

JEWISH AFFAIRS

Chanukah 2019



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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 AFFAIRS

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OBITUARY: ISAAC REZNIK

David Saks



Isaac Reznik, who died on 25 October 2019 at the age of 83, was a unique figure on the Jewish communal scene. Whether as a journalist, editor, photographer, historian, radio host, Jewish communal professional, book dealer, political and social welfare activist, archivist, lay volunteer or in various other capacities, it can truly be said of him that he immersed himself in the affairs of the South African Jewish community activities. In turn, he left a lasting mark in multiple areas of Jewish communal life.

Isaac was known as South African Jewry's living encyclopaedia, and in his case it was no exaggeration. His recall of names, dates and places was uncanny, to the extent that he could quote verbatim extracts from speeches and sermons given over half a century before. When approached by researchers, both local and overseas, for in-depth information on aspects of the community's history, this writer would regularly refer them to Isaac in the knowledge that not only was he scrupulously reliable, but that frequently he could tell at first hand of things that one would not find in the official record.

In the journalistic field, Isaac was managing editor of the *Zionist Record* during the 1970s and later editor of *Jewish Tradition*, official organ of the Union of Orthodox Synagogues.

An enthusiastic photographer, he also covered numerous community events over the years, with a high proportion of his photographs finding their way into the archives of the SAZF and SAJBD. For five years, he presented two popular weekly

radio programmes on ChaiFM: *Talk of the Town* and *Art of the Cantor*, the latter focused on *chazonut* (cantorial singing). He went on to start an online streaming service, 20Chai. Amongst his copious writings on aspects of Jewish communal history were the many scores of obituaries he wrote for the Jewish press, almost always in a voluntary capacity. He was coopted relatively late onto the editorial board of *Jewish Affairs*, but made a valuable contribution during the few years that he served until his passing.

Isaac was involved in many aspects of Orthodox Jewish life. He served on the committees of the Federation of Synagogues and Jeppe and Cyrildene shuls, as a prisons chaplain (initially accompanying Rabbi Irma Aloy on prison visits, including to political prisoners held in Barberton) and had a long association with the Chevra Kadisha, officiating at well over a thousand burials. This culminated in his appointment as the first director of the Union of Orthodox Synagogues in 1986, a post he held until his retirement twelve years later.

The son of an immigrant butcher, Isaac Reznik was born on 14 October 1936 in Fairview, Johannesburg. After matriculating at Athlone Boys High, he studied pharmacy at Johannesburg Technical College and then worked for a time in the Melrose Cheese Factory. From an early age, he was involved in politics. At 18, he was the youngest member of the central committee of the United Party and later campaigned for the Progressive Federal Party.

While far from being a wealthy man, Isaac was noted for his unstinting generosity. Never married himself, he raised sister's four sons and daughters when she became too ill to take care of them. After his domestic help died, he became guardian to her seven year-old daughter Julia, and paid for her education. In 1979, he acquired L Goldberg's Hebrew Booksellers in Bree Street, Johannesburg, which he eventually sold in 1988. He also opened a branch in Cape Town, as well as Medicus, a bookshop selling medical books on Wits campus.

In between all his work on synagogue and library committees (specifically the lending and audiovisual libraries of the SA Zionist Federation), running his businesses or political campaigning, Isaac was also a founder member and for twenty years secretary of the Johannesburg Film Society. This was founded in 1954 by a group of Athlone High matriculants, all Jewish, and at its height had a membership list running in the 1000s. As secretary, he met with a number of world-renown film stars, including Anthony Quinn and Janet Suzman.

Uprooted and uncompensated: the mistreatment of 'Russian' Jews by Perfidious Albion during and after the Anglo-Boer War

Richard Mendelsohn

Richard Mendelsohn is Emeritus Associate Professor of History at the University of Cape Town. His books include the award-winning Sammy Marks: 'The Uncrowned King of the Transvaal', The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History, the first major general history of South African Jewry in fifty years (co-authored with Milton Shain) and Black and White in Colour: African History on Screen (co-edited with Vivian Bickford-Smith).

2019 marks the 120th anniversary of the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). While it was by no means a 'Jewish War', despite the accusations of some hostile English commentators like JA Hobson, there was nevertheless a significant Jewish presence in the theatre of war. Some 3000 Jews, mainly English but also on occasion of Russian origin, joined the British forces. Many of these chose to demonstrate their patriotism at a time when Anglo-Jewry was under public pressure as a result of a flood of immigrants arriving in England from the Russian Empire.[2] A much smaller number fought for the Boers, probably a few hundred at most, for by and large Jewish residents of the Boer republics were recent arrivals who understandably did not see the war as their war. Besides the combatants there were some ten thousand Jewish civilians who lived in Kruger's South African Republic and its neighbour, the Orange Free State, at the war's outbreak. Many of these joined the general Uitlander exodus from the cities of interior, Johannesburg and Pretoria, for the relative security of the coast but some remained for a part or the whole of the war.

The Jewish population of the Boer Republics was heterogeneous in character. Significant numbers had come from western and central Europe. These were highly acculturated and largely indistinguishable from fellow British, Germans and Hollanders. Much larger numbers had come from Eastern Europe, chiefly from the Russian Empire, and predominantly from one limited geographical area, the Kovno and Suvalki provinces in Lithuania, though there were also smaller numbers from Latvia and Eastern Poland. These Jews were by and large recent departures, part of the wave of Jewish migration from the Tsarist Empire in the last decades of the 19th and early decades of the 20th Centuries. (There were some earlier Eastern European Jewish arrivals in South Africa prior to the 1880s. The most notable of these was Sammy Marks, who in 1861, at the age of seventeen, left Russia for England before coming on to South Africa in 1868. He went on to make successive

fortunes on the Kimberley diamond fields in the 1870s and in the Transvaal from coal mining and secondary industry in the 1880s and 1890s).[3]

While Marks and others arrived in the 1860s and 1870s, the major influx began in the 1880s in the wake of the pogroms and so-called May Laws following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. Those who chose to come south rather than heading westwards across the Atlantic were drawn by the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886, the largest worldwide discovery of gold hitherto. Some of the new arrivals settled in the coastal ports of the British colonies of Natal and the Cape, but the majority moved into the interior, to the Boer republics, particularly Paul Kruger's South African Republic.

What was the experience of this predominantly Russian Jewish population through the war? Additionally, what was its character on the eve of the war, and how did it emerge from the conflict? Answers to these questions can be pursued, albeit only in part, in the contemporary Jewish press, in particular the detailed reporting of the war in the *London Jewish Chronicle*, the weekly voice of British Jewry, and in its English rival, the *Jewish World*. Though most of their attention focussed on the patriotism and heroic deeds of the Anglo-Jewish soldiery, some attention was paid to the fate of Jews in the republics. Beyond these well-known printed sources, and buried in the State Archives in Pretoria, are the papers of the Central Judicial Commission, a body set up by the British after peace was made to investigate and adjudicate claims for compensation for damage to property incurred during the war.

The background to the creation of the Commission is the extensive damage to the property of burghers and of foreign subjects living in Transvaal and Free State due to the devastating nature of the war. This was particularly the case in the countryside where successive British commanders-in-chief, Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener, adopted punitive scorched earth methods in an effort to end the fierce and sustained resistance of the Boer guerrillas. When the war eventually ended the British, as part of a programme of pacification and reconstruction of the defeated Republics, undertook to pay compensation for these wartime losses. Very large sums were set aside for these purposes. The Central Judicial Commission (hereafter CJC) played a critical role in administering the payments. Claims for compensation were submitted or passed on to this commission. These were carefully investigated, often by magistrates and the police. The CJC would then rule on the merits of the claim and make awards.

The Archives of the CJC are organised by category: British Subjects, Burghers, Protected Burghers, Foreign Subjects, and within the latter, by country of origin, French, German, American, Dutch, Turkish, and so on. One of the largest sub-categories is the Russian section: there are some 553 files devoted to claims by Russian subjects and many of these are quite voluminous. The great majority of the applicants in the Russian section are Jewish rather than ethnic Russians.[4]

What do these voluminous files reveal? Firstly, they provide biographical information about these immigrants, including:

- their years of departure from Russia and of arrival in South Africa
- their ages and marital status
- their occupations
- their patterns of settlement in the republics.

This is rich documentation of a sort not otherwise available for this particular immigrant population.

From these records it is apparent that the majority had arrived in the 1890s, particularly in the mid-decade, though some had left Russia considerably earlier. Most had come directly from Russia, presumably first travelling to the Baltic ports and then on to England before embarking at Southampton for the long sea journey to Cape Town. But there were cases of staged migration, Jews who arrived in South Africa after extended stays in Britain. With regard to age and marital status, one might have expected the great majority of the new arrivals to have been young, single males. Instead the archive reveals that while these predominated there were significant numbers of older men and a fair number of women. Some of the former were married but at this early stage of settlement were still unaccompanied by their wives.

With regard to occupations, an overwhelming number of applicants described themselves as general dealers and storekeepers. There were also a significant number of hotel keepers and a sprinkling of artisan and miscellaneous occupations: cab drivers, dairymen, butchers, tailors, photographers, hawkers, booksellers, builders, a blacksmith, a printer, a hairdresser, and a handful of farmers. Judging by the extent of the claims for compensation submitted, many of these had prospered quickly in their new countries. Some had only arrived in the mid-nineties and yet within a few years had accumulated substantial means. (This rapid economic betterment is clearly related to the opportunities a rapidly developing Transvaal offered.)

Regarding patterns of settlement, most of the claims came from urban centres, the Witwatersrand in particular, but also from Pretoria. There were also many claims from the countryside. The files provide evidence of a pattern of dispersion throughout the backveld. There was a whole constellation of rural stores established and operated by Jews on farms owned by Boers, along the roads of the republic. These Jewish-owned stores supplied local farming communities with goods, and bought and then sent to market their produce. The Archives of the CJC include detailed inventories of products bought from the farmer, mealies (maize), tobacco, skins, wool, and so on. From these records it is clear that Jewish

storekeepers played a vital role in the commercialisation of the South African countryside during the last decades of the century.

Besides profiling these Russian Jewish immigrants at the outbreak of the war, the CJC archives also richly document the wartime experience of these Jews. The files record the departure of many as refugees on the eve of the war and detail the crippling losses many suffered as they abandoned their property. These refugees would board up their homes and stores with wooden planks and corrugated iron, or take their stock of goods to central stores for safekeeping. Much of this property was poorly secured and duly fell victim to waves of looting along the wartime Witwatersrand. (In some cases this was 'manufactured' looting as the basis for fraudulent purposes.)

The files also document their lives as refugees, telling us about their wartime destinations and occupations. While it seems that most stuck it out in the Cape Colony, particularly in Cape Town, some of the Russian Jewish refugees returned to Europe, either to Britain or to Russia itself. Those who remained at the Cape struggled to find employment; many, it seems, were unemployed for the duration and lived off charity. The files also document their often frustrated attempts to return to the Transvaal late in the war or soon afterwards. The British authorities, it appears, were none too eager to have major influx of Jews, some of whom had been involved before the war in undesirable practices such as illicit liquor dealing and prostitution.^[5]

The files richly document the experience of the minority who had remained behind, both in the towns and in the countryside. They are particularly revealing of the fate of the latter. Pressure was brought to bear on those who stayed behind to join the commandos going off to fight against the British. A few did so but most resisted service in what was not their war. The key to avoiding commando service were documents issued by M. Aubert, the French Vice-Consul in the Transvaal, acting for the Russian Consul at the start of the war. On the basis of statements from four witnesses the French Vice-Consul issued consular passports stating that the holders were Russian subjects. Armed with these documents asserting that they were foreign subjects the bearers were able to resist efforts to conscript them.

These consular documents provided no protection for their goods, however, and these were commandeered where required by the Boer forces. Many of those who remained behind were involved in supplying the Boer forces, including those laying siege to Mafeking. (The irony here is that the British forces inside Mafeking were able to resist because of the extensive stores laid in by Julius Weil, an Anglo-Jewish merchant with Russian Jewish connections.)

Once the British forces advanced in 1900 and occupied the Boer capitals, ending the conventional phase of the war, Jews like many other residents of the Transvaal and Free State, took an oath of neutrality. Most of the rural Jews were allowed to remain at their stores once they had taken the oath. The rapid conclusion to the war

the British had expected once the Boer capitals were occupied failed to materialise and in the second half of 1900 the Boers instead turned to guerrilla war. Jews were caught in the middle as the Central Judicial Commission archives fully document. Willingly in some cases, unwillingly in others, these Jewish rural storekeepers played an important role in sustaining and encouraging the guerrilla struggle in its initial stages. Jewish stores effectively became supply depots for the commandos, who regularly turned up and took what they needed: boots, clothing, food, fodder for their horses. The hapless storekeepers had little choice faced by these armed (and dangerous) men.

Collaboration was quite willing in some cases though. There is plentiful evidence in the archives of illicit 'trading with the enemy' as the British investigators put it. It seems that Jewish storekeepers were a vital part of an informal economy that sprang up during the guerrilla phase of the war, with sales of produce to the storekeepers from farms whose owners were on commando, an underground economy that helped to keep the Boer guerrillas in the field.

Given this, as well as their own uncertain loyalties, it is not surprising that the Jewish storekeepers became objects of suspicion and that in an atmosphere of paranoia and of denunciation many fell victim to accusations, often malicious, of disloyalty. The archives contain records of arrests, often repeated arrests, on the basis of reports from informers.

Given too the willing participation of some and unwilling participation of others in sustaining the commandos, it is equally unsurprising that Jewish storekeepers, together with Boer families and black peasants, became the targets of the land clearances conducted by the British forces in the second half of 1900 and first half of 1901. They too were victims of the scorched earth tactics adopted by Lord Kitchener to deny the commandos any traction in the countryside. The archives are filled with reports of the destruction of rural Jewish homes and stores: poignant tales of the arrival of British columns at remote sites, the issuing of instructions to accompany the columns to town immediately, the hasty packing of a small part of the family's possessions, the seizure of some of the goods by the British, and the destruction of the rest, together with the burning and dynamiting of the homes and stores.^[6]

Take the the unfortunate case of Joseph Aaron Braude for example.^[7] Born in Kovno province in 1854, he left Russia and came to South Africa in 1887, a year after the discovery of the Witwatersrand goldfields. With his wife Bertha he raised a family of six children and prospered as hotel and storekeeper on a farm in the Lichtenberg district of the western Transvaal on the road between Klerksdorp and Vryburg, trading in skins and wool, and earning the respect of their Boer neighbours. "Everyone has a good word for these people and they certainly are a good class of Russian Jew", a British office reported to the compensation commission after the war.



Farm and store burning, Anglo-Boer War

During the early part of the war Braude had goods commandeered by Boers. After the British arrived in May 1900, goods to the value of close to £3000, a very large sum, were requisitioned by passing British columns. These were fraught and lonely times with the “enemy always hovering about in the neighbourhood”. Neither the Braudes nor their servants could leave the farms, and little news reached them of the progress of the war. The Braudes lived on in this precarious fashion for over a year, till mid-1901, all the while, they would later claim, behaving with scrupulous neutrality.

Nemesis arrived at 8 am on 31 July 1901 in the shape of a Lieutenant Boyle of the British army who ordered Braude (as Braude testified a few months later) “to pack up whatever personal effects he considered most urgent for himself and his family...and ... hold themselves ready to leave at once....” Boyle offered two military mule wagons to carry the Braude family’s possessions. While the family hastily packed, the troops began destroying their furniture and preparing to dynamite and set their buildings on fire. The mule wagons had gone no more than 150 yards, Braude later recalled, when smoke began to pour from his store; looking back from further down the road, he saw the rest of what he had built up over the past eleven years going up in flames. The column marched off with Braude’s mares and donkeys, the troops laden with Braude’s geese, fowl and turkeys. The

family were taken by the British troops to Taungs in Bechuanaland, and then 'allowed' to proceed to Cape Town at their own expense. Soon afterwards, Braude returned to Russia and had his lapsed Russian nationality re-instated.

In applying for compensation to Britain as a Russian subject, Braude claimed that the fair value for the destroyed buildings and their contents was the very substantial sum of £7068, an amount disputed by the British, who claimed that Braude was 'grossly' exaggerating the value of his losses. Doubt was also cast on his neutrality, and it was alleged that he had kept his store open and traded with the Boer commandos till his removal in July 1901. Deeply despondent Braude, a ruined man, took his own life in May 1902, leaving his widow and six children "in much straitened circumstances".[8]

While the archives richly detail the fate of Joseph Braude and his fellow Russian Jews during and immediately after the war, they also graphically reveal the fate of their applications for compensation for their wartime losses. Over 550 applications were made to the Central Judicial Commission by people claiming Russian nationality. Some of these were for relatively small amounts, a matter of just a few pounds, some, as we have seen in the case of the benighted Braude family, were for sizeable amounts. The British conducted careful investigations of many of these claims, seemingly in an effort to minimise or even invalidate them. They sought to cut down the value of the claims and where possible, to invalidate them on the grounds that the claimants had breached their neutrality as foreign subjects and aided the Boers. Hence the importance attached to investigating the commercial activities of these Jewish storekeepers during the war. Many of them were accused of trading with the enemy and had their claims disallowed on these grounds. All these efforts at invalidating the claims on an individual, case by case basis were overtaken by the fortuitous discovery of a means of collective disqualification of the Russian Jewish claims.

The great majority of these Jewish applicants had left Russia without Russian passports, possibly to avoid any risk of conscription. At best a few had internal travel documents. The British discovered that Russian law required that "no Russian leaving his country, legally or properly ... be without an Imperial Russian passport". The passport, "a small Green Book" with the signature of the passport holder on the first page and information in Russian, German and French inside, stipulated that if the holder of the passport was "to retain his Russian Nationality" after five years abroad, he would have to have "his passport extended by the Governor of the province" in which he had obtained the passport.[9]

Jewish applicants for compensation had no such passport and in most cases, little intention of ever returning to Russia. The only official proof they had of their status as Russian subjects were documents issued by the French consuls in the former Boer republics acting for the Russian consuls. As explained above, these documents were required if the applicants were to remain in the republics and avoid conscription into the commandos.

The British established to their own obvious satisfaction (and relief) that these documents carried very little legal weight for purposes of claims of nationality. The consular passport was strictly a “temporary” arrangement “to enable a Russian subject to comply with the passport regulations, and obtain the extension of his passport from the Governor of the province.” Failure to comply with these regulations meant that one “was debarred from the rights of a Russian subject abroad.”

Like nearly all his fellow Russian Jewish applicants Moses Aaron, a Johannesburg storekeeper who had left Russia in 1863 and the subject of the test case, could produce no Imperial Russian Passport, nor any evidence that he had ever had such a passport or had ever applied to the Governor of his former province for the extension of such a passport. He was consequently in effect stateless – without a Russian or any other nationality – at the time he had incurred his wartime losses. In the words of British officialdom: “This man, therefore... is not considered to have proved his nationality, or his neutral foreign nationality. In the absence of such proof there will be no award.” Effectively, no proven nationality, no status as a foreign subject, no award.

The precedent established in the Aarons case was then applied across the board to the great majority of the hundreds of Russian Jewish applicants for compensation for wartime losses. Their applications were simply disqualified whatever the merits or otherwise of their actual claims. The notations on the files read:

“...not genuine foreign subject”

“...not bona fide Russian”

“...no nationality”

“...No award”

The only positive outcome of this bureaucratic exercise in futility was the mountain of paperwork it generated. This provides a rare and invaluable archival resource for the early history of the South African Jewish community at a time of great crisis. It further uniquely allows researchers to capture both the experiences and the voices of otherwise obscure individuals, victims of great historical forces beyond their control who sought unsuccessfully to re-establish lives disrupted by a war that reshaped the whole of South Africa.

NOTES

[1] The article is an adaptation of a paper originally given at an African history conference in Moscow. See ‘Russian Jews in the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902 : Recent Archival Discoveries’, in A. Balezin (ed.), *Archives – key to African history of the 20th century* (Moscow: Institute of World History, Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Asian and African Studies, Moscow State University, 2005), pp.141-149.

- [2] See Richard Mendelsohn, 'The Jewish War: Anglo-Jewry and the South African War' in G. Cuthbertson, A. Grundlingh and M-L. Suttie (eds), *Writing a Wider War: Rethinking Gender, Race, and Identity in the South African War, 1899-1902*, Ohio University Press and David Philip Publishers, Athens, Ohio and Cape Town, 2002.
- [3] Richard Mendelsohn, *Sammy Marks: 'The Uncrowned King of the Transvaal'*, David Philip Publishers and Ohio University Press, Cape Town and Athens, Ohio, 1991.
- [4] There are also numerous claims by Jews of Russian origin in the British and American sections. These are Jews who had emigrated from the Russian Empire and had been naturalised in their initial countries of settlement.
- [5] Diana Cammack, *The Rand at War 1899- 1902: The Witwatersrand and the Anglo-Boer War*, James Currey, University of California Press and University of Natal Press, London, Berkeley, Los Angeles and Pietermaritzburg, 1990, p.198. See Charles van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886-1914, Volume 1: New Babylon*, for Jewish involvement in illicit liquor dealing and prostitution. See also van Onselen's biographical study of Joe Silver, the Polish-born 'King of the Pimps' in Johannesburg. (*The Fox and the flies: the world of Joseph Silver, Racketeer and Psychopath*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2007).
- [6] The Jews removed from the countryside did not end up in concentration camps like their Boer and black counterparts. They owed this leniency, it seems, to their status as foreign subjects.
- [7] State Archives, Pretoria: Archives of Central Judicial Commission (CJC). CJC 1453: Claim J.A.B. Braun (sic)
- [8] A further example of the fate of rural Jewry, as reflected in the archives of the Central Judicial Commission, is that of the Segall family of Vlaktefontein in the Orange Free State, one of whose members, Josef 'Jakkals' Segal, fought with the Boer commandos till the 'bitter end'. For a full account of the wartime misadventures of the Segall clan, see Richard Mendelsohn, "A Jewish Family at War – The Segalls of Vlaktefontein", *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2000.
- [9] CJC 1388A: Claim Moses Aaron. This was the test case which provided the basis for the collective invalidation of most Russian Jewish claims for compensation. See also CJC 1762: Claim S. Meyer for details of the Russian passport and of the local consular procedures.

Mementos of the Anglo-Boer War

Gwynne Schrire

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“No matter how much suffering you went through, you never wanted to let go of those memories,” wrote bestselling Japanese writer and Jerusalem Prize winner Haruki Murakami. However, the same does not hold true of one’s children or grandchildren who live in another time. With the passing of years, memories become mementoes and those mementoes can land up in the bin, or in junk shops, auction houses and, sometimes, in museums. To the descendants, they are mere artefacts occupying space, and the experiences that were the reason for their original owner holding on to them shrivel and then disappear altogether.

This article will try to bring back to life the forgotten stories behind four of these artefacts, each associated with an event that took place 120 years ago. Two are on display at the Cape SA Jewish Board of Deputies and two are in this writer’s possession.



Hanging on the wall of the Samson Centre, where the SAJBD’s Cape offices are housed, is a carved walking stick of Burmese teak. We know who carved it as it bears the craftsman’s signature: *M. Segal*. Also engraved thereon is the place and date where it was made - Darryl’s Eiland, July 1901. Darrell’s Island is a small island off the coast of Bermuda. It does not feature on the list of places where East European Jews fleeing Russia chose to settle, so why was Moses Segal carving a walking stick there in 1901? Segal answered the question on his stick - “Bermuda krygsgevang” - Bermuda prisoner of war. The British used the island as a POW camp during the Anglo-Boer War along with camps on other Bermuda Islands, St Helena, Ceylon and India – an estimated 26 000 POWs passed through these camps.

What else can we learn from the stick? The owner was a gifted craftsman who demonstrated his loyalty to the Boer republics by carving on it the armorial crests of the Orange Free State and Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) with an eagle on the top. He also carved a hand in a sleeve with the initials P.R.D.T. M.T. Steyn on the cuff. Martinus Theunis Steyn was the last president of the independent

Orange Free State (1896-1902). The hand clutches a knife that pierces the head of a snake twisted round a frog. The snake curls right around the stick. At the bottom, the snake's tail is in the mouth of another snake that twists up the other side of the stick.

These symbols are found on other handcrafts made by Boer POWs to while away the time and earn some pocket money. Many have been given by their families to the SA National Museum of Military History in Johannesburg and to the Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein. Segal's walking stick was donated to the Cape Town Jewish Museum by his grandson, K Segal from Oudtshoorn, and is now in the possession of the Cape SAJBD as it did not fit into the themes of the new SA Jewish Museum. Comments Allan Sinclair[i], Curator of the Military Art Collection at the SA National Museum of Military History, "It was common practice for items to be marked with special labels, including such details as the date, the name of the camp, the country in which the camp was located and, in many cases, the name of the prisoner who created the piece".

Sinclair points out that the snake was a symbol of the guerrilla war. He also mentions that on the blade of a knife made in Ceylon, the coats of arms of both the ZAR and the Orange Free State were carved, just as Segal had done. The symbols on Segal's stick were thus not unique but conform to those carved on objects made in other POW camps.

In his Collector's Guide to Boer War Memorabilia, P Oosthuizen explains that the POWs started to mass produce items, like walking sticks, pens, boxes, clips, serviette rings and paper knives [ii]. Indeed the POWs on Burt's Island, another island in Bermuda, formed the Industrial Association for Carvings and Curios to help sell the articles they made through shops in Bermuda. They were paid a percentage of the profits [iii].

What else do we know about Moses Segal?

Although the symbols carved on his walking stick show that he had a strong loyalty to his president Steyn (who was friendly with Segal's brother Abraham[iv]) and to the independence of the Boer Republics, the face he gave to the British indicated otherwise. After the war he claimed to the Provost Marshall's office at the SA Army Headquarters that although he had been arrested on suspicion of having aided the Boers by providing them with supplies (which he was doing), he had remained "strictly neutral" and was not actually fighting for them [v]. However, the symbols he carved on his stick tell a different story.



In May 1900 he handed over to the British a Mauser rifle and cartridges - this in itself is suspicious as in order to enrol in a Boer commando, as required, each man had to supply his own horse, rifle, ammunition and two weeks' worth of rations. When the Afrikaner forces won the battle of Spion Kop on 24 January, 1900, they believed they owed their success to "*vertroue in God en die Mauser*" (faith in God and the Mauser)[[vi](#)].

Much is known about Moses Segal through the research of Richard Mendelsohn [[vii](#)]. He and his brother Abraham came to South Africa in 1894 from the very small north-western Latvian shtetl of Piltene, and started a shop in Vlaktefontein in the Free State. Four years later Abraham's oldest son, 14-year old Joseph, joined them. In March 1901, a passing column of British troops "totally ruined" their shop, smashing the safe and looting their goods.[[viii](#)] The next month Joseph's cousin HB Kaplan said that Moses was commandeered by Commandant Munnik Hertzog but released shortly afterwards minus horse, saddle and bridle and allowed to return home with a protective pass. In May, having heard that the British were in the neighbourhood, Moses decided to flee, packing his cart with his shop books, promissory notes, clothes, two watches and three gold rings[[ix](#)], only to be captured at the farm Skanse near Metz in the Fauresmith district. A British officer searched him, confiscating his papers, £81 in gold and notes and four shillings in silver. He was refused a receipt but the officer promised to return the money when they reached the Orange River Station. While they were about it, the troops also looted and burnt down the Segal's Vlaktefontein store. Moses was handcuffed, despite protesting that he was a neutral, and marched to that station.

"Still I have the marks of the handcuffing" he complained twenty months later, protesting that "the treatment was very bad, food not sufficient and no cover at all for the cold nights."

Arriving eight days later at the Orange River Station, the intelligence officer saw the incriminating protective pass and concluded that “the Jew Segall has been trading and aiding enemy if not on commando and probably his money will be confiscated” [x].

On 24 May poor Moses, still protesting his innocence, was placed in an open coal truck on a train headed for Cape Town and the POW camp on the Green Point common. He demanded that his money be returned but nothing doing. Two days later he was put onto the SS Armenian bound for Bermuda. He did not find that journey any better than the one on the train (“The food and treatment were very bad and having no money, I was obliged to take what they gave me. The treatment on ship was much to complain of” [xi].

Transferred to Darrell’s Island, Moses complained repeatedly about the theft of his money, writing to the camp authorities and even to Lord Kitchener, Commander-in-Chief of the British forces. He complained about his innocence. He complained about his neutrality. He complained that he had been left destitute without adequate clothing or the most ordinary comforts. To little avail.

Finally, the Provost Marshall at army headquarters decided to investigate, writing to Captain Leigh, the officer accused of taking Moses’ money now back in England [xii]. Naturally, Leigh “emphatically” denied knowing anything about the case. He did not remember taking any money. He did not remember Segal. He did not remember being in Metz. Faced with the word of an English gentleman and officer and the word of a Jewish foreigner it was a foregone conclusion which of the two the British would believe.

On 7 October 1902, Moses Segal was repatriated - but not before he suffered another robbery. This time his trunk was ransacked and “a great number of things stolen therefrom”. These included a silver watch chain, a suit of clothes, five shirts, four pairs of underpants, one fountain pen. Also taken was a small box which had contained “Numerous curios in silver and carved wood, a good number of them bearing my name and which I valued greatly” [xiii].

As Segal had, according to his letters, arrived on the island destitute and without clothing, one wonders how he had managed to acquire all these possessions. Would it be from the sale of goods he had carved? Knowing the quality of carving displayed on the walking stick in the SAJBD's possession, his craftsmanship must have been considerable.

Moses landed in Simonstown on 29 October and was returned to the Free State once more on an open truck, penniless. He submitted a claim to the British for £7 924, which the British refused to pay. They had found a cost-saving legal loophole. Britain would only pay compensation to foreigners who were citizens or subject of foreign countries. Some of the East European Jews had left the country illegally, sneaking over the border. Some had failed to comply with Russian laws about

retaining Russian status when out of the country as they had had no intention of returning to a land where conditions were far worse for them than they were in southern Africa. Nor was the Russian consulate keen to accept responsibility for these now stateless Jews. So Segal received compensation neither for his shop, nor his goods, nor his looted POW possessions. As Prof Mendelsohn wrote - “perfidious Albion” [xiv].

Thus the only memento remaining from his months on the island is the walking stick, a unique item carved by a Latvian Jew and *Boerejood* in captivity on a lonely Bermudan island.

The Board of Deputies also has a medal that was awarded to 'Burger W Jacobson'. Wolf Jacobson was a landsleit of the Segals — they had all come from Piltene, the same shtetl in Latvia. Piltene had 629 Jews in 1897 (42% of its population [xv]) so it is probably not coincidental that they settled in the Fauresmith district in the Free State and that Wolf and Joseph Segal (nephew of Moses) ended up in the same commando. Jacobson served under General Hertzog. He may have gained his knowledge of the area as a smous as he was a renowned scout [xvi]. Until the end of the war he served in the Staff Corps of Hertzog’s successor, General Chas. Niewoudt [xvii].

In 1999 (the centenary of the war's outbreak), David Saks met Jacobson’s daughter



Jenny Leviton when he was researching Jewish participation in the war[xviii]. Through him, she donated her father's medal to the SA Jewish Board of Deputies, along with two handwritten testimonials from General Hertzog and General Niewoudt. Hertzog's letter, dated 5 July 1905, states that Jacobson had been a burgher of the Orange Free State Republic, had fought under his leadership until the end of the war and had discharged his duty “faithfully and dutifully” [xix]. Niewoudt's testimonial is similarly worded.

Jenny had been told that if she should ever find herself in difficulties, she should appeal directly to General Hertzog and no stone would be left unturned for her rights or justice. She did so in 1939 when she needed documentary proof of her late father’s South African citizenship. She also asked that she be given his Dekorasie vir Troue Diens medal, which was duly sent to her. Jacobson had died in 1920, shortly before medals for Boer veterans were officially issued.

There is another medal, also belonging to another grandchild, the present writer. It was given to me by my grandmother Sara Neche Schrire nee Senderowitz. Sara was born in Beaconsfield, a town one-mile south of Kimberley, on 11 November

1893. She was the only one of seven children to survive (there is a whole row of little Senderowitz graves in the Jewish cemetery in Kimberley) and one of the first Jewish children to be born there[xx]. Her father Raphael Senderowitz rented a stand on Market Square, and opened a shop and a mill. He would buy mealies and mill them into flour which he sold around Kimberley and in the Transvaal. The family lived in a house next to the mill and had a stable for the horses that delivered the flour. They also kept chickens and cows. Raphael was highly respected for his ability, to the extent that the locals would come to him at election time to ask his advice on whom to vote for.

When war broke out in 1899, Kimberley and Beaconsfield were besieged. Much to the indignation of its inhabitants Col Robert Kekewich, who commanded the garrison in Kimberley, had originally intended to exclude Beaconsfield in his plans for the defence of Kimberley. However, the Beaconsfield residents protested so strongly that he was forced to include the defence of Beaconsfield with his defence of Kimberley, although independently of the main defensive enclosure[xxi].

The Senderowitz family decided to flee, loading their cart with their possessions and setting out for Kimberley. On the road, which was blocked with other refugees, they met up with relatives from the Barkly West river diamond diggings likewise fleeing into Kimberley and who were planning to stay with them. They decided to turn round and return home together.

The families survived on sacks of dried peas and beans from their shop. When I moved out of my house recently I sold two doorstops - shells from Boer cannon that my grandmother claimed had landed in their garden. When the shelling was bad, Rhodes ordered all the women and children to go down the mines for safety. Raphael refused to allow his wife and daughter to join the women and children sheltering in the mines, however, as he did not want them to associate with the women of ill repute who would be there.

When the siege was lifted, the relieved Beaconsfield residents (pun intended) decided to strike a Beaconsfield medal for their schoolchildren. Fifteen hundred were made of white metal and presented by Beaconsfield Mayor J.M. Pratley to schoolchildren of all races in Beaconsfield whose parents had submitted an application form. Suspended by two links from a rather crumpled red and white ribbon, the one face contains the full figure of the Roman goddess Pax extending an olive branch in her right hand, cradling a cornucopia in her left and standing on a small plinth. Underneath her is the word: 'PEACE' and around the medal it states: 'COUNCIL CHILDRENS MEDAL PRESENTED BY THE TOWN'; '1900'. The Beaconsfield coat of arms is on



the reverse with motto: 'FORTI NIHIL DIFFICILE' (nothing too difficult for the strong) on a ribbon below with 'SIEGE OF BEACONSFIELD' '14 OCTOBER 1899 * 15 FEBRUARY 1900 around the medal. The medals were presented to my grandmother and the other children at a large ceremony only late in 1901 because while the siege had been lifted, the peace took longer to arrive than anticipated [xxii].

My grandmother said that Cecil John Rhodes used to ride past their house every day to review the troops. He was a poor horseman, and when the children used to shout after him, he was too scared to turn round to shout back. At the Big Hole Open Air Museum one can see the stone that Rhodes used for mounting his horse. She also said the children used to run after the soldiers shouting "badges, badges". These the soldiers would tear off their uniforms and give to the children, which they would then swap amongst themselves. She was sorry that she had not kept them.

Something else young Miss Sendelowitz, or perhaps her father, must have acquired, from a soldier was a tin that had originally contained chocolate. These were presented to the troops by Queen Victoria as a Christmas/New Years' Gift. The chocolate were made either by Cadburys or by Fry and Rowntree. As these were Quaker owned companies, they were pacifists and reluctant to support the war effort, but were persuaded to change their minds [xxiii]. It certainly made sound business sense. The three companies' tins vary slightly in appearance - my grandmother's tin had been made by Fry and still contains the tissue paper in which the chocolate had been wrapped - but no chocolate. How the chocolate would have managed to survive the summer heat without refrigerated trucks is a marvel.

The gilt tin is magnetic, with red and blue paint. On the lid is an embossed left-facing bust of Queen Victoria, flanked by the crowned Royal cipher at left and inscribed at right "SOUTH AFRICA 1900". Beneath is the message "I wish you a happy New Year Victoria R"

So here are the stories behind four Anglo-Boer War mementoes, all preserved by grandchildren who, while not having experienced the hardships of those who lived during those times, had not wanted to let go of the memories the objects carried and accordingly had handed them on to others to care for. The owners had come from Fauresmith and Beaconsfield, but apart from the the Prisoner of War encampments on Green Point common, how did the war effect Jews living far from the fields of combat in Cape Town?

During the war, the woman who was to become Sarah Neche's mother-in-law ran a kosher butchery in District Six. She came down with the plague brought in by bacteria in the fleas in the rats in the fodder in the ships to feed the horses for the British troops. As plague was believed to be caused by unhygienic living conditions, on her recuperation, the Schrires decided to return to Europe away

from gossiping innuendoes. They left behind their oldest son Max, who was a photographer in De Aar. Max followed the British troops, taking photographs of the shops they destroyed for the owners who hoped to claim compensation after the war. They did not know of the convenient British loophole refusing payment to Russian Jews whose country had disowned them as citizens.

Of Max, his younger brother Harry wrote, "He managed to accumulate TWO THOUSAND GOLDEN SOVEREIGNS by the end of the war[xxiv]". This he used to enter partnership in a shop with the man who would become his brother in law, Israel Mauerberger, which developed into the country-wide chain of Berger's stores.

Apart from increased business opportunities, the war brought many changes to Cape Town. Over 25 000 refugees - mostly having fled from the Witwatersrand - flooded into the city between September and October 1899. Their arrival put enormous pressure on a town already with an unemployment problem and which lacked facilities, welfare network or the legislation to cope with the influx. The Mayor's Rand Relief Committee was formed to handle refugee relief and the City Council agreed to convert part of the Produce and Feather Market Building near the docks into an "admirable shelter. The accommodation is far better than that of the best steerage. The bunks are comfortable and spacious. The breakfast supplied is from the best materials and the most scrupulous cleanliness is observed. If a man is willing to work, is unobtrusive and cleanly in his habits, he can live in comparative comfort until a passage home to Russia can be procured him". [xxv]

The Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society [xxvi] contributed £50 to the Mayor's committee to help Jewish refugees to return to Europe. The Jewish community began fund raising drives for the refugees, Christian as well as Jewish. For Christmas 1899 Rev A P Bender helped to organise a dinner of soup, roast beef, potatoes and vegetables for 140 men temporarily housed in the Produce Market and gave an appropriate talk on behalf of the Jewish community.

The newspapers [xxvii] reported on the Committee's meetings which were attended by dignitaries from the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation - all of whom were on the committee of the CT Philanthropic Society - the Rev Bender, Hyman Liberman (soon to be Cape Town's first Jewish mayor and David Isaacs. Indeed Rev. Bender suggested to the Philanthropic Society's 1899 AGM that they convey their thanks to the Accommodation Sub-Committee of the Mayor's Rand Relief Committee for their consideration in allowing kosher food to be provided to the Jewish refugees. The Cape Times [xxviii] reporting three days later mentioned that "Hebrews having religious scruples" were fed at a special boarding house, the meals coming to 5s3d per head per week, and there were 90 such persons. A year later these numbers had dropped to 11[xxix]. There were never many Jewish refugees maintained by the Mayor's Committee as they were "apparently maintained partly by independent Jewish relief." [xxx]

Most of the Jewish refugees did not want a passage home to Russia and preferred Kosher boarding houses to the admirable accommodation offered in the Produce Market below Dock Road. They would get tickets from Rev Bender issued by the accommodation Sub-Committee of the Mayor's Rand Relief Committee entitling them to nine pennyworth of food per day for as long as Rev Bender deemed necessary[xxxix]. Their children were provided with free education at the Hebrew Public school by the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society.

To provide employment for the refugees, the authorities started road works on the Cape flats - a site chosen because it was out of the way and being sandy would not be too difficult for novice labourers. The men were paid two shillings a day plus rations, tents were provided and they built Lansdowne Road (now Imam Haroon), Klipfontein, Ottery and Wetton Roads. The Jewish workers were allowed time off for Jewish holidays and given food for Passover, but the work was unpopular. Living in tents on the sandy Cape Flats in the winter rains and the summer south easters was not idyllic, the work was hard, the hours long and discipline strict. Many absconded. Ashenden the engineer in charge of the relief labour did not approve of his Jewish workers. He thought them "a most undesirable crowd, incapable on the whole as labourers, not physically but mentally, for they look upon work as they do water, as a luxury, not often to be indulged in. As labourers (although picked for their physique) they are useless, being unwilling to even try laborious work, and I would undertake to do as much work with two ordinary Kaffirs in a day as any two of these Jews would do in a week... should be treated as vagrants... or better still be deported. I write without any prejudice towards Jews [sic!]...but ... they should by right be under police protection not the Public Works" [xxxix].

The arrival of 3000 Jewish war refugees had an enormous impact on the social and religious life of the Cape Town Jews. They had leisure time and little money. They gathered at Beinkinstadt, a bookshop, to read Yiddish newspapers, sit and talk and flocked to newly established societies, lectures, meetings and cultural evenings. Even to Yiddish plays on Friday nights put on by the Hebrew Opera Company. Among the refugees were keen Zionists, including most of the executive of the South African Zionist Federation, whose headquarters were consequently moved to Cape Town. Among them was its Vice president, Rabbi Dr JH Hertz (later to become British Chief Rabbi), who had been expelled from the Transvaal after a fiery pro-British speech.

Many of the refugees did not feel comfortable in Rev Bender's Anglicised Gardens Synagogue, preferring to worship elsewhere. The organisation of Passover 1901 was particularly problematic. Rev Bender had not anticipated the refugees still being there, and had not ordered enough matzah and matzah meal from England. To make matters worse, the *Norham Castle* which carried a lot of the matzah docked late [xxxix]. Special refugee festival services were held in the Good Hope Hall and the Sea Point Hall and were arranged by a joint Festival Services

Committee made up of representatives of Bender's congregation, the Witwatersrand Old Hebrew Congregation and the Johannesburg Hebrew Congregation with Rabbi Dr Hertz preaching at both venues [xxxiv].

The war permanently changed the religious unity of Cape Town, resulting in the end of the Garden Synagogue's sixty-year monopoly. The Zionist-oriented New Hebrew Congregation was formed after a meeting in September 1900 in the Masonic Hall - its Roeland Street Shul would open in 1902. In April 1901 the ultra-observant Lithuanian Jews established their own congregation and its Beth Hamidrash Hachodesh would open in Constitution Street two years later. Even the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation started a building fund for a new, larger, more ornate synagogue, which would open in 1905. With the end of the war approaching and the prospect of going home, twelve hundred worshippers attended a special final service and out of appreciation, donated £50 to the Cape Town Hebrew School.

Thus the mementoes left behind in Cape Town were more permanent, resulting in new synagogues, which extended to the Jewish residents greater religious choices, and new roads which opened up the sandy Cape Flats to any resident. All of this remained long after the last of the refugees had shaken the dust from the South Easter off their feet.

NOTES

[i] Sinclair, Allan, 'Boer prisoner of war handcraft at the South African National Museum of Military History', *Military History Journal*, Vol 11 No 3/4 - October 1999

[ii] Oosthuizen, *Boer War Memorabilia: The Collector's Guide*, p84, quoted in Sinclair

[iii] Benbow, C, *Boer Prisoners of War in Bermuda* (Island Press, Hamilton, Bermuda, 1962), p28. Quoted in Sinclair

[iv] Mendelsohn, Richard, 'A Jewish family at War: The Segalls of Vlakfontein', *Jewish Affairs*, Rosh Hashanah 2000, Vol 55: No 3, 22

[v] Saks, David, *Boerejode – Jews in the Boer Armed Forces 1899-1902*, Charlie Fine Printers, 2010, 119

[vi] Scarlata, Paul, 6 Rifles Used by the Afrikaners During the Second Boer War, *Military Surplus Magazine*. April 17, 2017 <https://www.google.com/url?sa=...>

[vii] Mendelsohn, R op cit

[viii] Ibid.

[ix] Saks, 120

[x] Mendelsohn, 23

[xi] Ibid, 24

[xii] Ibid.

[xiii] Mendelsohn R, information by e-mail, 25.2.2019

[xiv] Mendelsohn 25

[xv] Piltene - JewishGen <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizk...>

[xvi] Saks, 16

[xvii] Ibid, 125

[xviii] Ibid, 126-7

- [xix] There is a photograph of that certificate in Saks, David, 'Jews on Commando', *Jewish Affairs*, Vol 54 No 3, Spring 1999, 26
- [xx] This information was told to me by my grandmother.
- [xxi] Ibid
- [xxiii] Kekewich successfully defending the town but came into conflict with Cecil John Rhodes who undermined his leadership and behaved in an emotional and irresponsible manner. When Kimberley was relieved Rhodes persuaded the commander of the relief forces to replace Kekewich as commander of the garrison. Money talks. <https://www.google.com/url?sa=...>
<https://www.google.com/url?sa=...>
<https://www.google.com/url?sa=...>
<https://www.google.com/url?sa=...>
- [xxiv] From Harry Schrire's typed memoirs in possession of the writer, subsequently published in Schrire Carmel & Schrire, Gwynne; *The Reb and the Rebel: Jewish Narratives in South Africa, 1892-1913*, UCT Press, 2016, 101
- [xxv]. Abrahams. Israel, *The Birth of a Community*, (Cape Town, 1955) 125
- [xxvi] Minute Book of the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society 1897-1902, Morris Alexander papers, University of Cape Town archives
- [xxvii] Cape Times 8.1.1901; 18.9.1900
- [xxviii] Cape Times 21.11.1899
- [xxix] Cape Times 13.11.1900
- [xxx] Van Heyningen, E Refugees and Relief Cape Town 1899-1902 IN C. Saunders and H. Phillips (eds.) *Studies in The History of Cape Town* Vol 3 (1984) p88
- [xxxi] The Mansion House Fund of the Lord Mayor of London.
- [xxxii] Van Heyningen, E, op cit 91
- [xxxiii] Abrahams, op cit, 125. He ordered 5500 pounds of matzah and 600lb of matzah meal – and the ship broke down and came late.
- [xxxiv] Simon, John, 'Rabbi JH Hertz and the Anglo-Boer War', *Jewish Affairs*, Vol 54 No 3, Spring 1999, 55

I am John Dillinger (a Memoir)

Bernard Levinson

Bernard Levinson is a distinguished South African poet whose work has appeared in numerous scholarly publications and anthologies, including Jewish Affairs. Professionally, he is a psychiatrist based in Johannesburg. In the Pesach 2017 issue of Jewish Affairs, he describes being on the spot after Dillinger was killed.

John Dillinger. That's who I am. I am John Dillinger spread flat against the wall of our small tenement. I slowly edge to the window. I lift a corner of the curtain peeping out. I make sure the police and the G-Men don't see me. At moments, I leap in front of the window firing my make shift disabled cap gun. G- Men drop their Tommy guns and sag to the ground. Police are thrown back against the brick wall of our alley screaming as they die. At other moments I take the full force of a machine gun burst on my chest. I throw up my arms. The gun falls to the floor. I clutch at my chest jerked backwards by the force of the bullets. I slowly double up in agony and fall flat on my back, my arms spread wide. With my last dying gasp I whisper "They got me." I am careful not to do this when any of my family are at home....

"Would you like a violin?" Florrie owns the beauty parlour on our block. My Mother is the cleaning lady. On Saturdays I have options. At home alone in our flat which I secretly love, or go with my Mother to her work which I also love. I know the routine. I will complain bitterly and go with her. I sit on the floor in a corner pretending to read a book. My eyes are on all the women. I am the only male there and clearly of an age when I am not really considered a man. They are all happily baring their shoulders. Their dresses are loose fitting and marvellously revealing. I am wide-eyed with the wonder of hair dryers and the mysterious pastes being painted into their hair. Florrie is a gigantic breasted blond . She likes me. I get a hug when I arrive with my Mother. I squirm and complain but I love being buried in her breasts and smelling all the astonishing scents. " Would you like a violin", she says. " My sister has one . I know she wants to give it away." I am in a sudden whirlpool. Would I like a violin?

The magic journey begins on a tram that runs along Roosevelt road. I'm to go to the end of the line. An hours journey. I had no idea Chicago was so big. I am already playing a violin before an enormous audience. A roof lifting applause. I am the youngest violinist ever to play with an orchestra. They love me. The applause is overwhelming.

The directions are clear. I find her sister. She gives me the violin case. It's old and worn. I see an ancient dignity in this battered case. I'm afraid to open it. I return to the tram.

I walk slowly through the crowds at the concert hall. I am tired after so much playing but I hold my head high. They are all in awe as I pass. A musical genius. They can see the amazing talent in my walk and the casual way I carry my old violin case. I keep my eyes closed.

I go straight to the salon. My Mother is still there. Florrie is there. She opens the violin case. I see immediately there is a devastating problem. This is a skeleton. No strings. No bridge. No little knobs at the end of the arm, and no bow. I can see it has had a violent death. The wood is warped and agonisingly twisted. I look up at Florrie. She is smiling happily. There is no problem. The task is totally accomplished. I have a violin. I look at my Mother. Surely she will see the disaster. She will understand. She is also smiling happily. I stare at this sad ghost in his faded satin coffin. I don't know how to carry the sudden heaviness in my heart.

I give Florrie a hug. I hide my face in her magical breasts smothering my tears in her apron.

We become inseparable. This ancient violin case and me. I swagger down Roosevelt Road my Tommy gun in my violin case. Everyone senses that a formidable gangster is right there on the streets with them. They quickly make way. I tuck my head deep into my collar keeping an eye on everyone. Penetrating sidelong glances. When the coast is clear I flash my case open and pull out my machine gun firing instantly. The car filled with police swerves and bursts into flames. In an instant my machine gun is back safe in its case and I nonchalantly tip toe away. I am John Dillinger.

Dickens, Fagin and Me: A Tale of Two Countries

Harold Behr

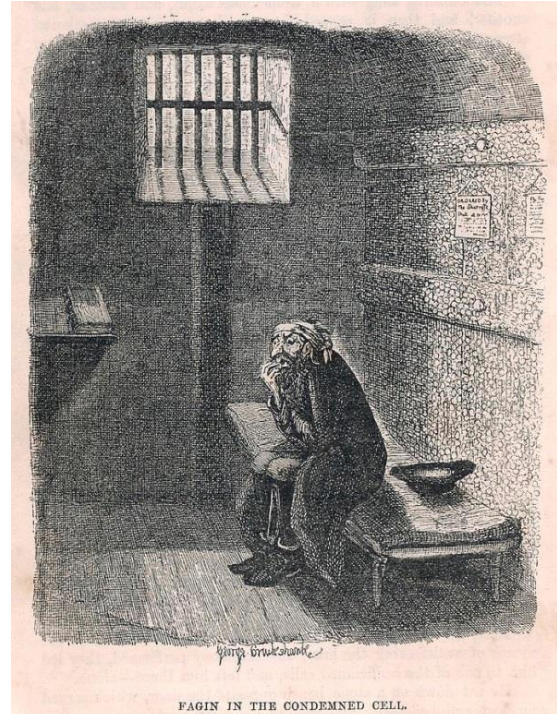
Dr Harold Behr is a retired child psychiatrist and group psychotherapist. He emigrated from South Africa to the UK in 1970.

I became aware of Fagin when I was given the story of *Oliver Twist* in comic book form. This was one of many graphic stories published under the rubric of 'Classics Illustrated', a series designed to introduce great works of literature to children. The idea worked for me: after thumbing through the comic I got stuck into the novel itself and became enthralled by the terrifying world which opened up to me, peopled by the likes of Mr Bumble, Bill Sikes and Fagin.

Naturally, I identified with Oliver. I was both fascinated and repelled by his tormentors, so much so that when I reached the misty-eyed ending, in which Oliver emerges from his ordeal into a sunlit future, my own world became correspondingly brighter, while I found Fagin's last moments in the condemned cell, on which Dickens dwells in gruesome detail, to be strangely satisfying.

In 1949, the David Lean film adaptation of OT came out. It starred Alec Guinness as a grotesquely made-up Fagin, replete with gigantic hooked nose and simpering nasal accents, at once obsequious and menacing. I remember announcing precociously to my parents my discovery that 'Fagin was a hypocrite' and basking in their amused approbation. But I have no recall of having paid any attention to the fact, emphasised interminably by Dickens, that Fagin was a Jew.

This lacuna in my awareness has puzzled me, especially as from childhood Jewishness was an intrinsic part of my identity. My parents were mildly observant, *laissez faire* with regard to synagogue attendance but in every respect they were quintessentially Jewish. Both had emigrated from Lithuania to South Africa as children and had lost close relatives in the Holocaust, although this was hardly ever talked about.



I was taught Hebrew almost as soon as I could read. Books on Judaica filled our bookshelves and the blue and white collection box of the Jewish National Fund beckoned on the sideboard. My grandparents on both sides had been devoutly Orthodox and I could even boast a rabbinic grandfather on my father's side, but my father ploughed a different furrow. Having quietly renounced Orthodox practice he pursued an academic path, went on to train as a teacher and rose through the Christian National Education system to become head of an English Medium Primary School in a predominantly non-Jewish Johannesburg suburb. At the same time he held a part-time post as a Hebrew teacher, was an active member of the *Histadrut Ivrit* and retained a keen interest in Jewish matters. He set the stage for my Barmitzvah at an Orthodox synagogue and coached me through matriculation Hebrew. Our social life was lived almost entirely within a Jewish bubble. Both my parents were sympathetic to Zionism and this, combined with their misgivings about a safe future for the family in South Africa, culminated in their immigration to Israel late in their lives.

Antisemitism scarcely impinged on me during my school years. In primary school, two of my closest friends were Jewish, but I also had a fair mix of non-Jewish friends. Likewise in high school, while the four or five Jewish children in my year group played together and visited each other, I formed friendships with non-Jewish classmates.

If there were any antisemitic jibes at school they came from some of the teachers. One, a rugged Afrikaner, would tell a child (not a Jewish one) to 'stop complaining like a bloody Jewboy'. Another, from an English background, also liked to make use of the 'Jewboy' epithet, in a context which I have since forgotten. None of my schoolmates seemed to mind that I was Jewish, nor was there any manifest envy of my intellectual prowess or teasing over my sporting ineptitude. I wonder today what I might have been overlooking and whether I was suffering from a kind of cultural myopia.

As I entered my teenage years, Fagin receded into the background of my consciousness as I was drawn into the iniquities of the *apartheid* system. In 1948 the pro-Afrikaner National Party unexpectedly defeated the United Party led by the pro-British General Smuts. The leader of the Nationalists, Dr D.F. Malan, was known for his antisemitic past and I remember a ripple of anxiety running through my family about the fate of the Jews under a Malan government.

When the 1953 general election came along I was twelve years old and absorbed in the duel between the Nationalists and the United Party. The result of the election was that the UP lost even more heavily than in 1948 and South Africa entered an era of full-blown *apartheid*. Throughout the fifties and sixties the Nationalists continued to strengthen their grip on power and churn out increasingly repressive legislation.

The Jewish community was divided. Some were radically opposed to *apartheid* and ran the gauntlet of state persecution. Others adopted a more gradualist approach towards integration, while a small minority threw in their lot with the White Nationalists in what they predicted would become an apocalyptic showdown between Blacks and Whites.

Antisemitism continued to fester; there were the usual mutterings about the affinity between Jews and Communists, but by then the Nationalist leadership had backtracked from its virulently antisemitic position of the war years. The ruling party was now more interested in rallying Whites of all persuasions to the banner of White survival.

In a material sense, life for the Jews was comfortable provided one kept one's nose clean, but the moral dilemma of how to live with *apartheid* persisted and the threat of increasing Black resentment were becoming more palpable. Violence was in the air and I knew I had to act on a longstanding childhood resolution to leave the country. I timed my leaving to coincide with my registration as a doctor and set my sights on Israel. However, an attempt at *Aliyah* in 1965 failed dismally. My Zionist spirit quailed in the face of the reality of having to spend my life in yet another conflict-ridden zone of the world, this time without the cushioning effect of my precious English language, and I returned to South Africa for a few more years of stock taking. The next time round I found myself in the United Kingdom, to which I had long felt culturally attuned.

I knew that the virus of antisemitism had a worldwide distribution, so I was not too surprised when I discovered its existence in the UK. I had read about the early Christian demonization and massacres of English Jews during the 13th Century, culminating in their expulsion from the country in 1290, but that felt like a long time ago. More interesting to me and closer in time was the British government's ambivalence towards Zionism in the post-war years, manifested in the struggle between the Jewish underground movement and the British Mandate authority. That continued to have resonance in the Britain of the 1970s, my first decade in the country. The Far Left presented Zionism as a racist ideology fuelled by colonialism. The antisemitism of the Far Right was a mirror image of that of the Left, more crudely racist and based on the picture of the Jew as untrustworthy foreigner or communist and therefore alien to the British way of life.

There were several variations on these themes, but as in South Africa, I felt that the problem was manageable provided one kept one's eyes open and one's head down. Once again, I discovered a rewarding network of like-minded friends and colleagues, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and had my professional standing to insulate me from all but the most veiled forms of discrimination. The tremors of British antisemitism hardly registered on my personal seismograph and above all I was free of the more blatant forms of racism which had surrounded me in South Africa, now firmly established in my mind as 'the old country'.

My interest in Fagin was re-kindled when I came across an article by David Nathan, entitled ‘The Devil and Dickens’, in the (London) *Jewish Chronicle* of 2 December 1994. Nathan reprised the correspondence between Dickens and Eliza Davis, a Jewish woman who had accused him of doing the Jews ‘a great wrong’ by his portrayal of Fagin. Dickens indignantly repudiated the charge. If the Jews thought him unjust, he replied, they were ‘a far less sensible, a far less just, and a far less good-tempered people than I have always supposed them to be.’

Warming to the subject, he pointed out that ‘all the rest of the wicked dramatis personae are Christians’, although nowhere in the novel do we read of Mr Bumble, Bill Sikes, Noah Claypole, or indeed any of the other villains being referred to as Christians. On the other hand, Fagin, we are told *ad nauseam*, is ‘the Jew’.



Eliza Davis in later life

Dickens must have been stung by the veracity of the accusation, because he returned to the novel in a later edition to prune some of the references to ‘the Jew’ and one wonders if his subsequent portrayal of a Jew, Mr Riah in his last completed novel *Our Mutual Friend* as a kind, gentle soul was offered by way of atonement. Riah is head of a small Jewish community, held in the grip of a Christian money-lender (!). Dickens puts into the mouth of one of his characters the words: ‘there cannot be a kinder people [than the Jews] in the world.’ Unfortunately, far fewer people have read *Our Mutual Friend* than *Oliver Twist* and ever since its appearance, the iconic image of Fagin the evil Jew has been blazoned across the

English-speaking world, while Mr Riah nestles in obscurity.

Dickens has another argument up his sleeve. He justifies his description of Fagin by saying that ‘it unfortunately was true of the time to which the story refers that that class of criminal almost invariably was a Jew, which is not to say, of course, that all, or even many, Jews were receivers of stolen goods.’

But Fagin is more than a petty thief. He is a corrupter of young minds. Here he is, entertaining Oliver and the other boys with:

...stories of robberies he had committed in his younger days, mixed up with so much that was droll and curious, that Oliver could not help laughing heartily, and showing that he was amused, in spite of all his better feelings.

In short, the wily old Jew had the boy in his toils. Having prepared his mind, by solitude and gloom, to prefer any society to the companionship of his own sad

thoughts in such a dreary place, he was now instilling into his soul the poison which he hoped would blacken it, and change its hue forever.

This vignette, larded with language which evokes the abusive relationship between Fagin and Oliver, shows Dickens' insight into the minds of both perpetrator and innocent child. There is no psychological naiveté about Dickens; he knows his subjects, and his readers, too well and is able to sound just the right note of horror and fascination to engage their attention. And there is no doubt that Dickens, despite his protestations, was determined to drive home the point that Fagin was a Jew. When we first meet Fagin we find him '...with a toasting fork in his hand, a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair. He was dressed in a greasy flannel gown, with his throat bare; and seemed to be dividing his attention between the frying pan and a clothes horse, over which a great number of silk handkerchiefs were hanging.'

With these Mephistophelean props the stage is set for Fagin's occupation as thief and coach of pickpockets. We see him 'shrugging up his shoulders, and distorting every feature with a hideous grin' as he looks on a chest of stolen treasures. From this point on, the references to 'the Jew' come thick and fast.

Fagin is more than a petty criminal. He is the devil incarnate. Even the brutal Bill Sikes is repulsed by him:

'That's the way to talk, my dear,' replied Fagin, venturing to pat him on the shoulder. 'It does me good to hear you' – 'You're like yourself, tonight, Bill! Quite like yourself.'

'I don't feel like myself when you lay that withered old claw on my shoulder, so take it away', said Sikes, casting off the Jew's hand.

'It makes you nervous, Bill – reminds you of being nabbed, does it? Said Fagin, determined not to be offended. 'Reminds me of being nabbed by the devil', returned Sikes, 'There never was another man with such a face as yours, unless it was your father, and I suppose he is singeing his grizzled red beard by this time, unless you came straight from the old 'un without any father at all betwixt you; which I shouldn't wonder at, a bit.'

And in a final act of wickedness, Fagin betrays Nancy, Sikes's moll, to Sikes, for her part in rescuing Oliver, knowing that in so doing, he is sounding her death knell:

'You won't be – too – violent, Bill?' The day was breaking, and there was light enough for the men to see each other's faces; there was fire in the eyes of both; they exchanged one brief glance, which could not be mistaken.

'I mean,' said Fagin, showing that he felt that all disguise was now useless, 'not too violent for safety. Be crafty, Bill, and not too bold.'

And so Bill Sikes, armed with the knowledge of Nancy's betrayal, sets off to murder her.

In Dickens's apology, which is not quite an apology, he says, 'I have no feelings towards the Jews, but a friendly one. I always speak well of them, whether in public or private, and bear my testimony (as I ought to do) to their perfection such transactions as I have ever had with them.'

There is more in this vein, including this self-righteous declaration, delivered in a speech at the anniversary dinner of the Westminster Jewish Free School: 'I know of no reason the Jews can have for regarding me as inimical to them. On the contrary, I believe I do my part towards their assertion of their civil and religious liberty, and, in my Child's History of England, I have expressed a strong abhorrence of their persecution in old times.'

Before cynicism takes over completely, it may be worth reflecting that Dickens was a man of his time. He would not have had fore-knowledge of the escalation of antisemitism in Europe which would lead to mass atrocities and genocide. But he was the carrier, transmitter and amplifier of an age-old antisemitic tradition which held that the Jews were innately different from other groups, and therefore dangerous. Like all his heroes and villains, when Jews were good they were very, very good and when they were bad they were evil. Sadly, it was the evil ones who tended to stick in the collective consciousness of the wider community.

Attempts to re-invent Fagin as a merry old gentleman (in the stage musical, 'Oliver!', for instance) did not cut the mustard. Too much blood had flowed for most Jews to perceive the singing, dancing old fellow as anything other than a feeble attempt to detoxify the caricature of the Jew presented in Julius Streicher's publication *Der Sturmer* and replicated in a host of antisemitic propaganda materials around the world.

As I write this, uneasily watching the story unfold in Dickens's native country, hardly a day goes by without some fresh incident of antisemitism to stir anxiety in the Jewish community. These days, the front runner in this hate campaign is the hard left leader of the British Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, who was recently heard to reflect that British Jews fail to understand British irony. When a leader speaks, the way is cleared for followers to indulge in their own brand of prejudice.

No doubt the script for antisemitism would have continued being written without the benefit of Dickens, but the template which he provided through his depiction of Fagin has made it more difficult to dispel the myths which have pursued me across two continents. Whichever way I look, 'the Jew' simply won't go away.

Herber House: 'A Hostel for Jewish Children (Part II)

Stuart Buxbaum

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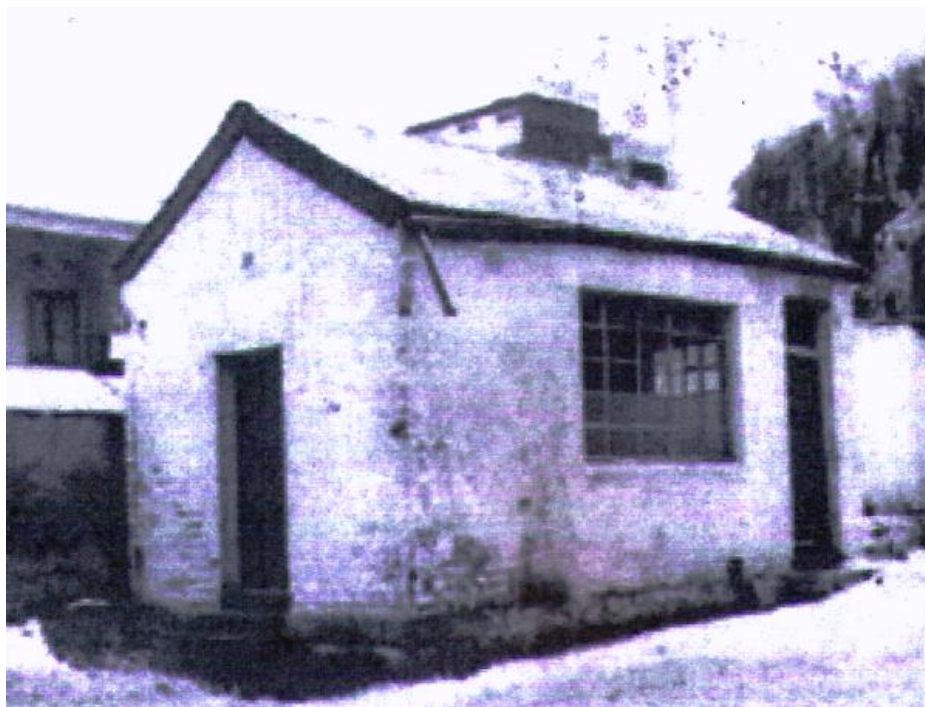
This is the second part of my paper looking at the establishment, running and final closure of Herber House, a hostel for Jewish schoolchildren in Johannesburg established under the auspices of the SA Board of Jewish Education (SABJE) in 1943. The first part appeared in the Rosh Hashanah 2019 issue of *Jewish Affairs*.

Classes, a Bar Mitzvah and some demography

In December 1946, a very detailed report was conducted by Isaac Goss, then assistant director of the SABJE, who had done an assessment of the Hebrew classes at Herber House. Five classes were being held, namely Hebrew writing and reading, prayers, history, *chumash* and *siddur*. (At a prior meeting, held 8 September, it had been decided that Mr Saltzman would introduce a *haftarah* class). Classes, divided according to age, were of roughly an hour's duration and held daily. With a few comments and reservations, Goss was pleased with the progress shown in this fledgling Jewish school, the forerunner of the modern day schools in the city.

Also in December 1946, Mr Saltzman provided details of a Bar Mitzvah that took place at the hostel. He found particularly gratifying a comment made by a parent in this regard: "I saw in The Herber House the vibration of the Jewish soul, and carried away with me a new faith in our youth and a new hope for our community." It was suggested, at a later meeting in 1951, that the first Bat Mitzvah be held on Shavuot of that year.

With the end of World War II, some structural changes and population movement in the community became apparent. There was a greater thrust towards urbanization, something reflected in eight mostly senior girls leaving the hostel as



Premises of the first King David class, Herber House

their parents had established homes in the city. This trend would continue. In the New Year, there would be 83 boarders, of whom 32 were girls.

After the establishment of the King David Primary School in 1948, the importance of Hebrew lessons at the hostel gradually diminished. These classes would become part of the curriculum at the day school. And the character of the hostel would change. It would become almost purely a Jewish boarding school, without a pedagogic justification.

And yet... The *cheder* system in the small towns, with all its limitations, could not prepare the young boarders for a demanding Hebrew syllabus at the school. Those who were “backward in Hebrew” needed and were receiving special tuition from Mr Saltzman (18/2/1951). The figures are interesting: 25 new boarders had enrolled at the start of the year, all but two from the country districts. There were now eighty children in the hostel, of whom 35 were attending King David. The majority were aged between ten and thirteen. The vast swathe of the country that formed the reservoir for the hostel led again to a discussion about the possibility of establishing a similar institution in the heart of the country, in Bloemfontein (10/7/1951). Meanwhile, the previously independent committee which had served the hostel had now become a part of the larger Institutions’ Committee of the SABJE, whose purview of services had by now been greatly extended.

Commissions, Reports and Inquiries: could they provide the answers?

The Hostel had now been established and been running for six years. King David School had been founded and with it, the Hostel’s need for providing Jewish

instruction was declining. Increasingly, the committee's focus became more inward looking. How successful an institution was it? Was this dwelling place comfortable for children living away from their families? Were living conditions hygienic? Was the quality of the staff such that it could act "in loco parentis"? Could they assuage the feelings of loneliness, of home sickness? Could they sympathetically provide comfort to the very young children? Was the physical living environment, made up of separate buildings of poor quality and not built to purpose, suitable at all for the delicate task of raising children away from home? And the crucial question: How was the image of the hostel being portrayed to the larger community?

A sequence of investigations was set in motion when a request was made by Mr I.H Harris to release Mr I Kahanowitz from the Hebrew Teachers' Seminary so that he could take up duties at King David School (18/2/1951). The experience of having previously been employed at a Natal boarding school brought a perspective to bear on his report of the hostel's shortcomings.

a) The Kahanowitz Report

This report focused on the structure, organization and abilities of the staff. Mr Kahanowitz found that there did not seem to be adequate co-operation between the children, housemaster, matron and staff, and that staff members did not seem to have clearly defined duties. He suggested that the matron have nothing to do with the spiritual side of the hostel, and that there should be an increase in staff numbers. Mr Saltzman was responsible for eighty children and it was difficult for one person to cope with so many children and their problems.

Discussing the report (18/8/1951), Goss stated that there was a reluctance, especially among Hebrew teachers, to delegate authority and that the housemaster



Isadore Kahanowitz in later life

was loath to delegate control to others. Importantly, he stressed that there was an acute shortage of trained personnel "*and that even Israel did not have better people in similar institutions*" [my emphasis]. Indeed an admission of a considerable problem.

Mr Froman entered the discussion. He found himself in two minds about Saltzman (who it must be said set the tone for the institution). He did his work, said Froman, but on occasion needed "pulling up". The frustration is evident. Even more directly, Froman referred to the shabbiness of the institution and to its high level of congestion. Dr Mendelow, the school's medical officer, also emphasized this, reporting that the dormitories were overcrowded.

b) Commission of enquiry

The Kahanowitz Report raised many concerns. In response, a commission was formed to examine these matters in greater depth. The members consisted of well-known communal leaders: Messrs Froman, Porter and Goss, as well as a secretary. Two points received especial attention. One concerned the working relationship between Mr Saltzman and the matron, Mrs Dubin. The second was the very vexing and worrying allegation raised by Mr Harris that the boarders were 'repressed' - a rather generalized term. Harris intuitively felt that the boarders experienced a lack of freedom, that they felt controlled by the staff, the hostel environment and its rules and regulations and the lack of recreational facilities.

Mrs Froman distanced herself from the prevailing dismal outlook of the committee. She said that there was a great deal which was good in the House, and thought that the discussion was conducted in too much of a pessimistic vein. She also wished to correct the impression that the hostel was not being run properly (18/8/1951).

Goss took a modern managerial stance. His thoughts were that the person in charge of the hostel should also look after the other institutions of the Board. His view was that such a person would have the qualities of a multi-talented executive type manager. So as a first step, they would separate and delineate the conflicting roles of Mrs Dubin and Mr Saltzman. The former was tyrannical, the latter temperamental [my comment]. Mr Froman reported that he had taken away Mrs Dubin's jurisdiction connected with punishing children and delegated them to Saltzman. She was in the future only to make a note of the children misbehaving and hand them to the committee. Whether she would abide by this bureaucratic measure was doubtful.

The issue that seems all this time to not have been broached in the minutes concerns the reality that the hostel was co-educational. This was a rarity among school boarding houses which were usually monastic. Here Mrs Dubin is quoted as being "very strict as far as the segregation of the sexes was concerned." Mr Porter offered a gentler approach, "that the staff was called upon for a very tactful handling of the children". The nub really was the quality of the supervisory staff. "The housemaster", said Porter, had to have "a certain flexibility of mind". But in even starker terms, Goss saw the crux of all the complaints being "...the alleged inhuman and unsympathetic attitude of Mrs Dubin to the children." (22/8/1951).

One week later Mrs Dubin was called to appear before the committee. She reported on general housekeeping matters, and deplored the fact that the dormitories were overcrowded. Questioned about her relationship with the boarders, she said she "had no difficulty with the smaller children and the girls, but a group of bigger boys were the cause of friction." Again in the discussion and concurring with

Kahanowitz's findings, it appeared that the roles and tasks of the housemaster and the matron were muddled.

At a separate meeting that week, the perception that the hostel children were 'repressed' had been discussed. Finding themselves in the situation of being away from home and in a restrictive environment, boarders had to balance their lack of freedom with that which was seen as the entitlement of the day scholars who were easily familiar with the city's lifestyle. They lived on the edge of the metropolis, strangers to those patterns of socializing which the day scholars took for granted. Rather naively, Mr Phillips reduced these sets of feelings to a byte-sized understatement: These resulted from the fact that the child "was prevented....from attending cinemas less often than the day scholars" (26/8/1951).

A day later (27/8) the committee, overwhelmed by findings and opinions which seemed to nullify their brave intentions of creating a wished-for model institution, took a look for themselves. Their inspection found that "Herber House is beautifully kept. The dormitories, lounges, bathrooms and conveniences were all found in spotless condition. The floors were all brightly polished and in general the hostel can be a source of pride and pleasure to the SA Board of Jewish Education."

Settled then, for the time being....

Momentous news

At the meeting of the Board's Institutions' Committee held 12 September 1951, much good news was reported:

- Mr Abe Lipschitz would commence his duties as headmaster at the King David Primary School from the beginning of 1952.
- Tenders would be called for the erection of a portion of the new school building. It was hoped that the new portion would be completed by March 1953.
- An announcement would also be made to the effect that a high school would be established at the King David School from 1952, and...
- "Herber House has become too small and is spread over too many buildings. The conditions under which the children live are too cramped. The dining room is too small. In view of the popularity of the hostel, consideration should be given to *the rebuilding of The Herber House entirely*" [my emphasis]

As if to emphasize the previous point, it was reported that for the coming year of 1952, the hostel was completely full. Applications had been received from a widespread area: Bloemhof, N'dola in Northern Rhodesia, Salisbury in Southern Rhodesia, Standerton, Winburg, Bethlehem, Johannesburg, Ermelo and Kopjies, to mention but a few. In view of the high demand and consequent lack of bed-space, a policy was adopted for the preferential treatment of applicants:

- Country children should be given preference.
- Full-fee boarders would be given preference over those needing assistance.
- A decision was pending about whether to give preference to boys or to girls.
- Some applicants were referred to the Orphanage.

At the end of 1951 there were 84 boarders, of whom 50 were from the country (five from the Free State) and other centres and 34 from Johannesburg. This number would increase to 93 in the first term of 1952. Those paying full fees were 67, and boarders on grants numbered 26. The increased accommodation for 1952 was made possible by the conversion of two classrooms of the Hebrew school into dormitories. Mr Saltzman also reported to the committee that as a consequence, the hostel would dispense with the services of one of the teachers of its Hebrew school (14/11/1951). Again, in the fourth term of 1951 King David had 266 children, of whom forty were from the hostel. As the King David project grew both as a primary and a high school, almost all the hostel's children would eventually attend the day schools.

These numbers raise an interesting question: The hostel's *raison d'être* was to provide an opportunity for children living outside the city to have access to thorough Jewish educational opportunities. Yet as the above figures show, 40% of the boarders were from the city itself! In the absence of a detailed socio-demographic profile of these urban boarders, it is permissible to speculate that financial need and family breakdown may have acted as contributory factors. In later years, from approximately 1958-1964, the hostel was almost exclusively the preserve of rural and small town children. This could suggest that the family structure and economic status of the Johannesburg community had improved.



Herber House committee, circa. late 1940s

Did the hostel's supervisory staff contribute to unhappiness and malaise?

In March 1952, in a letter to the SABJE, a mother from Wesselsneck in Natal gives notice of withdrawing her child from the hostel. Her letter complains about the

conditions there, and her child is described as being “miserable, unhappy and dirty in the institution” Reference was also made to a parent, a medical practitioner, who had taken his three children out of the hostel.

The root of the problem was traced to Mrs Dubin, the matron. Mr Goss stated that he was perturbed by the complaints at the hostel, and while he felt that certain complaints were ‘unjustified’, there had on the whole been a stream of complaints against the matron: “Mrs Dubin, to his mind, had done a good job of work, but she had a tendency to let her temper get the better of her. It must be made clear to her that she has to control her temper, for the welfare of the institution” (10/3/1952).

By this time, Mrs Bernstein and Miss Abrahams were both assistant matrons. Of Mrs Bernstein, Phillip Heilbrunn writes: “Mrs Bernstein, a survivor of the concentration camps was treated with great respect, not only because of empathy with her sufferings, but ...she could be (a) tough disciplinarian ...and would not stand for cheek from anyone. She could pull your ears in a most excruciating way....”^[i]

On 19 March 1952, Saltzman reported that seven boarders would be leaving at the end of term. He felt that there was much dissatisfaction among parents due to outbursts on the part of the matron. The relationship between Mr Saltzman and Mrs Dubin appeared to be hardly collegial. Mrs Dubin was a divisive, pugnacious matron, Mr Saltzman short-tempered and unsympathetic. Mrs Bernstein added to this dystopian mix. Seemingly unable to curtail the excessive conduct of Mrs Dubin, a sub-committee, again, had been established to meet with her to discuss her duties and presumably to guide and keep her in check. The committee seems to have been completely unable to impose their authority on the recalcitrant matron.

Do your homework!

At the 18 June 1952 meeting, it was reported that the hostel had no adequate facilities for homework preparation. Advocate Mendelow suggested that he obtain the rules governing the boarding establishment of King Edward School in Houghton with regard to study hours. At a later stage in the 1960s, when the various lodgings had been amalgamated into one central building in the old Castle known as the ‘Main’, an attempt was made to have ‘prep’ hours after supper in the large dining room. The attempt failed and scholars, as always, were left largely to their own devices.

An important shift in terms of school attendance was now taken. It would be a condition that all boarders *should* henceforth attend King David. As time went by, this would in general be the case. This thought led Mr Horwitz to report that in his view, the staff “was doing the very best in the present buildings and circumstances” (18/6/1952). It was always meant to be a better place.

Of concern was a crude reference made regarding the intellectual abilities of some of the boarders. It was suggested that there were cases of “sub-normal “children who had been accepted at Herber House and were at present in the King David School. Goss felt that under these circumstances, where there was a query about the “normalcy” of a child, a practising psychiatrist should be consulted (ibid). At a later meeting (5/11/1952), Saltzman stated most of the so called “problem children” would be leaving at the end of the year. Mr Pollard thought as far as possible the hostel should endeavor not to admit children who were ‘sub-normal’.

Always lurking in the minds of the committee was that this was, actually, an imperfect institution. The chairman expressed this quite gloomily at the start of 1953 (28/1). He admitted that although every effort was being made and no expense spared to look after the children’s welfare, he felt that the latter received a minimum and not a maximum of spiritual guidance and comfort. And again, the familiar refrain: the building was not suitable, the synagogue was too small and the grounds did not have suitable playing fields. It would, he opined, be most desirable to transfer Herber House to the King David site when it became available. The count-down clock for this to happen, seen in retrospect, was set at 14 years, running down very slowly indeed....

Could things get any worse? Indeed, they could.

On 19 March 1953, a critical meeting took place, laying bare a dysfunctional institution. From

an unfortunate, inappropriate disciplinary action taken by the housemaster, the frustration of the committee boiled over: ”Mr Froman regretted that he had to report a serious incident which had taken place at The Herber House. Mr Saltzman had ‘smacked’ a girl boarder’s hand until it bled. Mr Froman had visited the hostel, and although for the girl it was over, Mr Saltzman “*refused point blank to apologize*” (my emphasis).

Goss said that the incident was symptomatic of something which was utterly wrong at the hostel. He expressed the wish for Mr Saltzman and Mrs Dubin to attend an executive meeting of the board. This was at least a more serious sanction than leaving it to the usual sub-committee to investigate the matter.

The committee’s disillusionment, anger and frustration towards the whole project was palpable. Mr Porter went so far as to suggest that Herber House would either have to be abandoned or that new premises be found in the near future. They were caught in a bind, though. The municipality required certain alterations to be made to the physical environment, presumably because the buildings did not conform to health standards. These, however, would cost the Board a great deal of money. Porter “was of the opinion that the staff was hopelessly inadequate to deal with the hostel”. Mr Wunsch added to the criticism. “To his mind the staff did not have the facilities required for such an institution” (19/3/1953).

A slice of Life: 26 February 1953 (Not sweets from Heaven)

Here is a description of a visit by Mrs Pollard and Dr M Mendelow when they arrived unexpectedly at the hostel that Thursday at 7:15am. It makes for depressing reading: "A number of children under the age of ten were already standing outside the front door, waiting for the bus. Their breakfast had commenced at 6:45am. In the dining room a number of older girls were standing behind their chairs. After about 5 minutes, they were joined by a number of older boys who had apparently just completed prayers in the shul. Mr Saltzman arrived whereupon the children recited '*mode ani* and the *brocha*, *Hamotze lechem min ha'aretz*'. Mr Saltzman arrived and the children had their breakfast. The ban on conversation created a strained atmosphere. Breakfast was hurried and a part of "grace after meals" was said. A description of the breakfast menu follows: "...and tea or coffee (we don't know which) the latter served in enamel mugs some of which were badly chipped".

The report continues in a most unflattering manner. A general aura of neglect and unhygienic conditions is depicted. There is catalogued a veritable litany of shortcomings, most previously reported, but also that there were "no facilities for placing clothes, dressing gowns, towels and the like."

An almost Dickensian description follows: "In the hall of the main building we found a pale little girl dressed, standing aimlessly. She appeared to be ill and we were informed by the matron that she had been ill and still not well enough to attend school. In our opinion, there was no reason why she should, in her state of health, have been out of bed, much less dressed and presumably breakfasted, at that early hour."

This report was discussed at the 26 March 1953 meeting. It must be pointed out that this investigation came to a very different conclusion to a probe conducted a year and a half ago on 26 August 1951. What worried Mr Porter greatly about this latest scathing report was the image of the hostel within the community. Mr Saltzman, under siege, jumped to defend the hostel against these criticisms. He assured the committee that the health inspector visited the premises frequently and had not had any complaints. He also pointed out, with some justification, that the early morning surprise visit had taken place prior to the cleaning staff having done their rounds. It appears, however, that the snap inspection had its origin in complaints that had been made by a deputation of boys from the hostel. Among those complaints had been that conversation was banned in the dining room during meals (imagine!) and that the boarders were "stifled". They also complained that their parents were being disrespected and that they were being "smacked" by the staff. Mr Saltzman and Mrs Dubin were always pleaded with by members of the committee to "carry out with faithfulness the instructions of the board...and that if Mr Saltzman feels that he cannot cope with the problems arising at Herber House, he should report to this committee week by week". Mr Yellin reported that the press, at his request, "had held back letters of complaint about Herber House until the matter could be gone into" (26/3/1953).

Rabbi Lapin, troubled by the turn of events, sought vindication of the project. He said that “one thousand children had gone through Herber House and all had done well and that Herber House had enjoyed a very good reputation during the ten years of its existence, and it would be a great pity if at this stage it would be permitted to become an object of criticism by the community who are very apt to forget the good of the past and view the situation as it actually exists.”

A new(ish) dawn?

The ban on conversation at mealtimes had now been lifted. It had been an arbitrary, thoughtless and counterproductive idea, completely indefensible. It is indeed strange that it was ever implemented and justified by the matron and the housemaster, and that the committee took so long to ensure its abandonment.

By June 1953, Saltzman seems to have taken heed of the criticisms and the admonishments, and was optimistic. He said there was now a better tone at the hostel and that the difficulties had been rectified to everybody's satisfaction. Other developments that restored some hope were the appointment of an assistant matron, Mrs Keet, and also that sporting equipment to the value of £100 should be provided (16/6/1953).

Situated on the grounds of Herber House, the Rose Gordon Model Hebrew Nursery School was running smoothly. There were 70 children at the school in 1953, with the King David Nursery School running a close second, with 69. The Rose Gordon was, however, having problems which resulted from its success and popularity. It had a waiting list of almost 200, and was able to cater for only 10-20 new children each year. Thus, about 150-180 children remained without a Jewish nursery school. For extra space, the Rose Gordon requested the use of outbuildings at Herber House, which itself was overcrowded. An added problem was that leavers were not able to automatically gain entrance to King David Primary, resulting in much ill feeling among many parents.

With new-found enthusiasm, a dance was held for the boarders, strangely enough with the support of Mr Saltzman and Mrs Dubin. From the proceeds, the boarders opened a building society account, into which an amount of £72 and 3 pence was deposited. The SABJE would consider a pound for pound contribution into the account.

Flushed with excitement by these developments, Mr Froman enthused that “the situation was now better than it had been for the past ten years!” He informed the committee that the children were happy and contented. A letter tabled at the start of 1954 (31/1) seemingly supported his optimism. A past boarder who had matriculated the previous year had written thanking the institution for everything it had done for her.

There were now 85 boarders, and the hostel was crowded. It was resolved that a recommendation be made to keep the numbers down to a more manageable 75. However, in March (18/3/1954) it was argued that reducing the number at the hostel meant depriving school-going children from rural areas of a Jewish education. The very reason that the hostel had been established was to provide such an opportunity to out-of-towners. An exploratory meeting was conducted with the committee of the Arcadia Orphanage for possible co-operation between the two institutions, so that Arcadia would house some children whose parents had made application, and for whom there was no bed space at Herber House. "This would only be possible," said the hostel committee, "on the understanding that Arcadia would cease to be called the SA Jewish Orphanage."

The tenth anniversary of the hostel's opening would fall on April 10, and a discussion followed about the nature of the celebration to be held. Naturally, a sub-committee was established to arrange such an event. The good news continued: At the Bar Mitzvah of a boarder, a guest had been so impressed by the event and the manner in which the children conducted the service, that he enclosed a contribution of a guinea (£1 10s). More contributions had also been made.

Same old, same old. A little bit louder, a little bit worse.....

Mr Lipschitz, headmaster of King David Primary School, raised the issue that there were no suitable, structured facilities for homework at the hostel (8/8/1954). The older children at the hostel had also complained that the 9 pm lights-out rule gave them little time for homework. Messrs. Goss and Lipschitz, two extraordinary educationists, were in discussion about the matter.

But what was the situation like at other boarding schools regarding a structured homework program? Bernard F, from Leslie on the Eastern Highveld, was a boarder at both the Jeppe primary and high schools, latterly at its Oribi Hostel. He responded to my query thus: "We had compulsory prep – almost two hours a day for juniors (7 to 8:45 pm) and two-and-a-half hours for seniors (7-9:30 pm); also, an additional half hour in the morning before breakfast, in a prep room with long wooden tables and wooden benches. A housemaster supervised the junior prep room."^[ii]

Discussion, as was the committee's wont, turned to Mr Saltzman. He had been at the hostel since its inception. There was praise indeed. Froman said that he had done an "excellent job of work in the spiritual field." However, not all was praiseworthy: "There were certain aspects which could be improved... [and he]...suggested that Mr Saltzman be invited to an executive meeting to discuss the whole position."

Rabbi Lapin made an interesting suggestion to ease out of this morass. He proposed that the SABJE investigate establishing a separate boarding

establishment on the high school site for the high school only, with Herber House then catering solely for children of primary school age (8/8/1954).

There were continued and recurring efforts to involve particularly the ladies of the committee in the running of the hostel. The idea was to convene a ladies (sub!) committee who would visit the hostel, meet the staff, suggest improvements and report generally on prevailing conditions. It was certainly an attempt at providing a more caring, maternal outcome for the children. Did it work? Was it implemented? The minutes are unclear on that score. Quite probably the boarders would not have been overly impressed with such attempts. They were particularly savvy, and would likely have been skeptical and disdainful. In later years, to which I was witness, threats would often be made that the staff would “call Mister Froman” for some particular form of misdemeanor or misbehavior. The young boarders’ response inevitably was a shrug of the shoulders. The threat carried no weight, and neither would any goodwill visits by the ladies.

Reference is made at the 17 August 1955 meeting that Mrs Saltzman (the housemaster’s wife) was now matron. At last the era of the controversial previous matron had ended. It is difficult to measure the extent of the damage done to the Herber House brand by Mrs Dubin, let alone imagine the hurt and unhappiness caused to the boarders by someone who was in all respects eminently unsuitable for the position. Yet, the roiling dispute between the housemaster and the committee continued and seems to have come to a head at this meeting. Mrs Lubner speaks of this tussle, saying that the housemaster had proved himself very difficult and uncooperative, while the new matron was co-operative. Importantly, it was admitted again that the hostel was understaffed and that Mr Saltzman “refused to interview any non-Jews”. Saltzman was the subject of withering criticism by various committee members. He was found to be “an excellent spiritual head [but] found the administrative side difficult, but the ladies committee could perhaps guide and help him.” Mr I.J. Hersch was perfectly forthright on the matter, saying that if Saltzman was found to be unsuitable for his position, “he would have to relinquish his post.”

Weighing in, Froman reported that many complaints had been received by the executive committee concerning Saltzman’s conduct. There were suggestions that a resident master be employed to see to the children and that there be a superintendent and a supervisor. Such was the atmosphere of frustration at this meeting that Froman said his aim was to get the “difficulties of Herber House straightened out as soon as possible. If the ladies’ committee found Mr Saltzman unsuitable, advertisements would be placed in overseas newspapers to fill his position.”

If there was such unhappiness within the committee about the incumbent, why in all these years had he not been replaced? Mr Misheiker repeated the oft resorted to, highly inaccurate trope: “It was not an easy matter to replace Mr Saltzman as no one in this country was available to take over such a position.”

It is suggested that despite all these matters being kept out of the eye of the Jewish press, it was not lost on the community as a whole and a somewhat negative view of the hostel was prevalent.

Some welcome change – alas short-lived

Notwithstanding Misheiker's earlier opinion concerning the non-availability of suitable supervisory staff, it was announced at the 23 October 1955 meeting that the highly-regarded Isadore Kahanowitz had agreed to assume a supervisory position at the hostel. There was a palpable sense of relief and considerable praise for this appointment. Mr Kahanowitz was a vice-principal at King David High whose earlier assistance to the Board had resulted in the previously discussed Kahanowitz report. The enthusiasm was tempered, however, by the fact that it was a short-term appointment, and indeed it was to be a short-lived spell concluding at the end of that year. Kahanowitz's limited tenure had nevertheless been, according to the committee, a great success (17/4/1956). The Board had been advertising for the services of a suitable housemaster. Unfortunately this notice had met with no responses from suitable candidates. Goss stressed that until the new hostel was built it would be impossible to secure the services of a suitable housemaster. Perhaps Mr Misheiker was indeed correct, for the time being, in his assessment. The countdown clock to the new hostel's opening was still ticking. It was now showing just under ten years to go.....



A technical committee is established

In earlier minutes (18/6/1952), reference is made in somewhat crude terms, but in the usage of the 1950s, to children from the hostel whose intellect was 'sub-normal'. Mr Lipschitz, headmaster of the primary school, referred to this problem in only slightly less harsh terms, saying that children "whose IQ was below normal had been admitted in the past to The Herber House and he had been forced to enroll them in the school." Goss agreed that in future all Johannesburg children should be interviewed and carefully assessed before being admitted. The reference

made to “Johannesburg children” specifically is interesting. It suggests that it was an issue more prevalent among city children, who perhaps were at the hostel for these very reasons.

In response to this problem, a technical committee was formed. It was to consist of the headmaster, vice-principal of the high school, chairmen of the PTAs, the director, the secretary and the hostel housemaster and would look into the entire issue of applications and acceptances. “This committee naturally expected the fullest co-operation of the housemaster”: This seems to have been formally minuted, as if the expectation of non-compliance by the housemaster was a possibility. Since the ladies’ committee was not functioning as per expectations, it was resolved to also require their duties to be defined by the technical committee. It was also stressed, again, that Mr Saltzman would have to accept the committee’s guidance.

Minutes for the period April 1956 to 20 October 1957 could not be traced and archived records do become sparser.

At this meeting of the board’s Institutions Committee (20/10/1957), it was reported that approximately 700 pupils had passed through the hostel. This is a somewhat imprecise figure as earlier (probably exaggerated) reports had mentioned a figure of 1000. It also does not differentiate between boarders who had stayed briefly, and those who remained for a lengthier period. The time of sojourn would impact on both the positive and the negative effects of their stay on the children; numbers alone would tell an incomplete story.

Louis Sachs envisaged a hostel that would serve the needs of post-Bar Mitzvah country children. He suggested that as such children’s Jewish education largely ceased after the age of thirteen, a hostel should cater for them. However, the current arrangement of the hostel was essentially to cater for primary school children. There were inadequate facilities for high school pupils, and conditions were not conducive to study for those approaching matriculation.

King David High principal Norman Sandler underlined this view, saying that he had received numerous applications for admission to the high school from all over the country and reporting that parents felt that the present institutions for boarding lacked facilities for senior boys and girls: “They all want a boarding establishment within the precincts of the school. Parents were also not interested in private boarding for their children.”

The clock was slowly, ever so slowly, running time down. Roughly eight and a half years to go to the new hostel...

NOTES

[i] Heilbrunn, P, ‘Herber House : A Memoir with Pictures’, unpublished, p5

[ii] Personal email, 4/9/2019



FICTION

Someone on the Ceiling

Charlotte Cohen

Charlotte Cohen is an award-winning short story writer, essayist and poet, whose work has appeared in a wide variety of South African publications since 1973. She is a regular contributor to Jewish Affairs. This story was first published in the SA Jewish Times Rosh Hashanah Annual, 1994.

I loved visiting my grandmother when I was a child. The reason was simple. She spoiled me rotten: She took me to matinees. She played rummy with me. She made me French toast and she let me dress up in *her* evening clothes ... and she would tell everyone how wonderful I was - in front of me!

X X X

As fate would have it, I came to live next door to my grandmother in my late teens. She still continued to speak *about* me in front of me, but now, her comments were always directed to someone on the ceiling. ...

When I walked in, she would turn her eyes upwards and say: “*Another* new dress! She’s got a wardrobe full of clothes! Does she need *another* new dress?!”

Once when I said I didn’t know what to wear, my grandmother looked up to the ceiling and remarked dryly: “If she *only* had a black dress and a white dress, she’d *know* what to wear.”

The news of my impending marriage was met with great misgiving: “She can’t cook! She can’t sew! She can’t clean! All she can do is dress up!” she informed the ceiling. “Well, I wish her luck!” she said. “And I wish *him* luck” she ended ominously.

“Who are you talking to?” I demanded. “I *hate* it when you do that! ... When you talk *about* me, in *front* of me – to someone who isn’t even there!” And with that, I flounced from the room.

X X X

Once I had children, there was no end to it: A steady barrage of criticism and complaint preceded them wherever they went.

‘Those plastic pants are making marks on his legs’ she berated as she pulled the nappy from out of the pilchers.

“Don’t do that!” I would say as I pushed the nappy back into the pilchers, “The mattress is getting wet!”

“But it’s making marks on his legs!” she would go on arguing.

“And its making the whole cot wet! Anyway,” I sighed, “how did *you* keep your babies dry?”

“We *changed* the baby’s nappies!” she retorted, “We changed their nappies!”

She looked up at the ceiling. “We changed the baby’s nappies!” she told it, “We didn’t pickle babies in pee!”

As the children grew older, her remonstrations continued:

“The child is half naked! She hasn’t even put a jersey on him! The child’s got no colour! ...He’s turning blue!”

“You just said he had no colour,” I said, “Now you say he’s turning blue. Well, blue’s a colour, isn’t it?”

My grandmother looked straight up at the ceiling. “She thinks she’s so funny!” she said, “If she would rather put a jersey on the child instead of always trying to be so clever, we’d all be happy!”

X X X

One never knows when it is the last time we will experience something; there seems to be no transitional period in our lives. It is usually *one* event that suddenly catapults us from one stage to another; *one* event which changes our lives forever.....

..... Life irrevocably shifted gear for me with the death of my mother.

I was thirty-something. My grandmother was eighty-something.

I had lost a mother. She had lost a daughter.

There was no one else to break the news to her. I did what I had seen a family doctor do many years before. To allow her a few minutes in order to be prepared for what was to follow, I told my grandmother that my mother had taken a turn for the worse. "I'm going to phone the hospital now and find out how she is," I said.

I went to the phone and pretended to dial a number. I came back, put my arms around her and said softly, "Granny, she's gone."

In that imperceptible moment before I felt her small body sobbing in my arms, whilst I, in turn, wept on her shoulders, she seemed to sense that what I had done, had been done in order to protect her.

.... In that same moment, just as a baton is passed from one relay runner to another, we both knew that the reins of responsibility carried by my mother would be handed to me.

My grandmother *never* spoke to anyone on the ceiling about me again.

X X X

You know, very often the thing that irritates us the most, is the thing we miss the most.

I missed it – and still do. You see, my grandmother's remonstrations had kept me securely in the role of a 'child-woman'. Suddenly I had been catapulted into a pit-stop between a husband and children on one side and a frail, elderly grandmother on the other. I had been hurtled forward to occupy my mother's place as an intermediary between four generations.

X X X

They say children never listen to their elders, yet never fail to imitate them.

The Beatles had a profound effect on male-gendered children, no matter how young. Straggly shoulder-length hair had replaced the traditional 'short-back-and-sides.' I was incredulous when my son returned from school.

"You didn't have a haircut!" I exclaimed. "I can't believe it! You've been warned that if your hair is more than three centimetres over your collar, you're going to get into trouble!"

"No, I'm not!" he said, "You see, if I tuck the back of my hair into my collar, and push my fringe into my cap, no one can even notice it. Anyway, I think it looks sexy."

"Sexy!" I exploded, "What are you *talking* about?! You look absolutely disreputable!"

I rolled my eyes upwards in total exasperation. “Can you believe it?” I asked, “I *gave* him the money to have a haircut. But did he go?! No!! He actually *wants* to look his worst! And he’s been warned! He’s going to get into trouble! But will he listen? No!! He’s so stubborn; one might as well be talking to the wall!!”

My son stopped in his tracks.

“What do you mean, ‘One *might* well’? You *are* talking to the wall! And I *hate* it when you do that! ... when you talk *about* me, in *front* of me, to someone who isn’t even there!”

And with that, he turned on his heel and marched out of the room.

In the silence that followed his exit, my grandmother’s face was implacable. Not a muscle moved. It was her expression that reflected more than anything else her great satisfaction that I had finally become acquainted with her special friend who lived somewhere up there on the ceiling.



FICTION

My Friend Joey

Clark Zlotchew

Dr Clarke Zlotchew is Distinguished Teaching Professor at State University of New York. He is the author of seventeen books, including anthologies of short fiction, translations from the Spanish of short stories and poetry by Nobel Laureates and literary criticism of Spanish and Latin American authors. His short stories have appeared in both his Spanish and English versions in the U.S. and Latin America, as well as in Jewish Affairs

Joey Clarke had it all. In high school he was an athlete; he was on the fencing team with me, and was a football star as well. In addition, he was an excellent student, good conversationalist, good person. And still, look what happened to him! I feel, after so many decades that feel like eons, that I am somehow responsible for his calamity. I don't think so on an intellectual level, a factual level. Absolutely not. And yet, I'm haunted by the memory. And by a sense of guilt. But I shouldn't get ahead of myself.

When I was a kid, my parents and I lived just around the corner from a "coloured" neighbourhood. *Coloured* was a perfectly polite term for black people in those days. African-Americans preferred to use it themselves. I can't see why the term is now considered offensive, whereas the elegant, rather pretentious new term, *people of colour*, is the politically-correct term today. I really don't understand.

My playmates were all black, and we enjoyed each other's company, though Joey was my best friend. We had more interests in common, more to talk about. Of course, whenever we played Cowboys and Indians, they all played the Indians, and I was always the *cowboy*, better-known as "the white kid." In such games, unlike in the western movies of those days, I didn't knock three Indians off with one bullet and come out triumphant. The Indians always won. So, there we were in this

vacant lot right on the corner of Summit and Jewett Avenues, five black Native American warriors and one heroic Jewish cowboy fighting over a vacant lot in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Then we saw it. One of the guys almost stepped into it. It was a dead grey cat with off-white maggots in its abdominal cavity in a frenzy of rapid motion, feverishly weaving over and under each other, as though forming the woof and warp of some unspeakably hideous garment. They squirmed back and forth in a vertiginous dance, consuming the guts of the lifeless feline. It looked as though the cat were about to give birth to multiple Medusas. It first struck me as one single creature with its flesh in perpetual motion. The most revolting sight I had ever seen. Or as Joey commented, "Truly pukeable."

Staring down at that revolting mass of pulsating life, I felt the world whirl around me like a leisurely tornado, and had to avert my eyes. One kid actually threw up. In a rare display of courtesy, he turned his head to avoid vomiting on the carcass and its guests. While disgust might have been the first sensation we received, Sonny Sims, a tall, gangly kid, seemed transfixed by the sight, unable to take his eyes off it. Finally, he looked back at Joey and quietly announced, "Not good."

"Sure as hell not good for the cat," said Joey, and laughed.

Sonny stared at Joey. "Not good for anyone." His eyes were narrowed and his brow wrinkled in a serious, even worried look on his face.

We all stared at him. I said, "What do you mean?"

"My grandad, who was from New Orleans and knew all about that kind of stuff, once told me that if you come too close to a dead cat, especially one being chewed on by maggots, it's what he called an *omen*. That means it's hard luck, and something bad, something evil, is going to happen to you."

"If you come too close?" said Joey.

Sonny nodded his head a few times, then observed, "You were the closest to it, Joey. Almost shoved your foot right into its guts, and all those maggots."

The other kids just shifted glances from Joey to Sonny, Sonny to Joey. So did I. You would have thought we were watching a tennis match.

Joey said, "Aah, that's a bunch of superstitious voodoo crap!" He laughed dismissively and turned away from Sonny and the dead cat, but I thought his laugh sounded forced, and I detected a look of worry, maybe even fear, on his face.

He tossed back over his retreating shoulder, "Time to go home and eat. Let's get out of here."

#

We were probably about ten years old at that time. When I was twelve, my parents, kid sister and I moved to an apartment on Old Bergen Road in the Greenville section of town where I attended the local grade school. Joey and I lost track of each other until a year later when I ran into him walking down a hallway at Henry Snyder High School. His folks had relocated too, so we both attended the same secondary school.

I felt great when I spotted him, and saw his face light up when he caught sight of me. We shook hands and slapped each other on the back, punching each other on the shoulder as we caught up on each other's news.

At one point he added, "By the way, I'm too old for anyone but my mom and dad to call me *Joey* now. You know how it is. So, do me a favor and just call me *Joe*, okay?" Then he told me he was going to try out for the football team and asked if I would.

"Heck, no," I told him, "I'm still too lightweight: five feet ten and weigh only a hundred fourteen pounds. But I plan on joining the fencing team. Interested?"

He thought about it a minute, then, "Sure. Why not. You never know when it'll come in handy." He gave me a broad smile, and added, "Might run into Zorro some day."

Joe Clarke became a great football player, and we both turned out to be valuable fencers for the team. He was an unusual athlete, both fencing and playing football. Our swordsmen won most of our bouts with other schools every year. Life was good.

One evening we and the other team members were in the back seat of Coach Raspini's station wagon, traveling to Teaneck for a fencing meet, chattering away in high spirits. For no reason I can think of, that incident with the dead cat and maggots popped into my mind.

I chuckled at the thought, leaned over to my old friend, and said, "Hey, Joe, remember that maggot-filled dead cat in the vacant lot?"

Joe had been leaning back against the seat, arms folded, relaxed. Suddenly, he sat up straight, eyes narrowed, forehead wrinkled, and looked down at the floor. He didn't say anything for a few moments. Finally, he turned to me and muttered, "Damn it, Goldberg, what the hell did you have to bring that up for!" He sounded angry.

"No reason; it just popped into my head. What's the problem?"

He looked back down at the floor and shrugged. "No problem. It's just a disgusting thing to remember." He thought for a moment, and mumbled, "And it's bad luck."

“Bad luck? Things have been okay with you, haven’t they? Besides, I thought you weren’t superstitious.”

He sighed, then shrugged again. He didn’t usually shrug. “Well, it’s a strange world, so who the hell really knows.” Then he looked at me and smiled. “Forget about it; I just overreacted. Must be this fencing match we’re going to. Teaneck has a pretty good team.”

#

Because the Teaneck fencers were so skilled, as were we, it would be an extra-special victory for whichever team won. Joe had won every one of his bouts that evening but one. The score had been tied, and now it was my last bout of the evening. And mine would be the last one of this meet. It would be the deciding “vote,” so to speak. If I won this one, the Snyder Tigers would win the whole match. If I lost it, well, I hated to think of how that would affect my teammates. That was a hell of a lot of pressure on me.

My opponent and I progressed one point for me, then one maddening point for him, all the way to the very end of our bout. My opponent and I were four to four just before the end. Our teams were at a tie, and now this individual bout was tied. Whoever won the next point would decide the entire match. I felt the strain, and saw clearly visible tension on my opponent’s features behind his face mask. The very next point would decide the entire meet. Long story short: I got my fifth point. My opponent ripped off his mask and flung it to the floor in frustration. His teammates gathered around him solemnly to comfort him, and each other. The small group of Snyder fans leapt to their feet, cheering vociferously. My fellow fencers and some of the spectators crowded around me, hugged me, patted my back and jumped up and down in celebration. We were all flushed with victory. It was a glorious evening.

#

They say, “All’s well that ends well.” They also say, “It’s not over till it’s over.” Must be something invented by Captain Obvious. But, other than witnessing the proverbial portly woman perform her vocalizing at the opera, do you ever know when it is actually over? Okay, I realize this cheap philosophizing is nothing more than the manifestation of my discomfort, my reluctance to reveal the end, as far as I can know it, of this story. And my guilt in its culmination.

#

About a week after that last fencing meet, Coach Raspini invited the team to his house for tea, cake and ice cream. At one point the coach banged a spoon against a glass a few times for attention. When everyone gave him their full attention, he made a speech praising our performance in the highly successful fencing season we had racked up. Then he veered on to another subject. The Principal wished to

publicize the victorious fencing team and wanted us to put on an exhibition for the entire school body on the auditorium stage.

The coach announced, “As you all know, the foil is the most common weapon used in fencing matches. It’s what we’ve always used, as have all the schools we compete with. But there are two other sword types used in some special competitions: the épée and the saber. Most of you who volunteer — and it is purely voluntary — to take part in the demonstrations will use the foil. However, we would like two of you boys to give the épée demonstrations. And two others to do the same with the saber. After I explain to the audience the parts of the body allowed as targets for the three different weapons, with you demonstrating what I describe, you will take part in actual fencing bouts using those weapons...”

Dan Smith interrupted to say, “But, Coach, none of us know how to use those other two kinds of weapons.”

The coach smiled and said, “You don’t know at this point in time. I want a pair of boys to volunteer to learn – to *master* - each of those two fencing modes. I’m going to have two experts who will instruct you in the techniques.” He paused, looked around and said, “Okay, you’re all skilled with the foil. So, nothing extra to learn. Volunteers?”

Long story, short: Coach got more volunteers than he needed for the foil demonstration. Not all the guys were anxious to spend more time and effort learning a new set of skills, but two volunteered. I was anxious to learn saber; it would feel more like actually dueling, like being Zorro or one of the Three Musketeers. My adolescent sense of romance stimulated me to volunteer.

The coach scanned the room and, when his eyes alighted on Joe, who hadn’t volunteered for anything, said, “Hey, Joe, I really need you to volunteer for saber. I know the strengths and weaknesses of every member of this team, and you would be a natural for saber. How about it?”

Joe looked surprised. He said, “Can’t do it, coach. Sorry.”

“I know Goldberg will do an excellent job, but he’s not going to fence himself, now is he. I really would like you to be in this too. How about it?”

“Sorry, Coach, just can’t do it.”

Coach flushed. His jowls suddenly turned pink. Not a good sign. Raspini did not like to be crossed. He pulled the cigar out of his mouth — I remember the saliva glistening on the darkened tobacco — and flung it to the floor. His own floor! Not good.

#

The next day, as I left the school after class, Coach Raspini came up to me, grabbed my arm and said, “Hey, Goldberg. What’s the matter with your buddy, Clarke? Too busy to pitch in and help us out?”

I don’t know why Joe hadn’t bothered to explain his reasons. They were good ones. Coach had said it would take about a month, month-and-a-half, of evening practice sessions of from one to two hours each evening. I did not want Joe to be on bad terms with the coach. It could have a negative effect on his future. I needed to soften Coach’s attitude. So, I determined to save my friend’s future.

“Coach,” I said, “Joe needs to help out at home. Financially. He got a job for right after school lets out, five days a week.” I studied Coach’s face, but couldn’t read it. “He really can’t spare the time. You can be sure he’d much rather learn saber, Coach, than work, but he and his family could really use the money.”

#

A few days later I started down the staircase toward the lunchroom. Joe came up behind me and clomped down the stairs after me. When I saw him, I smiled and said, “Hey, Joe, how you doin’?”

He looked irritated. Walking alongside me, he asked, “Listen. Did you tell Coach I took a job and that my folks need the money?” Somehow, he made his parents’ need for money sound shameful.

“Yeah, Joe, I did.”

“Why the hell did you do it?” His voice was getting louder.

I was puzzled. I said, “Hey, Joe, Coach was pissed off. He grabbed my arm as I was leaving the building, and asked if my buddy — that’s you, Joe — was too busy to pitch in and help out...”

“So, you said we’re so poor, I have to work to help out at home. Right?”

I didn’t like the slant he was putting on it. “Joe, I didn’t say it like that...”

“So now he and probably a bunch of other people are feeling sorry for us.”

“Joe, for cryin’ out loud, I thought I was helping...”

He stopped in the middle of the staircase and turned to face me. His face was contorted with anger. He yelled, “Damn it, Goldberg, why the hell can’t you learn to keep that long nose of yours out of my business?!”

To this day I don’t know for sure if his rant was merely a personal attack or if it had wider ramifications. Let me explain: Since I was a kid, I’d had the long-nose epithet thrown at me with antisemitic intent. It doesn’t make sense, but the ones

who use it don't care about accuracy. Very often the expression was "long-nosed Jew." As a child, I had gotten into a few fights over this. You have to understand that I was born in 1932, the era Hitler's Brown Shirts were carrying out their violence against dissenters and Jews. We owned a shortwave radio, and my father used to listen to Hitler's speeches and, believe it or not, translated them to me as he listened. As I was growing from age six to age twelve, I followed the news and the progress of the war more than the average child. In time, I was painfully aware of the death camps and felt great anxiety, fear of death, actually, because of the European situation.

Here it was the end of the 1949-1950 school year. That was only a few years down the road from Hell. The wounds were still open, and I was overly sensitized to the attempt — an extremely successful attempt — at annihilating me, my parents, my cousins, and all my loved ones for the "crime" of being Jewish. I couldn't tolerate the slightest hint of antisemitism. I was overly sensitized to it.

When Joe referred angrily to my long nose, in my mind his words instantaneously translated to "Damn it, Goldberg, why the hell can't you learn to keep that Jew nose of yours out of my business?!" Coming from an old friend, it struck like lightning. It blasted me, shook me. Is this the way it would be forever with regard to the condition of Jews on earth? This from people you thought were good friends.

I felt betrayed, under attack. I needed to strike back swiftly, cruelly, with the same weapon he had just used: words. What words? His long-nose comment was safely ambiguous — it *could* refer to Jews, but it might be merely personal — although I was convinced, on a visceral level, it was antisemitic. Ideally, my counter attack had to have the power to wound my attacker, yet be ambiguous as well. This paragraph would take about ten times longer to read aloud than it took for my invective to gush from heart and brain, unite into one single stream and shoot like a thunderbolt directly against my opponent's brain.

Among adolescents in that era, there was a common insult delivered at the least provocation, sometimes with true offensive intent, other times with a sense of humor. You would say the object of your verbal attack was a *brown-nose*, later reduced to *brownie*. This was an accusation of flattering teachers or other authority figures to gain advantage. Today, I believe, the more current term is *suck-up*.

Joe's long-nose insult was not merely personal, not simply physical, but was intended to be offensive on a deeply ethno-religious level. At least, that's how it struck me at that moment. I wanted my counter attack to be just as hurtful on a similar level, in this case, racial. But it had to be just as ambiguous as his attack on my people.

I instantly retorted, "Yeah, but at least it isn't brown!"

In most cases, saying this had nothing to do with race; it just insinuated that the other person was a sycophant.

My response had been unhesitating and immediate. I was proud of myself for so quickly thinking of the perfect comeback. Proud, for five seconds. Then a deluge of shame and guilt descended on me. Was Joe wondering which interpretation to put on the *brown nose*, whether the usual bootlicking concept or the literal and therefore racial one? No, I'm sure he understood exactly what I had done.

This was my old friend, my childhood friend. And he thought my interference had harmed him. So, I just added insult to injury. Wonderful, very noble. And this was an era in which racism still stalked the nation, and strict segregation remained in force in the South. Martin Luther King had not yet accomplished his task, not yet begun it. What had I just done?

There we stood, at the middle of the deserted school staircase, glaring at each other, murder in our eyes, bodies tensed for combat. I fully expected him to take a swing at me. We stood that way for probably about three seconds, but they seemed like three whole minutes. His rigid facial muscles collapsed into a look of disgust. He wearily released the breath he had been holding, turned his face away from me, and stomped down the stairs without a word. I felt a sudden sorrow, an expanding emptiness, as I watched his retreating figure.

#

Fencing season was over, and I hadn't run into Joe after that incident, when I heard the news. Another member of the team came up to me in the corridor and said, "Listen, I've got bad news."

I felt a powerful foreboding, as though an inexorable tidal wave were coming straight at me. I hesitated before asking, "What?!"

"It's Joe Clarke."

"What about him?"

"Polio. He's caught polio."

It was 1950. Immunization against that dreaded disease had not yet been developed. Every summer it struck our youth with frightening ferocity, crippling those it did not kill. Now Joe, a talented athlete, had it. Who would have imagined it?

I wrestled with myself about going to visit him. I wanted to see him, to reaffirm I was his friend after all. To offer solidarity. But, after what I had said to him, would he even want to see me again? Would he want to have me in his house, defiling his

refuge? I didn't know. I really didn't, but I reached the conclusion that I must go, no matter what.

The next day, after school, I took a bus and got off at his street in the Lafayette section, an African-American neighborhood. I exited the bus, clutching a box of Loft's chocolates, and trudged down the long street, wondering how he would react to my surprise visit. Would he tell me to get the hell out of his house? Had he told his mom and pop what I had said to him?

I rang the doorbell and waited, perspiring, until a thin woman appearing to be in her late thirties or early forties opened the door. She looked at me — whom she had never met — with sorrow etched into her features, and quietly asked, "Yes?"

I felt the quiver in my voice as I told her, "I'm a friend of Joey's. Can I talk to him?" *A friend? Do I deserve to use that word?* The thought smacked me in the face as soon as I pronounced it.

"Yes," she murmured. "Come in." She turned, walked straight ahead toward a dark room in the back, and pointed to a room off to the side. I entered the unlit living room where I saw Joey in a wheelchair, a heavy plaid blanket over his lap, watching television. The shifting bluish light emanating from the screen played over his upper body. He tore his eyes, reluctantly, from the screen and looked up at me with a frown.

I saw with shock, even though they were covered by the blanket, what looked like two lead pipes under the cover. His thighs were that thin. No muscles left in this athlete's legs. I found it hard to believe what I was seeing. My mind found it too hard to accept this horrible transformation in my old friend. It was just not acceptable. And yet, there it was, visible fact demanding to make its presence known.

I asked him something about what had happened, a fatuous question, I knew, but what else could I say to open conversation? I couldn't ask him how he was; I could see how he was.

Joey reluctantly, hurriedly, tossed off something about waking up with fever one day, pains in his legs. I really don't remember anything else he said about it. Maybe that was all he said. Although in my garbled memory, I think, not at all positive, he slurred something unintelligible about dead cats and maggots. Don't know why he'd say that. Must've been my imagination. I do remember he sounded angry. Naturally.

I was never an optimist, but I felt that somehow this condition in my friend could not be a lasting one. Surely, medical science would take care of the problem and restore him to his former self in maybe a few months. A silence loomed in the space between us. I filled it with a hopeful, "So, Joe, what's next?"

His frown deepened, “What do you mean, ‘What’s next’?”

I stammered, “I mean what are they going to do for you. How are they going to fix this, cure you?”

He looked at me for a moment, his face twisted in rage, hit his shriveled legs with the back of his hand, and growled, “Fix this? Cure me? Damn it, Goldberg, there’s no fixing, no curing.” He raised his voice a notch, “This is it! Understand? This is it!”

I don’t think I’ve ever heard any words as crushing as those words *This is it!*

Joey, jaw set, turned back to the television screen.

I hesitated for a moment, but saw he had no desire to speak to me any further. I mumbled my goodbyes, turned and plodded my way to the door.



NEW POETRY

COMICS

View the glass case,
of doughnuts and baguettes.
Behind the cigarettes,
of my father's front store,
stood a newsstand,
with two comic types.

English slim ones
Sunny Story booklets.
American ones piled high.
Captain America on front side.

His round shield, weighing a ton.
Red stripes & stars,
blazing like a sun.

Simple paper pictures
entertain Dad's sons.
America so far away,
would protect everyone.

One summer's night,
my brothers walked
to a neighbour's home.
In their dark room
A celluloid strip
on a turning wheel.

A light shining on the wall,
we saw grenadiers tall
marching past a bus.

Shouting with surprise
we made a fuss.
Being so entertained
We turned the wheel
again and again

Tastes and times change.
Years pass away.
Sadly we say goodbye
to comic sales
in cafes and stores.

Farewell comics
pictures side by side.
Even the classics
read with such pride.

Yesterday is gone.
"Comics wonder"
no longer here.

No simple playground
or carousels
or turn-style fairs.

Then new changes arrived.
Those comic characters
managed to survive.
Cartoonists changed their designs
and made the comic characters
smile and speak.

New techniques
Stereoscopic visions, videos,
ETV home shows
Very virtual reality on lit-up screens.

Where a hero wakes
breathes and inspires.
Moves his limbs
somersaults, jumps up
springs alive,
takes a bow.

His kin shout and sing
And happily join in

Ben Krengel

ICU – TRUE HEROES OF RAMBAM

A capsule of pain and fear – or an airlock
Waiting for travellers to pass through to a place they're loath to enter?
Are there those among us who care enough to bring them back?
Jew, Muslim, Christian, some brought low by illness,
Or worse, by bullet, knife or car,
Victims of those weaned on hatred,
Bullied by brutes bereft of – bankrupt of – compassion.
Across the way in a darkened room,
A man struggles to bring his pulse down and his blood pressure up.
A woman whose teary eyes still hold the captured images of visitors,
Lies dying of the illness of old age, an oxygen feed clamped firmly
To her fine Semitic face.
Down the line of serried beds a man cries out incoherently –
It is a high-pitched supplication of dread, pain and pleading. Is he talking to God?
Monitors, the Argus-eyed guardians for the physicians,
Blink codes and messages to those trained to read them.
Through all this, doctors and nursing staff
Meander among the beds performing minor miracles,
Like a team of lifeguards constantly on duty
Ready to pluck a sinking life from the jaws of eternity.
They fight the battle and mostly win,
But there is no triumphant parade with flags waving,
And boastful thumbs stuck in lapels.
There is no time for that – a new patient is wheeled in from OR.
There are lines to set and veins to pierce,
And all focus is on the never-ending stream of humanity
On the road to recovery, if not survival.

Rodney Mazinter