/YadAharon/](https://www.facebook.com/YadAharon/)[www.yadaharon.co.za](http://www.yadaharon.co.za).







# NEW POETRY

03 September 2019

## **In the Auschwitz Infirmary**

A line of naked stick-men; he in front  
Eyes longingly a pair of chamber pots,  
When told to, on the one he's told to, squats,  
In sixty seconds, though, can only grunt.

By squirting out a dysenteric mess  
His aim (excuse the pun) had been to stay  
In the infirmary a further day;  
Instead, he's kicked aside and told to dress.

Another, with his entrails in a knot  
That tightens every second, quells a howl,  
Loses the bid to cow his brimming bowel,  
Sullies a Nazi toecap and is shot.

There's one, though, who has made the 19<sup>th</sup> block  
A comfortable home within the camp.  
He lines up with the long-term squirting champ  
And, while all eyes are looking at the clock,

They switch the pisspots. Thus, for half his bread,  
Through roll call he can comfortably doze  
While, sockless in the snow in ragged rows,  
The half-alive must hold up last night's dead.

***Peter Austin***

## **Smartphone**

Never, in my wildest imaginings  
Could I ever have dreamt  
That one day I would hold in my hand  
A small device  
Which could provide me  
With every miracle ever conceived by man  
Which could harness air waves  
And light waves and sound waves  
And carry a memory of more than  
A million lifetimes  
And by merely touching it with my fingertips

Allow me access to the world's knowledge  
And place people across the globe  
Into my space  
Right there in front of me.

The phenomenon I hold in my hand  
Tells me everything I ever wanted to learn:  
It instructs me. It guides me  
It talks to me. It plays music for me  
It is my friend, my companion, my other self  
It astounds me. It charms me.  
It challenges me.  
It overwhelms me.

.....

We live with complacency  
Surrounded by the most incredible of miracles  
Yet we continually wait to be woken  
By another manifestation  
The ultimate, the even better  
So that we can test the human capacity  
For invention and mastery  
Smaller and smaller microchips  
In bigger and bigger constellations

The smart-phone which awaits my bidding  
Is a miracle designed for and by mortals  
From components generated  
By an Intelligence beyond our understanding  
Embedded within our being are also microchips  
Embracing gifts of logic, insight, imagination  
Poetry, art and music  
Love, laughter and appreciation

Within our hands lies the capacity to construct  
Within our minds, the capacity to create  
Within our hearts, the capacity to care

.....

If this small mobile phone has so much power  
How do we divine the source and complexity  
Of every force and every energy  
Not yet even comprehended by man?

Or the origin  
Of the unimaginable intricacies and connectivity  
Of every evolution and design  
Delineated even before and beyond?  
And which remains and will remain  
In our domain  
Undiscovered and unknown  
For we are too microcosmic  
And cannot see

***Charlotte Cohen***