

JEWISH AFFAIRS

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MISSION

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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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Memories of Operation Savannah, Angola 1975–6

Gary Nowosenetz

Editor's note: Operation Savannah, the code name for South Africa's military intervention in the Angolan civil war, took place in the closing months of 1975 and early 1976. It was, as described by military historian Rodney Warwick, "a kind of pre-emptive military strike, shrouded in secrecy, with an intention to ensure a political objective of assisting the establishment of a post-colonial Angolan regime favourably-disposed to the South African government, and one which would also hopefully, deny future assistance to the combatants of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO)".¹ During the campaign, details of which only began to emerge long after the eventual conclusion of the 'Border War' saw South African armed columns penetrate deep into southern Angola, some units coming within 50km of Luanda, the capital. Numerous actions were fought before the South African withdrawal from Angola in January 1976, including the encounter later celebrated in South Africa as the Battle of Bridge 14.

A number of Jewish national servicemen took part in the campaign, among them the author of this article. Because of the Official Secrets Act, until very recently, veterans of the campaign were legally bound not to go public with their experiences.

The 1 Medium Battery 4th Field Regiment

We did Basics in Potchefstroom in 1975. Afterwards, we were divided up into three groups and trained in how to operate and deploy the 5.5 (140-mm) guns. The first group was the gunners. They were trained to operate the guns. Ten gunners were assigned to each gun. Four guns comprised a troop and two troops comprised a battery. Each gun was towed by a Magirus Deutz gun tractor. These were driven by the trained drivers and signalers, who comprised the second group.

The third group were trained as technical assistants and were called the TAs. I was a TA. Each troop had one TA van with four TAs in the van. The TA's job was to plot and calculate bearings and ranges for the laying of the guns. From this group of trained TAs, two OP assistants were selected, of which I was one. After gunnery training, the Battery went on artillery manoeuvres in the Kalahari for two weeks. As hard as we tried, we could never hit the target. I think that the instructors just gave up on us, not only due to our poor ability, but because South Africa was not involved in a conventional war, but in a counter- insurgency conflict at that time. After artillery training, we left our guns and went on a COIN OP training course. Thereafter we were deployed on the border for two weeks as infantry at Kwando Base Camp, 10km from Katimo Mulilo. From there we were flown to Grootfontein, where we were reunited with the guns and sent into Angola on Operation Savannah.



Kwando base camp, east Caprivi

Build-up to Operation Savannah

In early September 1975, we boarded a Hercules troop transporter plane at Waterkloof Air Base and flew to Mpacha Airforce Base. From Mpacha, we went by Bedford to Kwando Base Camp near the South West Africa-Angola border.

After two weeks of our usual patrols, we were informed one morning that the minister of Defence PW Botha would be coming to inspect the base and address the troops. We were to prepare a firepower demonstration for him to show how well prepared we were to carry out our duties. All of us were issued with two hand grenades and an extra four full magazines of ammunition. An hour later, two choppers landed outside our base. I saw PW alight from one of the choppers, accompanied by generals and other senior officers. He wore an open-necked shirt with his usual checked jacket and hat. He was driven to the centre of the base and all the troops were sent to their firing positions on the sandbags surrounding the base. On the order "Fire!" we all let loose. We threw hand grenades, mortars opened up and machine guns fired.

After about three minutes we were ordered to cease firing and gathered around the Minister to hear what he had to say. He spoke to us in both Afrikaans and English and told us, "*More gaan julle manne in Angola veg*". A general pep talk followed, after which he climbed back into the chopper and flew off.

The following morning, thirty troops in Samel trucks and four Eland armoured cars drove out of the base, accompanied by a water bowser, a fuel truck, some medics, a mortar crew, two or three machine gun crews and an ammunition truck. I was one of the troops in this convoy. We drove out the gate, straight over the border and into south-eastern Angola. The commanding officer was 2nd Lt Bernie Pols and I was his radio operator.



Bernie Pol, Wayne Jacobs & self, Cela

We drove for two days straight through the bush, not following any road and at one point passing a pride of lions until we reached the banks of the River Bambangandu. There we set up camp. The object of our mission was to neutralize any SWAPO members fleeing the civil war towards South West Africa. They would tend to walk along the riverbank. On the first day, under the watchful eyes of two manned machine guns, our troops went down to the river to swim and wash. The next day, while the guys were swimming, one of our machine guns opened up. They had spotted a float of crocodiles swimming down the river towards our troops in the water. The guys flew out of the river as fast as they could! However, this event did not deter them from getting back into the water, although not before two hand grenades were first exploded in the river. This led to us eating vast quantities of fish for every meal.

After about three weeks and a few minor, brief contacts with SWAPO, we were ordered to return to a rendezvous on the cutline. There we were collected by an assortment of vehicles and transported to Mpacha Airforce Base. We were stationed there for a week to rest and eat. No military parades took place and we were basically on sabbatical.

A week later we were flown by Hercules to Grootfontein, where we resumed our artillery duties. On our second day there, we were called into a large hangar. The doors were locked. MPs surrounded the sides of the hangar. A stage had been erected and a dozen or so senior officers and generals walked onto it. We were told that we would be asked to volunteer for a secret mission into Angola and given the option to stay and volunteer or to leave immediately. If we chose to stay, we would have to sign a nondisclosure document prohibiting us from speaking about anything pertaining to this mission for thirty to forty years. Four or five troops got up and left. I, however, was willing to go on this boy-scout adventure.

A row of tables stood at the back of the hangar, at which sat a number of clerks with the document we had to sign. Before signing, I briefly looked through the document, which stated that we would be issued with foreign battle uniforms and that our South African kit would be stored at Grootfontein, to be collected on our return. We had to hand in our dog tags but were allowed to wear our religious necklaces. The form also stated that we were volunteering and had to fill in our name and service number. We were then instructed to write our last will and testament. I was just out of school and owned nothing except a few Rands of army pay, which I left to my parents. We were told that we would be handsomely reimbursed for our efforts – the amount to be calculated at double the danger pay allowance.^[1]

After doing the paperwork, we were issued with one set of hessian cloth green uniforms and new ankle tackies. The gun crews were given Chinese steel helmets. Our SA kit was handed in for storage. We were told to ensure that none of our items had a “Made in SA” label. We were ordered to speak only English between ourselves and when using radio communication. This was a difficult feat as we had been trained almost entirely with Afrikaans commands.

We headed into Angola, towing the guns. A few days later, we arrived at Sa Da Bandeira and overnighted on the airport runway. The next day we set up the guns and a few ranging shots were fired to test and calibrate them. Thereafter, I can remember driving through Cela. Some small battles must have taken place before reaching the area near Bridge 14.



Wayne Pols (far left), self (arrow) and other SA troops with Unita soldiers in bush, Cela

Battle for Bridge 14 – An Artillery Perspective

At the start of this event, the artillery component on the central battle group, of which my unit was a part, was made up of a troop of four 5.5inch artillery guns. Each gun was manned by ten men and a GPO officer operating in the TA van. There were three additional TA men to plot the enemy co-ordinates. The GPO officer at the time was Lt Enslin Beetge, the battery commander was Lt Johan Potgieter and his 2IC was 2nd Lt Bernie Pols. We had two OP teams for the troop. One team would go out on an OP lasting three or four days, while the other team rested. This alternating of teams carried on for months before the Battle for Bridge 14 and after.

Around 1 December 1975, Lt Potgieter and Lt Liebenberg were sent up Hippo Hill, which overlooked Bridge 14 and enemy lines. On about 7 December, 2nd Lt Pols and I were told that we would have to go and relieve Lt's Potgieter and Liebenberg as they had run out of rations, water and radio batteries. We were told to take twenty spare magazines and rations and water for three to four days. In addition, we took two hand grenades and two spare radio batteries and full battle packs. Before sunrise on 8 December, we were taken by Landrover and dropped off in the vicinity of Hippo Hill. We had one outdated map of the area and a list of codes to use on the radio. We were not allowed to wear dogtags but were allowed to wear a necklace with a religious symbol. Bernie wore his St Christopher and me, being Jewish, my Star of David. The weather was wet, with intermittent rain and generally poor visibility. We walked in a westerly direction through pineapple fields and banana plantations, which were thick with fruit and in some places 2m high. After about 2km we began the gradual ascent, moving in an easterly direction. We had been given a rendezvous point to meet with Potgieter's OP team, which was stationed halfway up Hippo Hill. At about 3.30pm, we established contact on the radio and met up a few minutes later. Potgieter gave us his binoculars and a vague registration of the enemy targets. We reached the summit at last light. Due to poor weather and visibility, we were unable to identify any enemy targets before nightfall.



Bridge 14, with lower slopes of Hippo Hill visible on left

That night at around 7.30pm, a fire-works display erupted in the pitch dark below us. Thirty seconds later, the radio went. It was Enslin Beetge screaming that our gun positions were under fire. We tried desperately to get our guns to bear on what we presumed were the enemy targets, with no visible landmarks to help us identify the enemy firing positions. After ten minutes of incessant bombardment the commandant, Cmdt Joffel van der Westhuizen, came on the radio to me and said, "*As jy nie daardie tuikens uitwis nie, gaan hulle vir ons almal doodskiet*" ("If you can't detect those targets, they'll shoot us all dead"). All of a sudden, the enemy fire ceased. The issue with this first engagement was that we could not distinguish between our shells landing and theirs being fired.

The whole night, we lay concealed in the rain, overlooking the enemy's position. We dozed in stop-starts. Shortly before dawn Bernie shook me awake. We peered out through the mist and rain looking for movement. To my right, about 500m away towards the north-east of Hippo Hill, I could make out Bridge 14, which had been totally destroyed. Looking north, we could make out the Cuban positions. It became apparent that in front of us was a huge enemy deployment that far outnumbered our troops. That's when Bernie said to me that if they got across the bridge and if we didn't win the battle, we would be "goners". At that stage I still did not know what the command element intended for us to do.

Then the enemy opened up fire at all our positions with ferocity. Enemy rounds were going over our heads as our gun positions lay much further back. They had obviously registered our gun positions before we had occupied them. Their fire was incredibly accurate. We started to return fire, but our eight 25lbs (88mm) guns were totally outranged. The maximum range of the 25lb gun was 12km while the maximum range of our 5.5 guns was 18km on charge super. We did try to add in increment which gave us roughly a 21km range, but was not accurate because the propellant was measured manually. The issue with increment was that it also increased barrel wear dramatically. We were slowly able to knock out the enemy targets close to the bridge using the 5.5s. There were so many targets that we used a system of one gun per target. Far into the distance, the Cuban BM21s suddenly opened up a salvo. What we saw

was termed “the red eye”, rising up out of the mist coming towards us. At that point, Bernie said to me “Look at that!” Twenty seconds later we heard the rockets passing over our heads. The target was our gun positions. That is when we sent the warning over the radio “Gate toe”. Salvo after salvo rained down on our positions. We could estimate how long it took from the time that the rocket was fired till the time it hit its target and we would inform the GPO over the radio. They had approximately 25 seconds to take cover.

At that point we tried to reach the BM21s but were hopelessly outranged. It was almost impossible for one person to continuously concentrate on focusing on looking through the binoculars, as the salvos were coming from different distances away. We adopted a system where we would swap the single pair of binoculars that we had between the two of us every thirty minutes or so. We realized that we would never reach the BM21s positions due to the limitation of the range of our guns. Bernie came up with the idea to leap frog the guns. The range specification of the 5.5s was probably known to the enemy. The range specification in the operation manual states that the rate of fire of the 5.5 gun is one round per minute. The enemy must have known this. The idea was that one gun at a time would pack up and move forward 2km or 3km and while that was happening, the other three guns would increase their fire rate to one round every fifteen seconds. And so, one by one, we managed to move the troop of guns much closer to the enemy than they thought we were. This exercise must have taken a good hour and a half. During this time, the gun crews of the firing three guns were able to maintain the fire rate to make it appear to the enemy as if all four guns were at the original firing position. This was a Herculean task as the guns were heavy, weighing seven tons each. Each projectile weighed 45kg. The gun crew procedure followed was that immediately after a round was fired, the gun chamber would be swabbed down with water and the troop aiming the gun re-aimed the gun while the next projectile was being rammed down the barrel. Then the propellant was inserted and a new fuse was put in. The fuse was either an impact or a proximity fuse. All this had to happen in fifteen seconds. Once all four guns had taken up closer positions, we were able to reach the farthest enemy positions and targets. At one point, one of our teams of gunners reported excessive barrel wear on their gun and we began noticing that the range of this gun was decreasing. The gun tiffies were called and during the thick of the battle, they came forward and dismantled and rotated the barrel so that it was as good as new.

The rebuilding of Bridge 14 then began. The engineers had the onerous task of chopping down trees to use as building material and then reconstructing the bridge while under constant enemy fire. We watched all this happening from our OP position. This went on for two days. The plan was to send heavy armoured vehicles over the bridge. The river was flowing strongly due to the continuous, heavy rain. On day two, the enemy must have realized that we had an OP, because our firing was becoming more and more accurate. They started taking speculative shots, trying to monitor whether or not there was movement where their projectiles fell. Eventually, they found us. Heavy enemy fire from their BM's then rained down continually on our positions, getting closer and closer. The salvos came thick and fast, including mortar fire. We took cover behind rocks, keeping as close to the ground as possible. I radioed back to the guns that our position was under heavy fire. The enemy had realized that if our position had been taken out then there could be no accurate fire from us on their artillery. Bernie said to me “If ever there was a time to pray, it's now”. He clutched his St Christopher mumbling in Latin. I presumed he was a Roman Catholic. I, being of the Jewish faith, but not having attended synagogue much since my Barmitzvah, mumbled the Hebrew phrase “*Shemah Yisroel Ad-nai Eloheinu Ad-nai echad*” – “Hear O Israel, the Lord our G-d, the Lord is One” all the while clutching my Magen David. Fifteen minutes later, a

lull in enemy fire gave us the opportunity to move our position. “Time to move out of here” Bernie said. We hastily packed up and moved to a position about 300m above where we had been. The terrain was rocky. As we scrambled up the hill, heavy machine gun fire opened up shattering the rocks around us. We found a new hidden position and were able to locate and neutralize the enemy fire on us.

We were not sure how much damage the enemy took, but later into Day Two Bernie decided that we should send the Eland 90mm noddies across the bridge to see if the repairs would hold. The first car tentatively approached on the bridge. After a few metres in, the car commander realized that the bridge would not hold. He reversed off and reinforcement building resumed.

Towards the end of Day Two we started to successfully fire right into the enemy gun positions. We could see the enemy starting to panic. There was only one tar road to the bridge, running from north to south. In the far northerly distance, we saw a truck coming along the road at speed. Through the binoculars, we saw that it was an ammunition truck on its way to resupply the forward-most Cuban positions, more than likely with heavy mortars. Bernie said “Here’s our chance!” We did a single gun engagement using fuse 117 (an impact fuse). The first round landed about 200m in front of the vehicle, which kept going. We then re-adjusted the gun aim. The second ranging shot exploded about 40m in front of it in the road. The driver must have realized that the next shot would probably hit him, so he hastily turned the vehicle around and at great speed attempted to exit the battle area. Bernie gave me the co-ordinates up 300 and the order to fire. Enslin Beetje, the GPO responded incredibly quickly. The gun number one was Gus Martins’ and they got the round off almost immediately. The TA in the van promptly responded “*Skoot viertien sekondes*”, which meant that the calculated time measured from the moment the gun was fired until hitting the target was fourteen seconds. I repeated the command as was procedure. Bernie was looking through the binoculars and fourteen seconds later turned to me and said “Got him!” When the smoke from the explosion cleared, the vehicle was no longer on the road. It was later recovered by our tiffies and from the shrapnel damage to the vehicle it had sustained close to a direct hit. This incident and all others involving the 5.5s during the battle for Bridge 14 were directed by Bernie Pols and I and NOT by Potgieter and Liebenberg as described by Herman van Niekerk in his book *Born to Storm*. Just to put the record straight, Johan Potgieter and his OP team were not on Hippo Hill at any time during the battle for Bridge 14.

The radio message for this engagement to Enslin Beetje was sent by myself and was “*Teiken uitgewis*”.



Destroyed Cuban transport vehicle, photographed after the battle

Our gunners continued to work feverishly and even in our new position, the enemy was still firing at us. At this point, we were managing to land many of our firing rounds in the enemy gun positions. Despite this, they still seemed to be firing at us from those positions. Then Bernie gave me the order to fire “lug bars” (air burst). This meant that the fuse fitted on that high explosive shell would detonate at between thirty and fifty metres above the ground. This would result in shrapnel being sprayed over a circular area with a circumference of 30m to 50m. The issue with the 117 fuse was that with all the rain that had fallen, the ground had become so soggy that the projectile would not explode on impact. Immediately after using air burst we could see enemy infantry abandoning their positions. We continued lifting our fire until all enemy activity ceased.

Early on Day 4, we looked out over the valley and all appeared to be quiet. Bernie gave me the order “*Stuur Panzers voorentoe*”. We heard the armour start their engines and saw the Elands inch forward over the bridge while we continued firing at the farthest registered targets. Once all four cars were across the bridge, they spread out and moved forward. Out of the mist ahead of them, I saw smoke trails snaking out of the vegetation heading straight for the cars. It was later told to me that these were Sagger missiles, which had been used with devastating effect by the Egyptians against the Israelis in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. At this point, our guns were firing at maximum range using charge super. We immediately had to change the guns from impact to air burst fuses, as well as change the charge to low in order to engage the threatening enemy positions. We managed to knock out the Sagger missile positions. I am sure that Eoin Gibson (one of the armoured car commanders) can describe what he saw and experienced. The cars were able to proceed forward and accordingly we lifted our fire. There were still enemy soldiers trying to hide on the sides of the road. Our cars machine guns went into action. From our OP position, we could see the cars moving forwards and could monitor the communications between them and HQ. I could see that the enemy troops were trying to take cover on the sides of the road and taking pot shots at our cars with small arms fire. Our artillery at that point could not assist because they were too close to our cars and risked hitting them. The cars’ main machine gun could not depress low enough to hit the enemy. Somehow we managed to neutralise the targets. After the battle ended our troops showed us evidence of marijuana in the pockets of the Cubans.

The taking of Bridge 14 was now complete. Our troops advanced over the bridge. It appeared to me as if any remaining enemy troops had packed up and left. That evening, we received orders

that the next morning (I think that would have been a Friday) we were to descend Hippo Hill to a rendezvous on the road below. We were already out of rations and water and I was battling to drain out the last bit of power from the radio batteries. The next morning, I established communication with Comdt Joffel van der Westhuizen, who told us to proceed to the rendezvous point. We rolled down Hippo Hill, exhausted, hungry and thirsty. We got to the rendezvous and there was Joffel in his Landrover waiting for us. He came over to help us and shook our hands, thanking and congratulating us profusely and saying it was a job well done. I threw my kit into the back of the car and climbed in. Bernie got into the front passenger seat.

Joffel turned his car round and took us over the bridge to show us the results of our work. All the trees in the area had been mown down by shrapnel. There were craters dotted all over the ground, some deeper than chest height. Hundreds of enemy body parts were strewn over a large area. Here and there were legs with boots on. Body parts hung from parts of destroyed trees. It stank of burnt, rotting corpses. I started to vomit over the side of the vehicle and Joffel, who seemed to be enjoying all the gore, laughed at me. He was so excited that he was bouncing up and down in the driver's seat.



(Left): House damaged by South African shellfire. (Right): Dead Cuban in pineapple field

Incident Post Bridge 14

Wayne Jacobs and I were sent back to Cela Hospital to deliver a message. It was on our way there that Wayne had acquired his Cuban boots off a rotting corpse. As we drove, we discussed ways and means of getting hold of enemy weapons as mementos. Wayne had heard from an infantry troop that captured Cuban weapons had been dumped in an unused room in Sela Hospital. The hospital had been taken over by the medical corps for the sole use of the SADF troops. On our arrival, we delivered the message and inquired from one of the staff where the weapons room was. He directed us to go past the operating theatre, which was in use with its doors wide open. We located the weapons room. Wayne was as excited as a kid in a toy store. He immediately began rummaging through a pile of weapons. I followed suit. I found what I thought was a Portuguese G3 rifle. It had the same calibre as the South African R1 rifle i.e. 7.62mm long. The magazine was still in the weapon. I sat down on the only chair in the room to check for rounds in the chamber, remove the magazine and to pull the cocking handle back in order to eject any live round from the chamber. Much to my disappointment, the cocking handle was missing. I had the rifle upright resting on the butt with the barrel between my legs, trying to get the mouse to pull back without the missing cocking handle. I was unable to do this. Undeterred, I came up with another plan. The alternative was to put the

safety catch on to “safe” and attempt to pull the trigger, which would then be blocked by the safety catch. The safety ON and OFF insignia were in Portuguese, which I did not understand. I manoeuvred the safety catch as I would for a South African R1. Big mistake! (The Portuguese safety catch worked opposite to the SA gun). I pulled the trigger. There was around in the chamber and the rifle discharged. The sound was deafening. I looked up and saw the sunlight streaming in through the hole in the roof that the round had made. Wayne turned and looked at me wide-eyed. Blood poured from the tip of my nose where the bullet had grazed me. The noise of the shot and the sight of my bleeding nose sent Wayne flying past me, out of the room and down the road in total shock. The medics who had heard the shot came to investigate. Two of them chased after Wayne, eventually managing to pin him down and sedate him. They then patched me up. I was almost deaf and shivering from shock. Wayne, being the designated driver of our vehicle, was in no state to drive. I didn’t have a licence and didn’t really know how to drive. Somehow, with much jerking, I managed to get us back to our gun positions. We arrived shaken and empty-handed. Luckily, there were no repercussions or investigations regarding this incident.



The writer in the bush, against a combat vehicle

A few weeks after Bridge 14, Bernie Pols and I were sent on an OP up a mountain north of Bridge 14 called “Top Hat”. On day 2, I spotted what I thought was an enemy armoured vehicle driving through the bush about 1km north of us. We relayed this information to our command position. About ten minutes the reply came back “Do not engage”. On Day 3, we were told to come three quarters of the way down the mountain to a rendezvous with another OP team who would take over from us. The relieving OP team consisted of a national service 2nd Lt, (I am not sure of his name), and a permanent force Corporal de Kock. The standard protocol was to radio in one’s co-ordinates every 20 minutes during the descent so that the gunners could monitor us and cover us if necessary. This we failed to do only reporting in hourly. During the descent from Top Hat we established radio contact with the relief OP team. On the final part of our descent we lost contact. This was worrying being so close to the rendezvous point. Suddenly, the relief team

appeared out of the bush 100m ahead of us, followed by ten Cubans who had taken them captive. We were close enough to them to hear them speaking in Afrikaans. The 2nd Lt told de Kock to “run for it” and they made a dash towards us. The 2nd Lt was shot with the bullet severely grazing his forehead. De Kock was hit in the chest. Both were able to continue running in our direction. Bernie ordered me to radio the message “*Bestook eie posiesies!*” This is a last resort order meant to create chaos amongst the enemy, forcing them to seek cover and to give own troops to extricate themselves from the situation. A few seconds later the first round came in but way off target, due to the fact that we had not regularly radioed in our positions. I readjusted fire and the next round was closer. By that time, the injured men had reached us and we all ran for the nearby road. The armoured cars arrived soon after to extract us. The 2nd Lt passed out from loss of blood. De Kock’s life was saved by his binoculars hanging on his chest and which had absorbed a lot of the impact. He was transported to Cela Hospital where he was operated on by Dr Tony Dippenaar, who later became Surgeon General to the SADF. The 2nd Lt was flown to 1 Military Hospital in Voortrekker Hoogte for treatment and survived. Bernie and I visited him a few days after. We found him in a large, empty ward, his chest heavily bandaged but in good spirits.

This was the last enemy engagement I had in Angola.

Klaaring Out

The discharge date for our mandatory military service of twelve months expired during the Battle for Bridge 14. We were informed by radio that parliament had passed a resolution extending national service for those involved in current conflict indefinitely. Also, the department of Defense had run out of funds and parliament had agreed to allocate extra money to them.

We had had no contact with our parents throughout. My parents received a weekly telephone call from either Major Bosch (2IC of the regiment) or from Cmdt Nel (OC). This call was to the effect that “your son is doing well and in good health on the border”.

After Bridge 14, there was a political stalemate. Towards the end of January 1976, we still did not know when we would be going home.

Whilst in Angola, we all became memento collectors. Prize finds were an AK47, a PPSH type tommy gun, enemy combat caps, bayonets, Russian watches and a pair of Cuban boots. I had a Russian PPSH with a full magazine, dating back to the Second World War, a FN bayonet, an AK47 bayonet and a Cuban cap. In a lull after one of the shorter skirmishes following Bridge 14, Wayne Jacobs (our OP Landrover driver) and I were sent back to Cela Hospital to deliver a message. Wayne was desperate for a pair of Cuban boots. Apparently they were very comfortable. After a few kilometres driving we smelt the most awful stench. Wayne slammed on brakes. We got out of the vehicle and walked into the bush. We came across a dead Cuban fully clothed. Much to my disgust and horror, Wayne gleefully removed the corpse’s boots. He tried them for size and they fitted. He wore them with great pride!

Sometime in late January/early February, we were told that we were withdrawing from Angola and to hand over our guns to some citizen force artillery unit. The handover took place about 150km north of the border somewhere in Angola. We were finally on our way home. We were told that on our arrival back at camp, we would be searched for any mementos and that any that were found would be confiscated. I decided to ditch the PPSH over the side of the vehicle into the Angolan bush, but kept the two bayonets and cap, which I still have today.

Our convoy drove into Grootfontein. A closed tent had been erected for our unit. We had the first hot shower and hot meal in many a month. We were issued with a brand new set of Browns and boots and our original, stored kit was returned to us. We were marched into the same hangar where we had signed over our lives. Once again PW Botha addressed us. He was flanked on the stage by General Magnus Malan and Lt General Constand Viljoen. PW explained to us that the Defence Force had not yet received the money due to it from parliament. He said that anyways we were too young to get that money and would probably spend it recklessly! Instead of being paid, we would each be given a Parker pen! The front row was filled with our armour troops. They wore their jumpsuits which made them look broader and brawnier than the rest of us. When they heard what PW said, they jumped up and I thought that they were going to lynch him. They were not happy with the situation. A row of MP stepped between them and PW. PW finished off his speech by offering each of us a post in the Permanent Force. He was then bundled out of the hangar with the other dignitaries. We again had to sign a nondisclosure and official secrecy document.

That day we boarded the troop train for the two day journey back to Potchefstroom. We were given a hero's welcome by the civilians of Potch who came specially to meet us. We were driven to the base where we handed in our kit and rifles. Sgt Major Erasmus was in charge of the Stores. He wanted to charge Padda du Preez for handing in a bent rifle, but changed his mind when he learned that it had been driven over by an enemy vehicle. My parents came all the way from Pretoria to fetch me.



South African troops salute Minister of Defence PW Botha as they leave Angola

Gary Nowosenetz is a Pretoria-based businessman and electrical engineer. In January 1975, he commenced military service, and went on to serve in a heavy artillery unit in the Fourth Field Regiment Operation Savannah incursion from August that year until March 1976.



How true a reflection of the Afrikaner-Jewish relationship was the pre-1948 antisemitism of the Afrikaner Press and Politicians? (Part 2)

Ivan Kapelus

- *Feature image: Afrikaans, English and Jewish members of the Pietersburg Ambulance Fund Committee, 1929-1930*

The 1930 Quota Act was aimed at severely curtailing Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe, primarily from Lithuania. This Minister of Interior Dr D F Malan admitted in Parliament in 1937 when he said: “The Quota Act placed certain countries under restrictions ... We definitely had the tremendous influx of Jews in mind at the time”. The impact of the Act was immediate, with the flow of immigrants from the “quota countries” dropping drastically. In the period 1931-6, a mere 3449 Jews from those countries were allowed to enter South Africa

The manner and timing of the passing of the Quota Act resulted in a deep schism between the Jewish and Afrikaans populations. Jews were now suspicious of and distrusted the National Party, which in turn saw the party adopt an increasingly menacing attitude towards the Jewish community. In an interview with *Die Burger* on 2 November 1931, Malan stated, ‘There is a section of the Jews seeking revenge on the Nationalist Party for the Quota Act, but they are, of course, afraid to come out in the open.’ He added that it was ‘very easy to rouse a feeling of hate towards the Jews in the country ... if they want to hit us, they may be assured that we will hit back.’

South Africa was not alone in denying entry to Jews. As the situation of German and Austrian Jews became known, a conference was called by US President Roosevelt to discuss their plight. The conference was held in the summer of 1938 in the French resort of Evian and is thus known as the “Evian Conference”. Of the 32 countries attending, including the US,

UK, Australia, and Canada, none besides the Dominican Republic agreed to take in Jews seeking refuge from the Nazis. South Africa was not among the countries attending.

Several Afrikaners who later became prominent in politics did postgraduate studies at German universities in the late 1920s and '30s. Among them were HF Verwoerd, Eric Louw (later Foreign Minister) and Louis T Weichardt. It was with this background that Weichardt, in October 1933, formed the South African Christian National Socialist Movement (SANP) with its offices in Cape Town. In May 1934, the organisation was registered as a political party, which Weichardt took great care to emphasise was an Afrikaner party. The SANP, known as the Greyshirts because of the uniforms its activists wore, was a paramilitary group that at its peak numbered 2000. It was just the first of many Nazi-type movements that came and went over this period.



Greyshirts uniform & symbols, 1930s

In the 1933 election, the South African Party under J C Smuts and National Party under J B M Hertzog stood as a coalition, winning a handsome victory of 136 Parliamentary seats out of 150. They agreed to a merger of their parties into the United South Africa Party (United Party), with Hertzog becoming Prime Minister. The fusion that Hertzog sought was strongly resisted and eventually rejected by the Cape National Party led by Malan. Supported by MPs, who later became the “Who’s Who” of South African politics, he founded the *Gesuiwerde Nasionale Party* (Purified National Party). Some of those who supported Malan included future prime ministers Hendrik Verwoerd and J G Strijdom, future cabinet ministers Paul Sauer and Nico Diedrichs and Piet Meyer, later Head of the SABC.

From 1933 to 1936, a total of 6132 Germans fleeing Hitler, of whom 3615 were Jewish, arrived in South Africa. This resulted in much hysteria over Jewish immigration. With the impending arrival in Cape Town of the *Stuttgart* carrying 570 German Jews, a meeting of professors at Stellenbosch University led by Verwoerd protested on the supposed grounds that these Jews would make it even more difficult for Afrikaners to make headway in the professions and business. Speaking at the same university Malan, asserted that Jewish immigration was being organised by ‘*Joodse geldmag*’ (Jewish money power), even though Germany was not one of the scheduled countries in the Quota Act that he had proposed.

The weight of anti-Jewish vitriol in the Afrikaans press, led by Verwoerd in the *Transvaler* and Boonzaaier in *Die Burger*, as well as the support for Weichardt, resulted in Malan’s *Gesuiwerde Nasionale Party* moving ever more to the right and embracing an openly anti-Jewish platform. By November 1936, Malan was calling for the unequal treatment of Jews.

With all this anti-Jewish fervour, it was not long before another blow against Jewish immigration was felt, with the introduction by the ruling party of the Aliens Bill in 1937. The Bill made no mention of race, creed, or religion and made the selection of immigrants the prerogative of an Immigrants Selection Board, which had specific criteria to consider, in his address to Parliament. However, Prime Minister Hertzog made it abundantly clear that ‘the influx of the Jews is ... one of the immediate causes for the introduction of this Bill’.

The Quota and Aliens Acts succeeded in virtually stopping any further meaningful immigration of Jews to South Africa from Europe at the very time that they most needed access to a safe haven. The catastrophic impact this was to have on virtually every Jewish family in the country was apparent as the horrors of the Nazi “Final Solution” emerged. About 95% of Lithuanian and Latvian Jews perished in the Holocaust, some 200 000 souls out of a total Jewish population of 220 000. As the majority of Jews in South Africa hailed from Lithuania/Latvia, few were not touched by this tragedy.

In 1938, the country went to the polls and for the first time in South Africa a political party, the National Party, stood on an explicitly anti-Jewish platform. This engendered vigorous opposition from the United, Labour and Dominion parties, all of whom were outspoken in their condemnation of the NP’s antisemitism. The result of the election was a resounding victory for the UP, which won 111 seats to the 27 of the NP, with Labour and the Dominion Party winning three and eight respectively. The country had clearly rejected the antisemitism being propagated by the NP and its acolytes.



The Lipshitz family in Nylstroom, 1920s. Abe Lipshitz (extreme left) taught Afrikaans to lawyers and became the first principal of King David School in Johannesburg. He often played tennis with future Prime Minister. J G Strydom, who represented the Waterberg constituency for nearly three decades (See Wiener, Charlotte, The Jewish communities of Limpopo/Northern Transvaal, 2016. Photo: courtesy SA Friends of Beth Hatefutsoth]

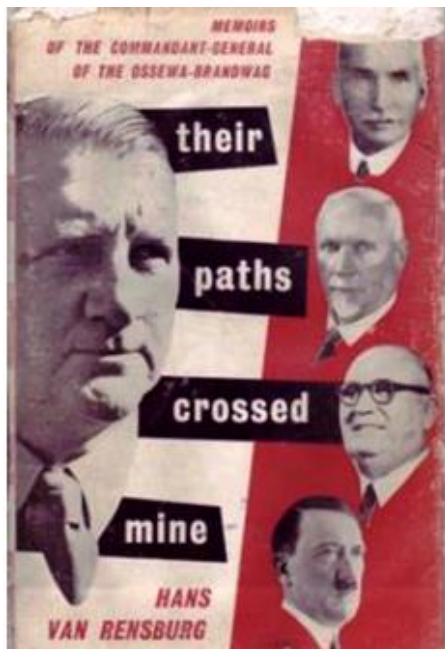
In January the following year the NP's Eric Louw, with the full backing of his party, proposed a Private Members Bill that was an echo of Nazi antisemitism. Speaking in parliament, he said, "The main principle of this Bill is that it admits the existence in South Africa of a Jewish problem and faces up to that problem". His solution was that "no applicant who is of Jewish parentage shall be deemed to be readily assimilable". It went on to define "Jewish parentage" as "that person whose father and mother are or were wholly or partly Jews, whether or not they professed the Jewish religion".

Not only did Louw's Bill prohibit Jewish immigration but it proposed to deprive un-naturalised aliens who entered the Union since January 1930 of their immigration permits. Like the laws of the Nazis, it went further by imposing restrictions on foreigners being able to practise certain trades, professions, and occupations. The Bill was soundly defeated, but it demonstrated how the NP was using the antisemitic trope of the Greyshirts as a platform.

1938 was also the centenary of the Battle of Blood River – the defeat of the Zulus by the Voortrekkers on 16 December 1838. To celebrate that milestone and to strengthen Afrikaner nationalism in general, the National Party and its elite support group, Die Broederbond, together with its cultural wing, the Afrikaans Taal en Kultuurvereniging (Afrikaans Language and Cultural Society), conceived the idea of building a monument to the Voortrekkers on a hill outside of Pretoria. As a build-up to the gathering at the site of what would become the Voortrekker Monument, a symbolic trek by ox wagon from Cape Town to Pretoria was organised. The Great Trek celebrations unleashed a wave of Afrikaner nationalist pride.

War was looming in Europe, and when Britain declared war on Germany in September 1939, the schism between Hertzog and Deputy Prime Minister General Jan Smuts came to the fore. Many Afrikaners were diametrically opposed to South Africa entering the fray. Hertzog called for South Africa to remain neutral while Smuts, who saw the coming conflict as a fight for the preservation of democracy and Western civilisation, advocated joining the Allies. After his motion in favor of neutrality was defeated by 80 votes to 67, Hertzog called for the dissolution of Parliament and the calling of a general election, but the Governor General refused and asked Smuts to form a government. South Africa's entry into the war resulted in Hertzog's resignation from the United Party. In January 1940, his and Malan's followers merged to form the *Herenigde Nasionale Party* (Reunited National Party; later just NP), with Malan as leader. It also led to a polarisation of Afrikaans- and English-speaking groups and to the conclusion that the only way forward for Afrikaners was an 'uncompromising spiritual Afrikanerdom'. There was, it seems, no longer room for a middle way in South African politics on race and colour.

On the back of the enthusiasm generated by the Great Trek centenary celebrations as well as widespread Afrikaner opposition to South Africa's entering the war, the *Ossewabrandwag* (OB) was formed. The OB, with its own paramilitary organisation known as *Die Stormjaers*, was at the forefront of attempts to sabotage the war effort. It further adopted an avowedly anti-Jewish policy, attacking the 'British- Jewish democracy', 'Jewish money power' and 'Jewish disloyalty'. It became an Afrikaner populist organisation with a membership variously estimated at between 100 000 and 300 000.



It is important to understand that not all Afrikaner politicians or people were antisemitic. This is illustrated by Abraham H Jonker in his book *Israel – Die Sondebokke* (in English called *The Scapegoat of History*) published in January 1941. At the time Jonker was a journalist. From 1948-1966 he was a Member of Parliament, first for the UP and later the NP. On p152 of his book he writes (translated from Afrikaans): “In seeking and finding the Jews as the complete scapegoat for all adversity and all our own shortcomings, we not only have the mighty weapon in the hands of ruling politicians to bind and govern the masses, but also harbours the pernicious germs of humiliation and denigration. Jewish hatred, as in fact, any racial hatred, is an appeal to the most primitive and lowest tendencies in human nature. A people of Jew haters or racists lowers itself by a constant call on the weakest characteristics of humanity”.

On p77, Jonker quotes from a speech made in Parliament in January 1937 by then Deputy Prime Minister Smuts: “As for South Africa, I do not think, if we put our hands on heart that we can honestly and equitably say the Jews, few as they are in number, insignificant as they are from a numbers standpoint, have not made a huge and outstanding contribution to our lives and to our civilisation here in South Africa”.

Earlier in 1933 Isaac Frank, a town councilor and in 1938 Mayor of Van Rhynsdorp, in his personal capacity corresponded with several moderate Nationalist leaders. Frank held the view that no self-respecting Jew should join the NP until the ban on Jewish membership had been totally eliminated. This was N C Havenga’s reply: “My attitude towards the Jews is, and remains exactly the same as it was in the days of the old National Party under General Hertzog. I am not in favor of any discrimination against Jewish citizens who have become South Africans and I have reason to believe that this is also Dr Malan’s attitude.”

J H Hofmeyer was appalled by antisemitism, which he stated “has its origin in jealousy and intolerance and unworthy passions of the human heart”. He went on to say, “Assimilability does not mean conformity, it does not mean that everybody must think and feel the same”. Furthermore, as he put it, “the distinctiveness, the otherness, of the Jew and the success of the Jew” was remarkable and admirable.

By 1942, the NP was broadly accepted as the political vehicle of the Afrikaner. This did not mean that the NP was giving up its anti-Jewish rhetoric, however. On the contrary: in December 1940, the NP's Transvaal Provincial Congress confirmed its decision of 1937 not to allow Jews to be members. It further called on the Federal Council to encourage the NP in other provinces to follow suit, but this did not happen. [This prohibition was repealed in 1953 after the National Party won its second general election.]

By 1943, South Africa and the world were becoming aware of the barbaric treatment of European Jewry. However, as news of the implementation of the "Final Solution" started to be reported, the Afrikaner politicians of the NP and press dismissed it as "Allied Propaganda". It was only when the war ended and newspapers and newsreels showed the horrors of the death camps that this denial stopped. This made the blocking of access to South Africa by Jews from Europe even more difficult to accept.

In the middle of WWII in 1943, South Africa once more went to the polls. The UP, now without Hertzog and his followers won 89 seats to the 43 of the NP, with the minor parties, (Labour – 9, Dominion – 7, Independents – 2) giving Smuts a healthy majority and again demonstrating that the white population largely rejected antisemitism. In light of the evidence of the Holocaust, as well as the successful urbanisation of many more Afrikaners, the antisemitic rhetoric of the NP of the 1930s and early 40s disappeared. To the forefront was race, Black and White, Coloured and White – the fear of being overrun by the Blacks. In the 1948 election, Afrikaners won control of parliament, Malan's (H)NP winning 70 seats and Havenga's allied Afrikaner Party winning 9 for a total of 79 seats against the combined 74 of the UP under Smuts (65), Labour (6) and three Independents.

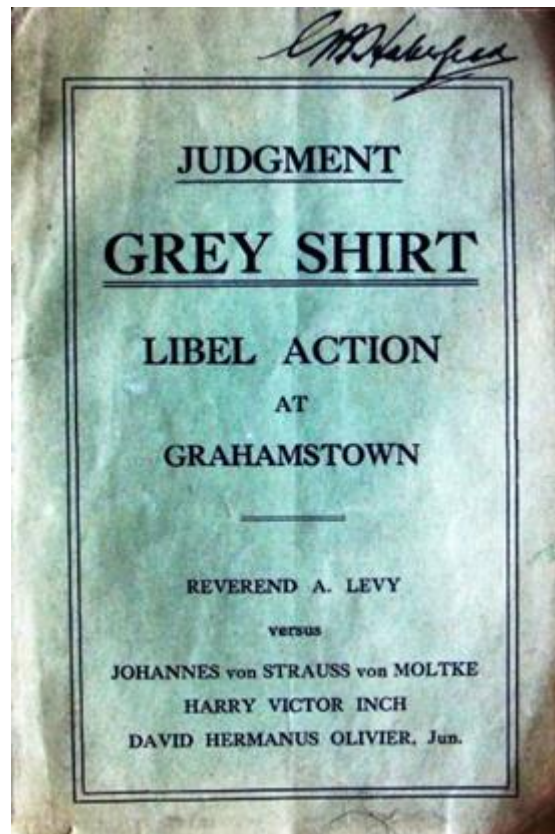
In October 1947, Malan had stated that while the NP stuck to its policy of Jewish immigration, "as far as its declared policy is concerned, the Party does not stand for legislative measures which discriminate between Jew and non-Jew". After the party's victory the following year Malan, now Prime Minister, reaffirmed this policy and added that he "looked forward to the time when there would be no more talk regarding the so-called Jewish question in the life and politics of this country".

On 29 November 1947, the South African government at the UNO had voted with thirty-two other countries in favor of Resolution 181, thus paving the way for the creation of the State of Israel. After the 1948 election the NP government on 7 May voted in favour of Israel becoming a member of the UNO and gave the new State *de jure* recognition on 14 May 1948. A far cry from the antisemitic rhetoric of the previous twenty-five years!

The Afrikaner – Jewish Relationship 1930-1948

Undoubtedly, the antisemitic rhetoric of many Afrikaans nationalist politicians and Afrikaans language press during the period 1930-1948 was most distressing for the Jews of South Africa. The wave of antisemitism in 1933 led to the Jewish public, and the SA Zionist Federation, putting their weight behind the Jewish Board of Deputies, the body recognised as representing the Jewish community to government and society in general. Adv. Morris Alexander resigned as chairman of the Cape Board to travel to the country areas to educate the people (including gentiles) about antisemitism and to garner funds for the SAJBD for the battles and campaigns to come. Many communities that they had not done so heretofore joined the Board and paid their subscriptions.

The SAJBD concentrated initially on three areas: pressing for anti-defamation legislation, and taking to the courts wherever possible against antisemitic acts; monitoring anti-Jewish propaganda and refuting it “by exposing its sources and objectives” [an example of this was their successful libel action against prominent Greyshirts leaders who claimed to have found the Protocols of the Elders of Zion when spying on a meeting held by Rev Levy of Port Elizabeth] as well as putting the objective facts before the public; and promoting better relations between the Jewish community and other sections of the White population.



Despite all the antisemitic rhetoric, the only laws ever passed in South Africa that directly affected Jews as Jews concerned immigration. In every other respect, Jews enjoyed the same rights, privileges and protections of other whites. In addition, as borne out by the election results of 1938 and 1943, most whites and the government were opposed to antisemitism and would not allow discrimination against the local Jewish community,

An opinion survey, conducted in the early 1940s by Simon Herman, a Jewish academic at Wits University, revealed an increase in antisemitism among English speaking whites. Most South African Jews were familiar with the English clubs that did not take Jews as members. No Afrikaans clubs had such a prohibition! Herman also conducted a survey among Jewish students at Wits in early 1943, in which students spoke of the antisemitic taunts and discrimination they had suffered as children. Even those from the rural areas said that “they grew up with it” and regarded it as “natural and inevitable”. Yet one student expressed the view that in Europe Jews had “actually been persecuted. Here the antisemites have just been talking about it and done nothing”.^[1]

Does that mirror the attitude of the Afrikaner people and their relationship to the Jews in their communities? Can we answer this question with facts, rather than relying on the

“historical memory” as Milton Shain puts it in his chapter “If It Was So Good, Why Was It So Bad” in the book *Memories, Realities and Dreams*?[2]

To examine this question, we need to appreciate how differently the Jews in the cities lived compared to those living in the “country” (platteland) during the period 1930-1948. Then about 90% of the Jewish population lived in the urban areas, mainly in Johannesburg and Cape Town, with smaller communities in Durban, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth, and Bloemfontein.

Particularly in Cape Town and Johannesburg, the “Litvaks” from early after their arrival, lived in communities of their own, almost like a silo society, where they had synagogues and other community organisations. As they became more prosperous, so would they move to more salubrious suburbs, almost as a group. Very often their social circle would be entirely Jewish, and some even then would have had little, if any social interaction with Afrikaners. Their children would attend the local English medium school and on at least three days a week “cheder” (Hebrew school) until after Bar Mitzvah, as well as being members of the Zionist Youth Movements.

In large measure, the same could be said of the urban Afrikaans community, who would live near their church and wanted their children to go to Afrikaans medium schools. As we have seen, the urbanisation of the Afrikaners was rapid. In 1910, with the formation of the Union of South Africa, only 29% of Afrikaners lived in urban areas. By 1936, it was 50%, making up 25% of the White population in Cape Town and Johannesburg. In 1936, the total white population of metropolitan Johannesburg was 266,455, with the Afrikaans population being 25% = 66,612. The total Jewish population of SA in 1936 was 90 645, so if 40% of them lived in Johannesburg they would have numbered 36 258, about half the number of Afrikaners!

Yet despite the antisemitic rhetoric of the time, and the remarks made to Simon Herman in his interviews, three Jews were elected mayor of Johannesburg during this period: Maurice Freeman (1934 -1935), L Levenson (1942 – 1942) and G.B. Gordon (1947 – 1948). As the above population figures show, it was not possible for the “Jewish vote” to get them elected. They were joined on the City Council by other Jewish councillors. In Pretoria, where the Afrikaans population was 50% of the whites by 1936, Ivan Solomon was elected mayor for the period 1932 to 1936. Once more it could not be the Jewish vote that secured his election, as the Jewish population at the time was only 2369 souls.

Cape Town over the years has had many Jewish mayors and City councillors. During the period 1930-1948 it had two Jewish mayors, Louis Gradner (1933-5) and Abe Bloomberg (1945-7). Once more, it could not have been the Jewish vote that propelled them to this office! All this despite the antisemitism propagated by Boonzaaier of Die Burger with its vicious Hoggeneimer cartoons!

With all the antisemitic rhetoric, there were no official boycotts of Jewish businesses or professionals! The Greyshirts tried to encourage the boycotting of Jewish businesses in some country towns, but these almost always fizzled out. No pogroms or physical attacks on Jews! Perhaps the remark of the student at Wits “Here the antisemites have just been talking about it and done nothing” is an accurate reflection of the behaviour of most Afrikaners!

Of the 36.1% shown under “Rest of SA” some 10% lived in the rural areas or as it was referred to “the country” (platteland”). In these communities the Jews lived with and among their non-Jewish compatriots, mainly Afrikaners, with whom they socialised in every way, belonging to the local sports and social clubs, and participating in local public affairs. So, during the height of the Afrikaner led antisemitic rhetoric, these country Jews were interacting with the local Afrikaans community daily.

As some 90.6% of all Jews in SA lived in the Cape and Transvaal, it seems sensible to look at these areas, to see how they coped and how their lives were affected by this rhetoric? Fortunately, we have six volumes of “Jewish Life in the South African Country Communities” researched by The South African Friends of Beth Hatefutsoth as a guide!

We should look at the rural areas of the Transvaal, as it was the centre of the antisemitic movement, where its branch of the National Party banned Jews from being members from 1937 until 1953, being the only branch of the National Party to do so. Furthermore, as the population figures show, it was also the province with the most Afrikaners and Jews during the period 1930 to 1948.

The population of the villages are gleaned from two sources; the census figures for the years 1936, 1951, 1980 and 1991 that show the number of Jews, White and Total (including Blacks), augmented by the Jewish community records that only show the number of Jews in the village and surroundings, for the years 1943, 1953 and various years while Jews still lived there. In many of these villages, during the period 1936 to 1951, there so few Jews that no reliable figures were available, in others the numbers varied from a number of families, where they never established a community or built a synagogue, to others with 50 to 350 Jews, where they formed active and enthusiastic communities.

It seems that all these towns and villages experienced a level of antisemitism during the period 1936 to 1945. To educate the local (gentile) population about the nature of the anti-Jewish organisations, Morris Alexander of the SAJBD visited several towns in 1936 in the Northern Great Escarpment, including Lydenburg and Pilgrim’s Rest. In the tiny village of Graskop, near Pilgrim’s Rest, a public official was dismissed as a result of the efforts of a Mr Israel Rabinowitz, for a “blatant and crude” act of antisemitism.

Yet throughout the period 1936 to 1948 Jews were elected to serve on the Town Councils and act as mayors, even where the Jewish population was a paltry 48 persons. So, in Nelspruit Julius Schneider served on the Village Council from 1928 to 1933 and Mr Burman served from 1938 to 1940 and on the Town Council from 1940 to 1945.

In the Towns with more substantial Jewish populations, members of the Jewish community served on the Town Councils and were elected mayor throughout this period: Witbank, Louis Trichardt and the surrounding villages experienced and recorded no antisemitism, Pietersburg remained relatively free from antisemitic activity during most of the 1930’s but in the surrounding area of Tzaneen and Duwelskloof, antisemitism was rife. In 1938 the situation worsened and in 1941 Robey Leibrandt, a Nazi spy, was active in the area, He was pursued by the police and later captured in Pretoria.

Potgietersrus experienced little antisemitism and the relationship with the Afrikaans community was generally good. An exception was reported in the Daily Express in 1937

when speeches at a “Dingaans Day” gathering in neighboring Potgietersrus attacked the English and Jews.

So, overall, even in the Transvaal rural areas, the Afrikaner/Jewish relationship remained respectful of each other and Jews were valued as citizens, being elected to public office even “during the worst of times” to quote Milton Shain. Once more there is no evidence of the Afrikaans population of these towns, where they were by far the largest White group, taking any adverse action against their Jewish neighbors.

It is much more difficult to deal with the huge areas in the Cape as it covers such a large area. What one notices is, that those areas that are within easy driving distance of Cape Town, the Boland, Fairest Cape and Swartland including West Coast – appear to have experienced more activity by the antisemitic movements like the Greyshirts, than the less accessible areas such as, Central Karoo, Namaqualand, Kalahari and Griqualand West. Even in these areas, antisemitism was present and felt during the period 1930 to 1948, although violence against Jews and their property were extremely rare.

Such antisemitism did not go unopposed. So, for example in Ceres in 1935, the Gentile Protection League was refused permission to hold a meeting in the town, so the meeting was held on a farm! In 1937, after a report in the Sunday Times of the introduction of racism in the municipal elections, three councillors, E.W. Krige, L.E Cohen and GG Baysken, resigned in protest at antisemitic propaganda being introduced in the municipal election.

As we have seen on page 6 above the relationship between the Jews and Afrikaners in Calvinia even in 1932 was friendly and co-operative, with very little antisemitism until the years before WWII, with a few incidents involving the Greyshirts, OB and even Dr DF Malan of the NP, did not enjoy great support in the town and district. By 1940 the relationship between Jew and the mainly Afrikaner community was back to normal as they socialised and played sport together. In the huge area of the Central Karoo the relationship between the Jewish and mainly Afrikaans communities was almost always good and they lived comfortably together. In Stellenbosch, the hotbed of objection to Jewish immigration in the 1930s, strong links were formed between the Jews and the broader community, and particularly between the Jewish and Dutch Reformed community. Each year a function was held where the theological students who studied Hebrew were invited to meet members of the congregation. A group of fourteen professors and five lecturers of various faculties at the university issued a manifesto, protesting against national-socialism and called for a more democratic society that did not contribute to racial conflict.

David Gross in his Honours Thesis “The Story of a Unique Jewish Community in Stellenbosch” records the remarkable history, not only of the Jewish community of the Town but also of the special relationship that it enjoyed with the University and the local community, even in “the worst of times” in the 1930’s and 1940’s!

We have seen how the attitude of the Afrikaner population and the National Party towards the Jewish community changed post their 1948 election victory, and this is highlighted by Gross in his Chapter headed “The 1960 Summer Camp”, a summer school of some three weeks (10 to 31 January 1960) run by the SAJBD with renowned Jewish scholars Professor Judah Goldin, of Yale University and Professor Leon Roth of Hebrew University, Israel being the keynote speakers.

The lectures were held on the campus of the university by courtesy of Prof H B Thom, the Rector and was not only attended by the many Jewish students from all over Southern Africa, but also by non-Jewish students, lecturers from the University and Theological School, as well as members of local Churches. Their attendance was encouraged by Prof Erika Theron, as well as the student newspaper “Die Matie”.

In 1937, when Upington had a Jewish population of 210 souls (White population – 16,801), its new communal hall was opened by Adv Morris Alexander, having been welcomed by the mayor, Mr van Copenhagen. Mr S. Malan, representing the Dutch Reformed Church, spoke of the warm friendship that existed between the Jew and Gentile.

And finally Beaufort West, the constituency of Eric Louw MP, the arch Antisemite. In a report to the SAJBD dated 1940, stated that antisemitism was only found in the Railway Camp, where Louw had great influence. After WWII antisemitism was in decline but there was still a problem with some school principals and teachers. In almost every village the Jews played an active role in the civic life of the village with many serving on the local Council and some serving as mayor even during the period of antisemitic activity.

By 1948 the number of Jews in the “country” had dwindled considerably, as parents made for the cities. There was both a pull and a push factor; their children (and grandchildren) lived in the cities after having completed their studies or training, and the economic opportunities were so much more attractive (pull), but the economic environment in the villages and country towns had also changed, as a result of the success of the Farmers Co-Operatives, as well as the urbanisation of the Afrikaners.

Perhaps the extract from a letter written by Mrs Florence Malan and published in the Cape Argus of Cape Town sums up the cordial relationship that by and large existed between the Jew and the Afrikaner in the “platteland”:

The Jews brought joy to Calvinia. No village should be without a Jewish Community. Their homes with lovely linen, silver, and glassware that they had brought with them from Europe was a source of inspiration for the pioneers who had been largely cut off from their European roots and immersed in their struggle to exist. Their residence here was a golden period in the history of the village where they helped and supported each other.

NOTES

[1] Richard Mendelsohn, Milton Shain, *The Jews in South Africa- An Illustrated History*”, Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2008, pp121-2

[2] Mendelsohn, R, Shain, M (eds), *Memories, Realities and Dreams: Aspects of the South African Jewish Experience*, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2005, p78.

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District Six and portrayals of Jews in the memoirs of those removed from there

Gwynne Schrire

In February 1966, the apartheid government announced that it was going to apply the Group Areas Act to District Six, a suburb with a long history of mixed race residence. Esther Wilkin who grew up in District Six remembered that "All around were the sounds of people, hundreds upon hundreds, Jews, English, Afrikaners, Coloureds, Indians, Malays, all concentrated in this one area."^[1]

At the time of the proclamation 56% of the district's property was 'White'-owned, 26% 'Coloured'-owned and 18% Indian owned.^[2] There was massive public protest, to no avail. The bulldozers were moved in and the residents were moved out, to be relocated into houses in the sandy Cape Flats far away from their jobs, neighbours and close-knit community.



The bulldozers move in

Alas for the apartheid planners. There were no private buyers for this valuable land close to the city as the land was regarded as tainted. Within a few years, all there was to be seen was desolate scrub. Only a few churches and mosques remained behind in the wasteland. Plans to

turn it into a multi-million rand suburb for whites had to be abandoned and as a face-saving plaster on an inflamed sore, the Government built a few projects like police housing and a white's only technical college. To this day fifty years later much of it still stands bare, a neglected eyesore subject to anger, frustration, ageing homeowners, court cases and broken promises.[3]

Although the houses vanished, the memory remained, preserved in paintings by artists like Kenneth Baker, Gregoire Boonzaier and John Dronsfield, novels like Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* (1962), Richard Rive's '*Buckingham Palace*', *District Six* (1986), which became a school text book, Rozena Maart's *Rosa's District Six* (2004) and musicals like David Kramer and Taliep Petersen's *District Six: The Musical* (1987), *Kat and the Kings* (1998) and *District Six Kanala* (2016). District Six became an idealised utopia of multi-racial and interfaith harmony and co-existence, while the Jewish involvement was forgotten or viewed through stereotypes of landlords and shopkeepers.

When there was a newspaper report that the District Six Museum was considering purchasing the Sacks Futeran building (now the Athol Fugard Theatre) the Cape SA Jewish Board of Deputies contacted the then acting curator offering to place in the museum a panel giving the history of the Jews in District Six as there was so little evidence of them in the museum. The curator replied that there was very little information about Jews in District Six.

Such professed ignorance was startling, as at the turn of the 20th century thousands of Eastern European Jewish immigrants had made their homes in that suburb. When this writer interviewed Esther Wilkin in 1996[4], she told her "At that time (1920s – 1930s) if you walked in certain parts of Cape Town like in Woodstock or District Six you would feel as though you were in Europe – the shop signs were in Yiddish, Yiddish was heard in the streets, everything was in Yiddish. Immigrants felt that they had left their shtetls behind only to come to a Yiddish country."

Now the Museum established to keep the memory of District Six alive had blotted out the memory of its Jewish residents. Information sent to her giving such information remained unacknowledged, as was a copy of the *Jewish Affairs* journal,[5] containing an article with detailed footnotes from a memoir written by Harry Schrire, who had born in District Six in 1895, describing his child hood escapades. The Kaplan Centre also mounted an exhibition at the South African Jewish Museum about Jews in District Six in 2012.



The Schrire family, Cape Town, 1911. Back, from left: Sam, Annie, Harry, Max. Seated: Gela with David, Yehudi Leib with Isidore, Rebecca with Theodore (Credit: C. Schrire collection)

This writer was faced with similar lacunae of knowledge when working on committees as a representative of the Cape Jewish Board of Deputies to plan interfaith events in District Six. To counter this, when the Holy Cross Church celebrated its centenary, she spoke about this on a panel and photos from the Jewish Museum exhibition were displayed. A similar talk about Jews in District Six was given at a District Six Reconciliation walk on Reconciliation Day. Faced with the pain and dislocation of the forced removals, the presence of Jews seemed to have got lost in the background.

Former political prisoner and a member of the Human Rights Violation Committee of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Hugh Lewin, commented that “for most of the witnesses, those pre-1976 events were ancient long-forgotten history...It was a useful if sobering reminder of how quickly contemporary history moves on and how quickly the stories of the past, even the recent past, are forgotten.”^[6]

Was the absence of Jews a generational memory failure, another example of how quickly the stories of the past are forgotten, or were the residents at the time also unaware that they were sharing the suburb with Jews? This article will be looking at books written by four people who had experienced the results of the Group Areas expulsions – Richard Rive, Hettie Adams, Gloria Kube and Linda Fortune – to examine whether they mentioned Jews and if so, how.

Some novels and plays about District Six feature Jewish stereotypes, as landlords and shop keepers like the Jewish landlord Katzen, “a small Jewish shopkeeper with his walrus moustache”, in *Buckingham Palace District Six*^[7] Katzen was referred to throughout as stingy or a miser, although he gave gifts of second hand furniture to a tenant and was invited to their celebrations. When the Group Areas bombshell falls, he goes to meet with his tenants to explain that he had escaped from Hitler’s Germany and his parents had been killed in Auschwitz: “In Germany they treated me as an untermenschen. Here they force me to be

part of the Herrenvolk. But I cannot forget what they did to us in Germany. So my heart is with all the untermenschen whoever and wherever they are.”[8]

He was refusing to supply the Group Areas officials with information about them nor would he sell his houses to white people. If his tenants moved out, the houses would stay empty. Soon after, he is admitted to ICU in hospital. His tenants try to visit him, but were sent away by Katzen’s neglectful lawyer son from Johannesburg who ignores Katzen’s promise to them, and sells the houses when his father dies.

Rive turns the stingy landlord stereotype on its head, referring to it in words while showing through Katzen’s behaviour and treatment, how unfair the description was. Katzen was bullied and intimidated by the petty thief living rent free for fifteen years in one of his houses and his shop had been burgled six times in six weeks.

Three of the books are written by women who had lived in District Six – *William Street, District Six* by Hettie Adams and Hermione Suttner – Hettie was moved to Mitchell’s Plain; *Living in Loader Street: Reminiscences of growing up and life in Loader Street before the forced group removals of July 1966* by Gloria Kube and Ruby Hill – Gloria was moved to Manenberg; *The House in Tyne Street: Childhood Memories of District Six* by Linda Fortune – she was moved to Hanover Park.

William Street, Loader Street and, Tyne Street – once all within walking distance – now they and their neighbours were separated from their schools, their shops, their houses of worship, their community by vast distances and expensive taxi rides. Before they knew their neighbours – now there was a sense of anomie stuck among strangers and a violent gangster culture.

These writers had all lived through the evictions. In their books, they want to pass on their memories, both of the evictions and of happier times. As the Canadian author of girls’ stories, Lucy Montgomery[9] has said – “Nothing is ever really lost to us as long as we remember it.” They are not trying to score political points but to focus on their lived experiences – their childhood, the warmth and comfort of family life, the eccentricities of relatives, neighbours, friends and skollies. The poverty that accompanied their lives is sanitised, and normalised, just part of their lives. When Jews appear as part of daily life, they emerge as individuals, not stereotypes.

Gloria Kube, Linda Fortune and Hettie Adams each put down for the future the memories they have not lost and look back with nostalgia at their childhoods and how their lives have changed. Kube’s book was published in 1988 twenty years after the removals, Fortune and Adams’ books appeared in 1996, thirty years afterwards – but in each book, the pain is still present.

So how do these women remember Jews when they appear in their reminiscences?

A. As fellow victims of the Group Areas Act

Hettie Adams remembered Mrs Ofsowitz: “She spoke and acted just like one of us, she wore takkies and long dirty dresses and could she swear – she too had to get out. And she was white; she cried so much.”[10]

Linda Fortune remembered Mr Leonard, a very kind old man, who was a wizard with a soldering iron and whose speciality was repairing primus stoves. He frequently did not charge or asked them to send him some vegetables or repair his shoes instead.

“In the end most of the people replaced their primus stoves with gas cookers, because there was no longer anybody to repair them because Mr Leonard and his wife had received a visit from the Group Areas and asked to produce their identity documents. When it was discovered that he was in fact a German immigrant and his wife a white Boer lady, they were told that they could no longer stay where they were.

‘We have no intention of leaving District Six as my wife and I have been living here in this house in Clyde Street ever since the second World War’ he told the official. ” I love District Six and I and my wife have come to respect and love the people around us. We are part of the community.”

“The man from the Group Areas told him that he was only doing his job and he was there to see that the government orders were carried out.

“Why don’t you go back to Germany?” the official asked.

”Why would I go back there? When I was there all I thought about was to get out of the country because of what happened while I was there, all that persecution under Hitler. Now I see you want to do the same thing here with your damned forced removals. All the time my wife and I have lived in Clyde Street, we have been happy and contented.”

The official only said, “if you do not move out within the given notice period of three months, we will come and move you personally.

“Mr Alex”, old Mr Leonard said to dad, “My wife and I are too old to put up a fight... So I asked the official if we could be allocated a house out on the Cape Flats so that we can still be amongst the people of District Six. The man told me that number one, I am White and so is my wife, and number two, there is no guarantee that the people from District Six are all going to the same area. They will be moved to places like Manenberg, Bonteheuwel, Netreg, Lavender Hill, Retreat, Steenberg, Hanover Park and Belhar. Now, Mr Alex, I never heard half of those names of the places he mentioned, I might as well be dead.”

“To calm him down, Dad took out a bottle of Old Brown Sherry. Mr. Leonard left our house when the bottle was empty. A few days later Mr Leonard came back to our house to inform my dad that he and his wife had decided to rent a flat in Green Point. Every Saturday Mr Leonard and his wife came back to visit their friends in District Six. They never went home empty handed.”^[11]



**Morris Mazel and Mogamat Benjamin ‘The Jews of District Six;
Another time another place’, South African Jewish Museum**

Although District Six was zoned for whites, neither Mrs Ovsowitz (? Mofsowitz?) nor the Leonards were allowed to stay there – possibly because of slum clearance and the bulldozers. As the second generation gained the educational qualifications their parents’ sacrifices had made possible, they moved out of District Six, first up the road to Maynard Street, Gardens, Vredehoek and Devils Peak and then to the suburbs. But by the 1960s there were still a few elderly Jews, like Katzen, living in District Six who were affected by the Group Areas removals. These are Jews as fellow victims.

B. As landlords

Hettie Adams writes ‘Our house belonged to whites, Jews, there was a lot of Jews, and when I was older I used to go and pay the rent once a month. I had to walk to Castle Bridge and just where it turns off, that was where there was an office.’^[12]

Gloria Kube recalled, “We paid rent to Dr Barrett, a Jewish doctor in the building, number 67 Loader Street. We were six in one room, eventually they renovated the building and we moved to a much bigger room in front.”^[13]

Linda Fortune^[14] was more negative. “Some people in District Six owned their houses but I knew that most of the property belonged to Jewish landlords who did not want to sell their property to coloured people. Often they were not even prepared to talk to their tenants, let alone come to have a look at the place! And if the landlords did get around to doing any kind of renovation the rent went up. So the properties were left to deteriorate more and more, giving the government more and more of an excuse to move out the people.”

She feels that Jews were partly to blame for their removal because they did not spend money on repairs. Her hostility might be a more accurate indication of attitudes. Linda, an education officer at the District Six Museum wrote her book herself. Hettie and Gloria were in domestic service and their memories had been filtered through the pens of their white employers, the Jewish, Hermione Suttner (who Hettie refers to as Madam) and Ruby who interviews Gloria.

C. As shopkeepers

Hettie Adams identified shopkeepers as Jewish, Portuguese or Indian but they also saw them as neighbours, went to their houses and ran errands for them and knew something about the Jewish shopkeepers and their religious traditions. This is an indication of shared communication and interest in each other: “The Gordins had the Golden Bakery. It was so called because old man Gordin who was from Poland first went to settle in America. He was only there a few days when he heard about gold in South Africa so he caught the ship; he landed in Cape Town and never went on to the Transvaal to look for gold. He made bread instead. His wife could not speak English, only Yiddish and even though she could not write her name, she was at the till of their bakery. They lived in Hanover Street, but when their house got too full with their children, two sons rented rooms near us. One son became a surgeon, Often I had to take for Auntie Titus her unbaked bread to put in the Gordin’s oven when their own bread was finished. They charged two pennies for big loaf and a half a penny for a small loaf. There were bright pink and yellow cupcakes, very tempting on the shelves at the bakery, so we sometimes ran with our baked bread when it was finished and instead of paying for the baking, we ran out the back door and came back into the shop and bought a cookie. I think the Gordins knew but they never said anything.’ [15]

“Other times I was sent to Mrs Blecher to buy portions of chicken. We also got eggs from her. We improvised songs about Mrs. Kaplan and Mrs. Gordin.[16] Once Lizzie and I took chickens to be slaughtered for the Gordins, It was the end of the Sabbath and the Jewish people wanted chickens for their Sunday lunch. There was a yard next to the house and in the yard two big drums filled with cement ... a plank was across them and on the plank big nails. Mr Shapiro would take the chicken, tie the feet together, hold the wings then quickly cut the chicken’s throat and let the blood drip out. The light from their dining room shone through the window and onto the chickens and that yard and there were feathers everywhere, and all the people waiting for their fowl to be koshered. If I could paint, I would paint that picture of the Saturday night at the slaughterer with all the mess, the blood and the feathers and then they would give us a tickey if we would hose down the yard. I often think: The Shapiro family’s son could study and became a doctor just from them killing chickens.[17]

“There were two bioscopes. I like the National bioscope better than the one Mrs Kaplan had. Hers was only a twopenny bioscope but we sat on long benches and she pushed us up with a long stick, prodding us closer and close together, we were so squashed, but we shouted and screamed there too. .. And we shouted as we saw different people come in: ‘There goes the baker’s son’ and ‘There goes the chicken woman’s daughter’ – they were Jews.”

Gloria Kube also identified the shop owners as being Jewish. Their house doctor was a Jewish doctor, Dr Cedrics. The man who ran the dairy was Jewish. So was the butcher.

“The man was short with a *lekker bleskop*[18]. A short guy. Also a Jewish guy. At the time, all the Jews had the shops. He used to sell milk, butter, cheese. I can remember his wife was also there in the dairy. She was a beautiful woman, short.

“In the morning before I go to school, I had to go to the butcher. He was a Jewish butcher so he was open at that time. And I use to go and buy bone pieces, there was a lot of meat on... I had to put the money down there (6 pence) in the mornings so that in the afternoon when school is out I will know there will be meat for us... Yes he was a good Jewish man, a very good man. He used to help us a lot. There were times when work was slack in the docks and

my father had no work and my mother had no money to pay for the previous week's meat. And we could go back to the butcher and he would supply us with more meat for the following week. Nowadays you can't do that. You don't get anything for nothing. The butcher shop was in Somerset Road next to the fisheries and then a café, Mr Berman's café. And we would go into the café to buy toffee and we would buy a tickey or penny's worth of crumbs on a roll and that would be our lunch ...I can also remember there was a Jewish shop on the corner that sold clothes, mainly baby stuff. It was very cheap and we used to buy things there also.[19]"

When she moved to Manenberg for a time, she would go to Hanover Street and do her shopping at the "Rooikop Jood."[20]



Hanover Street, District Six, 1964

Fortune is the only one who, with two exceptions, names shops without labeling them as being owned by Jews.[21] One reference is negative "this one old Jewish shoe shop close to the Star bioscope whose owner never changed his shoe display in the window. With time, some of the leather faded in colour, but nothing else ever changed."

The other reference is to their favourite shop, which was also run by the "Rooikop Jood". "The tall good-looking shopkeeper with his fiery head of hair and his assistants knew all their customers by name. They knew all the children's parents. They also knew what brand of item to give to which child as some families bought only certain brands of food. The Rooikop Jood was a wizard at adding up. Even when they were later used all over the place, he never got a calculator. On the counter, there were always large sheets of brown or white paper. He would tear off a piece and scribble our prices down, and add them up in no time. He never made a mistake. After you paid for your goods, he would hand you your change together with the slip. Once home, we would first check our items and then do our own addition. It would take a lot longer and eventually we would be satisfied that the Rooikop Jood was right. The Rooikop Jood was also famous for his *snoekmoorties*." [22]

Her lack of labelling shops as being Jewish owned might be deliberate. Even the reference to the Rooikop Jood has a sting in it- although his calculations were always correct they did not trust him and always checked the bill when they returned home. Their friend Mr Leonard has also been deracinated. Nowhere does she hint that he is Jewish although his comments appears to confirm this: "Why would I go back (to Germany)? When I was there all I thought

about was to get out of the country because of what happened while I was there, all that persecution under Hitler.”

D As friends and neighbours

Leonard the primus man who enjoyed old Brown Sherry, They ran errands for the Gordins, the Shapiros and their back yard filled with blood and feathers, they knew about Jewish customs.

Esther Wilkin grew up in District Six, until her family later moved a few blocks up the road to the more prestigious Maynard Street. In the 1980s she used to address members of the Cape Jewish Seniors Association on her memories, her notes subsequently being donated to the University of Cape Town.[23]



Fish cart and fish horn

“Fixed in my memory are the noises. There was the noise of vendors hawking their goods on the top of their voices. Buy buy cheap, you need this or that, in different accents, the main language being Yiddish. From the coloured vendors came a mixture of Afrikaans and English. The cry of the knife and scissors sharpeners, the cry of the iceman, the vegetable cart, *aartappels*, *drywe*, *piesangs*, the blowing of the fish horn, the noise of the housewives as they gathered around the fish cart, not only to buy fish, but to exchange gossip. Many a *shidduch* was arranged around the fish cart. I know of three cases of Jews marrying “coloured” women and in two of the cases the women became Jewish and their children were part of the Jewish community. I went to school with one. Jews were more civil to the “coloureds” of District Six than the English or Afrikaans as the immigrants had not forgotten their persecution in Russia

Four subjects do not a research project make, nor can one draw valid statistical conclusions. But unlike the next generation, these writers all knew that Jews lived and worked in District

Six because they shared the same time and place. For them it was “not ancient long-forgotten history”.

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NOTES

- [1] Interview with Esther Wilkin, in Shain, Milton (Convenor), *The Jews of District Six; Another time another place*. Exhibition opened at the SA Jewish Museum, 11 November 2012, Jewish Publications South Africa, Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town in association with the South African Jewish Museum, 2012, 81
- [2] <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=7&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKewjBq4Ci-rXmAhU0pnEKHe2oBoIQFjAGegQIBRAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sahistory.org.za%2Farticle%2Fdistrict-six-declared-white-area&usg=AOvVaw1uPIM13KBu0uXo42r8qn0s>
- [3] Barnett, Naomi, *The planned destruction of District Six in 1940*. in Van Heyningen, Elizabeth, *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, vol 7, , Cape Town History project, UCT Press, 1994, 189
- [4] Schrire, Gwynne, interview with Esther Wilkin 16.2.1996
- [5] Schrire, Gwynne, *Jewish Life in District Six before World War 1: A Memoir*, in *Jewish Affairs* 63:2, Rosh Hashanah, 2008
- [6] Lewin, Hugh, *Stones against the Mirror: Friendship in the time of the South African Struggle*, Umuzi, Cape Town, 2011, 144
- [7] Rive, Richard, *'Buckingham Palace', District Six*, David Philip, Johannesburg, 1986, 3, 149-153, 175- 186.
- [8] Rive, Richard, op cit, 152
- [9] L.M. Montgomery, *The Story Girl*
- [10] Adams, Hettie, 56
- [11] Fortune, Linda, 105-111
- [12] Adams, Hettie and Hermione Suttner, *William Street, District Six*, Chameleon press, Diep River, 1988, 7
- [13] Kube, Gloria and Ruby Hill, *Living in Loader Street: Reminiscences of growing up and life in Loader Street before the forced group removals of July 1966*, Rue Publications, Howard place, 1996, 9-10
- [14] Fortune, Linda, *The House in Tyne Street: Childhood Memories of District Six*, Kwela, Cape Town 1996, 77
- [15] Adams, Hettie, op cit 27
- [16] Adams, Hattie, op cit, 28
- [17] Adams, Hettie, op cit, 35
- [18] Bald head
- [19] Kube, Gloria, op cit, 38-40
- [20] Kube, Gloria, op cit, 34
- [21] Like the toy tea set from Mr Goldman's shop at the top of Hanover Street, Goodman's shop in the Sweeteries Building which sold the best peanuts, Waynik's famous for their school uniforms, Bank' hiring supply shop, Shrand's shoe shop Edworks, the Rose & Crown bar from where she had to fetch her father. The Bialls, whose daughters were this writer's friends, owned the Rose & Crown.
- [22] Fortune, Linda, op cit, 64-5
- [23] The writer was the social worker and used to invite Esther to address the groups. Her notes were subsequently donated to the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research and are stored in the archives in the Gwynne Schrire folder. BC1503



Soviet history through the eyes of a South African Engineer: The Five Year Plan and Holodomor Famine, 1932-3

Alison Marshall

This is the story of Jerry Berman, who was a close friend of my grandparents, Meyer and Sonia Fortes.[1] As fellow students at the University of Cape Town in the 1920s, they used to go climbing together. They continued to keep in touch, even as each went their separate ways in different parts of the world. Jerry spent several years working as a civil engineer in Soviet Russia, from where he wrote wonderful descriptions of his experiences.

Jerry Berman was born in 1903, in Pikeliai, Lithuania, within what was then the Russian Empire. The youngest in a family of four brothers and one sister, he grew up in extreme poverty. His father Zundel initially immigrated to South Africa some years before Jerry was born, leaving the children in the care of their mother, Mina. Zundel went to join his rather more successful younger brother, Jerry's uncle. Unfortunately for Zundel, it was not easy for him to make his way in South Africa and like many others he had a change of heart and returned home after a few years. However, here he also he struggled to get work, so decided to go back to South Africa. Jerry was born following this brief visit, making him quite a bit younger than his siblings. Mina instilled in her children the importance of study. They were the poorest of the poor, wearing old, patched clothes and often going hungry. Despite this, Mina insisted they study hard and expected them to come top in their classes at the *cheder*, always reminding them of the many rabbis among their ancestors.

While Jerry was still a child, his older brothers Israel, Aaron Zalman and Leivi emigrated from Lithuania. Two joined their father and uncle in South Africa. Israel eventually ran a general store in Tzaneen, while Aaron Zalman established himself as an accountant and later became a City Councillor and senator. Cape Town's AZ Berman Drive is named after him. The third brother, Leivi, settled in America. Finally Jerry, his mother and sister Beile joined the rest of the family in Cape Town. Like many others, they travelled via the Poor Jews' Temporary Shelter in London, and then on a Union Castle mail ship from Southampton, departing on 30 December 1921. He was 17 years old.



Jerry Berman with mother Mina and sister Beile around the time they arrived in South Africa. © Peter Berman, 2021.

In South Africa, Jerry learned fast, taking extra English lessons and school exams before entering the University of Cape Town in 1923. It was here that his friendship with my grandparents developed, as well as his lifelong enjoyment of mountaineering. They would arrange outings to the mountains, sometimes taking a large group and camping. After graduation with a degree in Civil Engineering, Jerry found work on large construction projects, initially in Orange Free State and then in Zululand building a railway. He had a hard time, working in extremely difficult conditions. Twice he caught malaria, ended up briefly in hospital. He was also uncomfortable with the way his African workers were treated and the weather – 24 days of rains at one point – made engineering progress slow. In April 1929, Jerry's mother died. In a letter to my grandfather Meyer, who was by then living in London, he described how devastated he was: "[My] mother's death was undoubtedly the biggest shock I ever got in my whole lifetime." Mina had been the rock in Jerry's life, working, saving and scrimping to make sure the family had enough to eat through the most difficult and chaotic of times. Together they had lived through World War 1, the Russian Revolution, Russian Civil War and the Lithuanian War of Independence. Jerry's grief after Mina's death added to his awareness of the rather empty life he was leading and growing dissatisfaction with his work. His father, to whom he had never been close, also died in that year.

By 1932, Jerry was finding it hard to get his career off the ground. The Great Depression had hit and there were few large-scale building projects offering opportunities to a young civil engineer. He tried his luck in America, with his brother Leivi, but that also did not work out. In America, Britain and throughout Europe, millions were out of work or on the breadline and investment was at rock bottom. Jerry could probably have found work, but it would most likely have been at a lower level or in a different field. His brothers and sister in South Africa were all married and starting their own families. Many of his friends had moved on. Thus did Jerry decide to go back to Russia, which by then was part of the Soviet Union (USSR).

Like many of his peers, including my grandmother Sonia, Jerry had had great hopes at the

time of the Russian Revolution, believing that the USSR would be able to provide a better life for its people. Many of his generation who had immigrated to South Africa as children must have thought longingly about returning to this new version of their birth home. For Jerry, there was another reason: Soviet Russia was the only place in the world where they were building at scale and where they needed civil engineers.

In 1932, the USSR was in the final year of its first Five Year Plan, initiated by Stalin in 1928 with the intention of speedily industrialising the country. Economically, some success had been achieved but, as Jerry was to find out, at enormous human costs. He took a job with Mostotrest, a company formed in 1930 to build roads, bridges and railways and which still exists today as Russia's largest heavy construction company. His first project was in the eastern part of Ukraine, building a bridge at Stanytsia Luhanska. It was then and remains to this day an important strategic crossing of the Severskiy Donets River.[2]



Jerry Berman in his Soviet Engineer uniform.
©Peter Berman 2021.

The engineering challenges for Jerry and his team were significant, exacerbated by the severity of the winter. However, as he soon realised there were more serious problems to deal with. Jerry had arrived in Ukraine at the height of what would now be recognised as a major humanitarian crisis. The ambitious construction targets of the Five Year Plan were accompanied by collectivisation of agriculture. The Bolshevik vision to share land equally, a process begun after the Russian Revolution in 1917, was accelerated from 1930. Land was confiscated not only from the 'parasitic' aristocracy, but also from all the peasants. A new form of organisation, the collective farm (or *kolkhoz*) was decreed. Peasants no longer owned a small portion of land and sold the crops they farmed. Instead, they were part of a much larger unit, run – in theory at least – as a co-operative. A quota of crops had to be met and under the Five Year Plan these rose sharply because of the need to generate foreign currency to pay for the construction programme through exporting grain (the main Ukrainian crop). In the first year of the Plan, grain output was high, so targets were raised. Unfortunately, due to bad weather the following year saw a poor harvest, so a greater proportion of the grain had to be surrendered by the peasants and harsh penalties were imposed on Ukrainian villages if they did not comply. Grain was confiscated by force, meaning that there was not enough left

for the workers to eat. Later the government even took the grain that would have been used for seeds. The result was that the harvest failed again the following year, leading to an artificial famine and millions of deaths. This famine is now known as the Holodomor, from the Ukrainian word for hunger. What Jerry witnessed were the direct consequences of the Holodomor. Many Ukrainians left their villages to find work and hence Jerry's team was made up of half-starved, unskilled workers from the rural hinterland.

Jerry wrote vivid descriptions of what he saw. To avoid writing the same news in several letters, he would write to his older brother Israel, who ran a general store in Tzaneen in the Northern Transvaal. Israel would laboriously re-type Jerry's letters onto old-fashioned foolscap paper, making several carbon copies, which he then sent out to Jerry's other siblings and some of his friends. My grandparents, then living in London, would receive a package of letters, carefully and closely typed on wafer thin paper to reduce airmail costs. Each package was generally accompanied by a long cover letter from Israel, sharing his desperate concerns for Jerry's wellbeing and exhorting them to help persuade him to return. Usually there was a kind note at the end, saying that he was sending a box of grapes. The grapes must have been most welcome in cold, rainy London, where such exotic fruits were then rare and expensive.

Jerry wrote horrifying descriptions of conditions in Ukraine: *"At the moment the food shortage in Russia must be very acute, for only very high specialists get bread rations (1 lb) for members of their households. That means that a blacksmith, his wife and three children will get only 800 g a day for the blacksmith only and the whole family will survive on his ration. That that is really physically almost impossible, I need not tell you. So the hardships are enormous. Members of the Kolkhoz had had no flour or bread given to them for two or three months, because they have not carried out their plan of food tax. They live on sour cucumbers, cabbage pickled and a little potatoes. Meat fetches today fabulous prices, perhaps 1 kg, the 'money' wages of ten days earnings for a fairly qualified workman."* Bread had become the most valued currency. Cash was of no use, as there was nowhere to buy food – although Jerry, as a foreigner, was privileged to be able to use the *torgsin* (foreign currency store). He was able to buy sugar, jam, tea and even white bread there, making him feel bad that he was so much better treated. As he ruefully observed, *"On such semi-alive men is being built successfully [?] the Five Years Plan!"*

As a manager, Jerry was compelled to spend a fair bit of his time procuring rations for his men. He had to negotiate and argue with the management, controlled by the local cell of the Communist Party. To make a bad situation worse, there was a great deal of bureaucracy surrounding the issue of food. Each man was issued with a bread card or *zhiton*, which he could exchange for bread: *"Oh, dear Israel! I returned back last night, late at midnight, frozen to death, two and a half hours on a wintry road, snow and wind. I have with me today, 40 cards...A great achievement – the right to issue 40 cards i.e. 40 x 400 grams bread to my men daily. On this I left the works for one and a half days, I fought desperately, felt like giving up and returning to you."*

Jerry recognised the futility of treating workers so badly and its negative impact on the building project. As a manager, it was useless to berate his labourers when they were too weak to work properly: *"I saw ... sleeping standing with his cleaning rod in his hand, pale as death, with bones sticking out into eternity! What terrible eyes! The boiler was about to go bust. There was no water in the boiler and a calamity of first magnitude was imminent! What can you do? Can you take anything away from him? Can you fine him? Have you given him and are you giving him anything that you can take away from him when he defaults?"*

Having grown up in another part of this vast empire, Jerry understood the culture and the language. However, he chose to keep this quiet, not wanting to lose the privilege of foreign status: *“Not a soul knows that I am Russian born and that I left in 1921. They look askance at the stranger in their midst, a South African native freezing in -30C in the Ukraine. A stranger freezing and eating black bread and wearing new clothes, unlike theirs, clean, whole, new and tidy!!!”* One thing, though, struck him as a positive change from his childhood, where he had lived under the Tsarist laws that constrained and discriminated against Jews. He wrote to his sister, *“Beile, there is no antisemitism in Russia. Absolutely none. I know it, for they take me as an Englishman and I hear how they refer to Jews. Do you know that even if a Jew is weak at his work, they will not throw him out for fear of insulting him – the man that suffered so much from the Czar. And the same about the Gruzins [Georgians], Armenians etc....!”*

Jerry lived an unsettled life at Stanitsia Luhanska. He was given short term visas, for four to six months at a time, and never knew if he would be staying longer or returning home. He found the many challenges very difficult to deal with – the bitter cold, the bureaucracy, the lack of materials and skilled labour – but also found his position as manager of starved, mistreated people very hard. His family in South Africa were desperately worried about him, often not hearing from him for several weeks at a time. Israel wrote *“Look here, Jerry, let us no more talk in ‘parables’, ‘aphorisms’ and ‘symbols’...I am down at hard facts, at tin tacks of your own health...I repeat in cold print [the contents of my cable] ...i.e. THE FAMILY UNANIMOUSLY INSIST ON YOUR RETURNING TO LONDON.”*

However, Jerry did not return. Instead, he asked for and was eventually given a transfer to another post in Nizhni-Novgorod, Siberia. Not many people would be pleased to be sent to Siberia. It shows how terrible conditions were during the Ukrainian famine that he should have found life so much easier there.



**Jerry (far right, front) pictured with his USSR work colleagues.
©Peter Berman 2021.**

In Nizhni Novgorod, Jerry was responsible as ‘First Assistant’ to the project chief, engaged on building a huge bridge across the Volga – *“the entire bridge is just a little less than one mile in length”*. The labour force was made up of prisoners and soldiers, who – as before – were given very poor food. However, the food provided to specialists, many of whom were foreigners, was much better than in Ukraine. For Jerry, there was another big advantage in

that he only had to deal with technical matters, with no responsibility for the food supply for his workers. It was clear from his letters that he found the work stimulating and that he was being given excellent opportunities to develop and apply his engineering knowledge.

Jerry returned to South Africa in 1935, having had enough of witnessing systematic, poor treatment of workers in the Soviet Union. He spent the Second World War supervising the building of bridges (including South Africa's first curved bridge across Kaaiman's River between George and the Wilderness) and roads. His workers were Italian prisoners of war, with whom he got on very well. Later he was promoted to Chief Engineer in the Roads Department in Bloemfontein, where he stayed until his retirement in the late 1960s. He was married in 1940 and had one son, born in 1947. After his wife, Gwen, died in 1976 he returned to Cape Town, where he later died in 1979, aged 76.

My grandparents appear to have lost touch with Jerry after the 1930s. Nevertheless, alongside other letters, laundry bills, photos and other paraphernalia, they kept his letters. These were passed on to my mother after Meyer's death in 1983. Progress has since been made to archive and secure their historical importance, leading to various academic collaborations and plans for an exhibition at the National Museum of the Holodomor in Kyiv, Ukraine.

Jerry Berman's letters are currently on display at the National Holodomor Museum, Kyiv, Ukraine – see example below. (<https://holodomormuseum.org.ua/en/>). The Museum is open to the general public and the exhibition will run at least until the end of 2021.



Alison Marshall is a writer and researcher, with interests in migration and travel. Her early career was in product and software development, following a PhD in solid state physics from the University of Cambridge. She is currently Professor of Innovation at Cumbria University and is collaborating with the National Museum of the Holodomor in Ukraine and a number of UK academics. She is the author of Testimonies of Horror: The Ukrainian Famine of 1932-33, Medium, 2020

NOTES

[1] I thank Pete and Mark Berman for generously providing information and photographs about Jerry and his family. Thanks also to Hilary Fortes, Gwynne Robins, Keith Engers and Sam Schrire, who assisted me in finding them.

[2] This bridge was destroyed in the Second World War and thereafter twice rebuilt. It currently provides the main checkpoint between the Donbas conflict zone of Luhansk and the rest of Ukraine.



Will my people — the Jews of Libya — ever get justice?

David Gerbi

The history of Libya's Jews stretches back to the 3rd Century BCE, through the 1492 Jewish expulsion from Spain and well into to the 20th Century. My community saw Romans, Ottomans, and Italians come and go. For hundreds of years, we coexisted peacefully with Libyan Muslims, despite tensions wrought by political upheaval. As recently as 1931, Libya's Jewish community of about 24 500 people represented 4 percent of the country's population. Subsequent wars and persecutions, however, decimated the community.

The trouble began in 1938, when a Nazi-inspired racial law against Jews led to heightened persecution. Hundreds of Libyan Jews were killed in riots during the decade that followed. By 1949, many Jews had been forced to leave after Libyans rioted again in reaction to the establishment of Israel. The remainder of the Jewish community, including my family, were forced to flee from Libya to Italy after the Six Day War of 5 June 1967 between Israel and its Arab neighbours.

In Libya, my generation grew up under the monarchy of King Idris, who after the pogrom of 5 June 1967 told us that he could no longer guarantee our safety as a Jewish minority and then helped us escape from Libya. The country had become extremely hostile to Jews, largely thanks to the propaganda of the nationalist Nasserite movement in Egypt. After the 1967 war, the Egyptian radio incited hatred against Jews and encouraged people to eliminate them. It was thus that the enraged mass congregated in the streets to rampage against Jews holed up in the dark in their houses and in utmost silence. They started burning houses and shops and killing many Jewish families.

I remember as a child when Jewish shops and houses were burned in front of my house. An angry crowd gathered in the streets screaming and proclaiming their chilling intentions with a hand gesture to the throat, shouting "*Uh Uh al Jehud, Edbah al Jehud*" (slaughter the Jews, death to the Jews). In silence, in that hot summer, we remained hidden, inside our houses with the windows and shutters completely closed, suffocating from the heat and petrified with fear.



The Gerbi family. The author is standing second from left

The Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee), the largest Jewish humanitarian organization in the world and the HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) assisted us in leaving the country and helped us recuperate by providing us with a one week stay in a hotel in Rome. In Italy we received UNHCR refugee certificates. In Israel, Jews were welcomed not as refugees but as new immigrants and received Israeli citizenship and benefits, both for study and for work.

By 1969, with Muamar Qaddafi in power, only about 100 Jews remained in Libya. At that time, Qaddafi confiscated the assets and possessions of all Libyan Jews, including those who had left in 1967 and earlier, and declared that Jews could not return or renew their passports. Meanwhile, my family and members of my community built a new life in Rome. In 2002, I was granted permission as a relative and as a psychologist to return in 2002 to visit my elderly aunt, Rina Debach, in a Tripoli hospice. We had thought that she was dead. In exchange of allowing my aunt to leave Libya and join the family in Rome, I first had to help Libya to normalize relations with the US through the support of the late chief rabbi of Rome Elio Toaff, Elie Wiesel and the Jewish lobby in Washington. After that three-month trip (entirely at my expense), I reached the office of the late congressman Tom Lantos, who initiated the normalization process. After more than a year of patient work to build peace between the US and Libya my aunt, after being held as a virtual hostage, was finally permitted to leave in 2003. She joined our family in Rome, where she died just 40 days later and was taken to Israel for burial. She could not be laid to rest in her birthplace, Tripoli, because the Jewish cemetery there had been destroyed by the Qaddafi regime. Today, there are buildings and a highway in place of the 2000 year-old Jewish cemetery where my relatives and ancestors are buried. She was the last Jewish person to leave Libya, and her departure marked the end of more than two millennia of continuous Jewish presence there.



The former Gerbi residence, Tripoli

While not one Jew lives in Libya today, the original Diaspora population of 38 000 has grown to about 200 000 people largely residing in Israel and Italy. Since my visit in 2002, I have made several further trips to Libya as part of reconstruction and reconciliation efforts on behalf of Libyan Jewry, acting as a representative for the World Organization of Libyan Jews (WOLJ). In 2007, I was invited back by the Libyan government as a gesture of gratitude because of my help in the normalization of Libyan-US relations. All I asked in exchange was for the restoration of Jewish sites of importance and the building of a memorial. I began the process of obtaining authorization to restore Tripoli's Dar Bishi Synagogue, which dates from the late 1920s but has deteriorated badly over time. Unfortunately, after a positive start and a constructive atmosphere, the Qaddafi regime ultimately made my work impossible: I was abruptly detained, interrogated and, without any reason or explanation, dispossessed of all my belongings and deported from Tripoli to Malta.

In June 2009, I met Qaddafi when he visited Rome and invited the Libyan Jewish community to meet with him. Attending in my traditional Libyan robe, I pressed him to give us permission to restore the Dar Bishi Synagogue and erect a memorial for all the Jews who are buried in Libya, in particular Tripoli and Benghazi, where the Jewish cemeteries have been wantonly desecrated. In 2011, I went to Benghazi with Italian government representatives to help people who were traumatized by the old regime and by the Arab Spring. During my last two trips to Libya during the spring and summer of 2011, I volunteered at the Benghazi Psychiatric Hospital, where I had trained to treat patients with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). After several months, I also went to the mountains northwest of Tripoli, working on PTSD among the Berber community. Like most Libyans, their suffering resulted not only from the current conflict, but from 42 years of calamities caused by the dictatorship. What they desperately needed was to overcome their fears and restore hope for a better life. I wrongly thought that Libya's revolution would offer a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for real democracy and respect of freedom of religion and restore the Jewish community into my

homeland's social fabric. However, I was shocked to be faced by a mob shouting antisemitic slogans and perpetuating the hateful sentiments that Muammar al-Qaddafi encouraged. That mob wanted to seize and kill me and thwarted my efforts to restore the Dar Bishi Synagogue. After Tripoli was liberated, I once again tried cleaning up the synagogue. Even though I had received permission from the National Transitional Council (NTC) and the local government to undertake this, a mob gathered, shouting that "there is no place for Jews in Libya" and carrying signs in both Arabic and Hebrew to make sure, I suppose, that I got the message. Once again, I had to leave.



The former Dar Bishi synagogue, Tripoli

Despite all these challenges, I still nurture hope that a stable Libya that affirms freedom, justice and the rule of law, protects freedom of religion for all its people and honours its Jewish heritage will come about. I will continue to do what I can so that the Jewish presence in Libya is not forgotten and Jews, as well as all minorities, can reclaim their rightful place in the country. I know that this will take time. Tripoli's new leadership faces enormous challenges, such as building the essential elements of government and civil life and bridging ethnic and regional divides. But part of this effort must include preserving and protecting Libya's few remaining Jewish heritage sites.

Hope often needs help. The international community must also act; not only in helping Libya's people achieve freedom, but also by trying to steer the new regime toward a path of justice and reconciliation with Libyan Jews. It can send a message to the Government of National Accord and other Libyan leaders that they can demonstrate their seriousness about democracy and human rights by breaking with Libya's past and welcoming back Jews and other minorities. The US should thus focus not only on economic and political development, but also on human rights. As we so often have seen, the way countries treat their minorities signals how they will behave toward their neighbours and the world at large.

History teaches how the Arab countries, enraged at the failure to prevent the United Nations Partition Plan on 29 November 1947 and the subsequent creation of the State of Israel, declared war not only on the new Jewish state, but also against the peaceful and thriving

Jewish communities that had lived among them for over two millennia. Thus were thousands of years of Jewish history and culture erased.

The UN must formally recognize Jewish refugees from Arab countries. Palestinian refugees must obviously also be helped, but there is an imbalance between the attention paid to them and to Jewish refugees. Over the past seventy years, the whole world has heard about the Palestinians. Member states of the UN have consistently cared about and stood up for them, but have done virtually nothing for us. A pall of silence and denial has been drawn over our suffering.

After centuries of relatively peaceful coexistence, communities in Syria, Libya, Algeria, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Iraq, Iran and elsewhere have been all but obliterated. Unfortunately, we are the forgotten refugees. Our stories are not heard in the European Union meetings nor do we ever see, exhibited in the corridors of the United Nations, photographic exhibitions commemorating those communities. Among the thousands of resolutions discussed and adopted by the UN since its formation seventy years ago, none addresses our communities, our families, our dear ancestors or the theft of our assets.

I remember a Libya of rich and diverse cultures, of different ceremonial rituals, of successes, prosperity and flowering of customs, sounds, tastes and smells. I have childhood memories of the three monotheistic religions that once lived in peace. We only went to school four days a week because Friday was a day of rest for Muslims, Saturday for Jews and Sunday for Christians. The displaced members of our Libyan community have successfully resettled in Italy and elsewhere and gotten on with their lives, without languishing in squalid camps plotting revenge. Today located in various areas of Rome, there are seven synagogues observing the Sephardic rite of the Jews of Libya that preserve and pass on Libyan traditions. In Israel there are more than eighty Libyan synagogues. In both countries, we have kosher restaurants where Libyan foods may be enjoyed and food stores where one can find the spices and food typical of the Jews of Libya.

I continue to devote myself to the search for justice, and to the fight for respect for human rights. My commitment is also to raise memorials in Tripoli, Benghazi, Homs, Yefren and Jado in honour of their vanished Jewish communities, to restore the four cemeteries and the three synagogues, with the hope that one day the miracle of peace and stability will occur so that we can freely visit the place of our roots. A peaceful, stable Libya is most likely to be realized if it is pluralistic, open, and tolerant. Libya must become a free, just, and democratic country, grounded in the rule of law, in which all Libya's minorities — including those forced to flee — are welcomed back into the Libyan family. We can make a difference at this critical juncture, before the cement dries, by making a mark for democracy, human rights, and religious pluralism, so that Libya becomes a model for reconciliation and tolerance.

Dr David Gerbi is a Jungian psychologist, psychotherapist, analyst and a writer. For many years he has acted as the representative of the World Organization of Libyan Jews. This article first appeared in the Italian Jewish community newspaper Pagine Ebraiche in January 2021, and is published here in the author's translation.



Pioneer Women in Mandate Times

Glenda Woolf

During Mandate times, many young women immigrated to Israel from Russia, hoping both to work the land and establish a socialist lifestyle. The words of a few of these women are recorded in the book *The Plough Woman*, edited by Rachel Katznelson Shazar. The book was first written in Hebrew and published in Israel in 1928. A Yiddish translation followed and was published in America while the English version, translated by Maurice Samuel, appeared under the title *The Plough Woman* in 1932. The Herzl Press, in 1975, published a second edition from which the following excerpts are taken.

Fifty women wrote of their experience in leaving home and settling in a new country with a desire to cultivate the land. Some identified themselves only their initials while others used their full names. A few subsequently became famous. They included Deborah Dayan, Golda Meyer, and Rachel Janaith, who became the wife of Izchak ben Zvi, the second President of the State of Israel.

The long-ago words of three of these brave women pioneers are presented here.

Miriam Schlimowitz of Ain Charod, arrived in Palestine at the beginning of the Mandate years. Of the role of the government she is silent. Of the role of women in the new settlements she has much to say:

We had been brought up in and by the Russian revolutionwe believed that the wall that divided man's work from women had fallen in one of the forever.....Soon after my arrival I went to work in one of the kvutzoth of the Galilee. I was bitterly disappointed when I perceived how small was the role women played.Would it therefore not be better for me to return to my earlier work and be a teacher again?..... I was offered the job of teacher in a large kvutzah which had a school. On the way.....I made a detour to the farm of women workers at Nachlat Yehuda. The work the women did there made a tremendous impression on me. Here were women carrying on without help, on their own initiative and responsibility and doing as well as the men. I made up my mind to try once more for land work.

Looking back it appears she must have been a talented teacher since she was accepted but to work on the land half a day on condition that she taught the women Hebrew in the evening. Yet she writes very little about teaching, but much of her work on the land. The lack of sufficient water caused hardship. They demanded and received a cistern. After much negotiation with the National Fund they managed to acquire more land. Following more negotiation they received a tractor.....and only then.... *“did we see the land ploughedWe began at last to carry out the complete plans of the settlement”* (pp159-162).



Children of Ain Charod on an outing, 1930s

Here are the words of Sarah, of Chavurath HaPoalath near Haifa, at the time of the 1929 Arab riots:

It was on Friday evening August 23rd 1929 that the comrades came back from the Nesher cement factory outside Haifa to guard the settlement.....our watchman was called to Haifa to the workers' council. They told him we would have to leave our place because it was rumored that the riots were going to spread from Jerusalem to the entire country.....After a long conference we decided not to leave the place, for we knew, that once it was abandoned it would be completely destroyed.....

Sunday morning...again the demand from Haifa that we abandon the position.....At five o'clock two automobiles come from the Nesher, and now the men speak determinedly, "The place has to be abandoned."

It was a fearful night we passed in Haifa.....As soon as it was light we got into the first automobile we could command.....When we saw the watchman standing at the door of the dining-room a load fell from our hearts.....

At eight in the morning we observed a crowd of Arab men and women, numbering between thirty and forty approaching us. They were armed with clubs.....we saw the Arab women trying to pull the men away from the gate.....Before long three Arab automobiles arrived. One of them turned to the Arab village, the other went to Haifa, and the third stopped with the crowd.

The watchman exclaimed, "I'm going out of here! I'll find my way to Nesher and have them send an automobile"He saddled his horse and set out at a gallop.....

Twenty minutes of horror passed. We locked ourselves in the dining room, the only building with stone walls, and waited there, pale and helpless.

.....we heard the shrill liberating whistle —the comrades of Nesher had arrived in an automobile.....the road passed by the Sheik's house.and the Sheik sat on a white horse delivering an address.

..a crowd of young people had detached itself, and was waiting for our car, and as we flew by a hail of stones came crashing round the automobile.

.....At noon the next day, a column of smoke rises from the corner of the horizon.....the hayrick blazes and we begin to hope that will be the sum total of the damage.....

Early in the morning we asked the four Englishmen that had been sent to defend the Nesher to take us over to the farm...

Nothing at all is left of the barracks....The store room is empty.....fragments of the smashed incubator lie scattered on the ground

We look at the tree nursery. Everything is green and fresh and undisturbed. We breathe once more. The ruffians did not understand, that for us, the nursery means everything.....

...we must leave ...sitting in the automobile we begin to make plans for getting back the same day in order to water the young trees (pp130-4)

On this hopeful note the entry ends.

Looking back we can only wonder at the bravery and commitment of these women. The Arabs from the village that attacked them are still in their homes not far away. The British do not allow the Jews to have arms. Danger remains, though the British have for the moment subdued the worst rioting.

The life is hard, with few creature comforts. Yet they are elated by the discovery that the nursery is untouched. They seem to concentrate on that, rather than the destruction of their housing and their implements.

The riots were the result of false rumors, sent out by the Mufti that Jews were attacking the Wakf. Today social media is made use of rather than automobiles to create false narratives and instigate destruction.

Rebecca Broisman wrote of the founding of the *chavurah* of Petach Tikvah:

We managed to get three old tents and set them up in the narrow lot opposite the workers club in Petach Tikvah – much to the astonishment of passers-by. The morning after we had set up the tents we went out to look for work. Meanwhile a grocer promised us food on credit until the first wages came in. We were five in number at the outset and two weeks later our number swelled by an additional seven.Winter was approaching and the doubts grew.....would we be able to build a barracks before the rains came?..... What we longed for was a piece of land of our own.....After much effort the Agricultural office of the Federation of Labour obtained a piece of land for us...

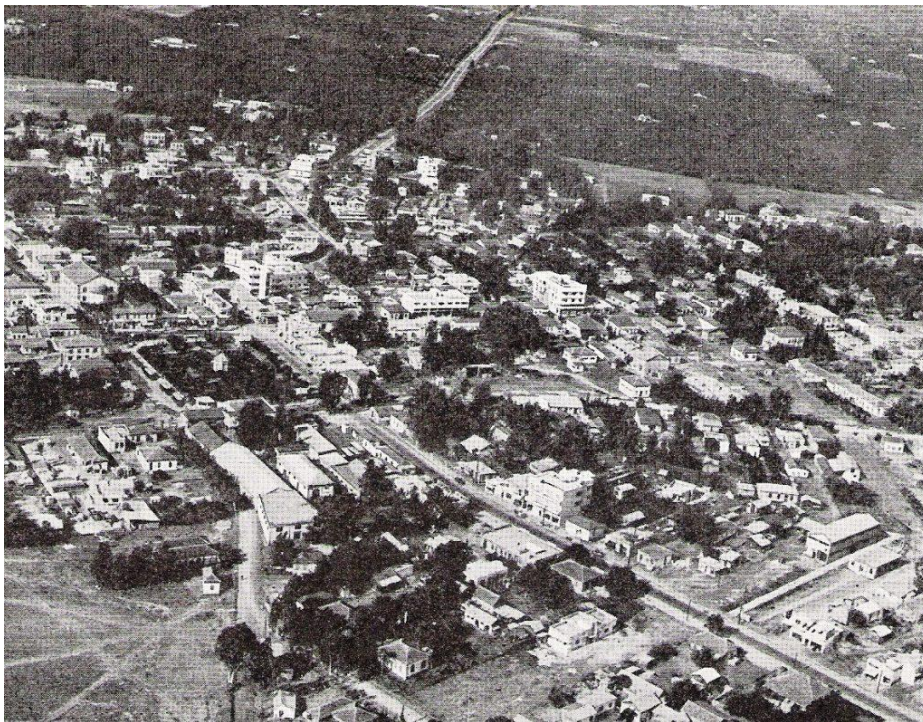
They were still living in tents when....

On the morning of the first rain we broke the ground for our vegetable garden.....The struggle for work was long and cruel...Evenings the girls came home from the work which it had been so difficult to find. The table was narrow, the food meagre, but the conversation was eager and comradely.....every day a new girl came to join the chavurah.

Towards the end of the rainy season the received some barracks which housed the kitchen and dining room as well as newly hatched chicks, while they continued to sleep in tents. Nevertheless...*The first year passed and we could say with calm certainty that we had been successful and founded a new economic unit of workers.* (pp173-4)

The women's *kvutzoth* were a short lived phenomenon. These women later became merged into *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*. However, for the women who arrived in Palestine from Russia, alone, friendless, and with few material possessions, but a burning desire to work the land, these women's *kvutzoth* proved a lifesaver.

Rachel Broisman, who wrote this article, went on to become principal of the Agricultural school run by Moatzet Hapoalot in Petach Tikvah.



Petach Tikvah, circa. 1950s

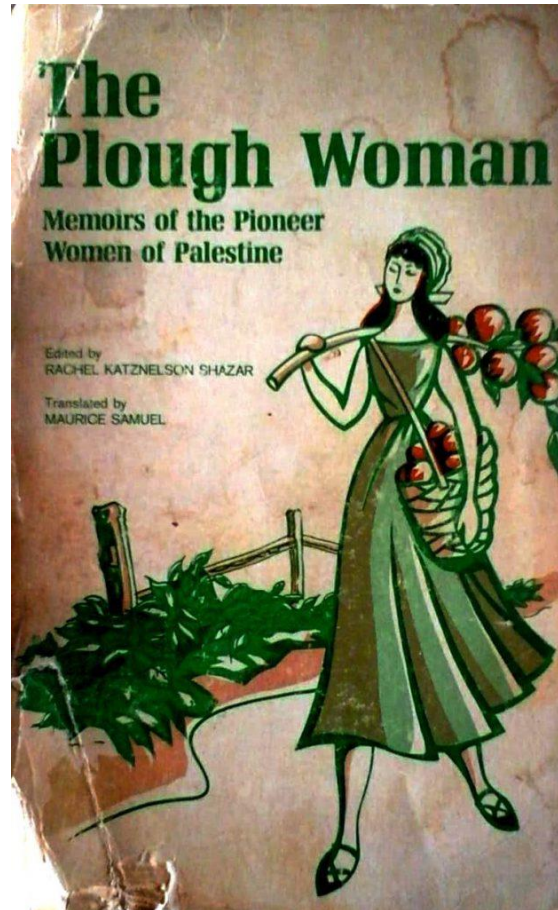
The book covers a vast array of subjects. There is coverage of strikes. There is a strike against PICA, when it reduces the pay of women workers from fifteen to ten piasters a day. (pp121-3) There is a strike in Acre against the appalling conditions in the Nur match factory (pp124-6). In both cases the British police are called and brutally break the strike and throw the women in prison.

There are discussions about childcare and worker's clubs. There is an article by a woman on Moshav Ovdim of Nahalal (pp150-8). A woman who is a builder of houses in Tel Aviv writes of her struggle to be accepted by the men with who she works (pp176-9). Many wrote anonymously and to this day we have no idea of who they were, or what became of them.

The editor of the book *The Plough Woman* was Rachel Shazar, who became the wife of the second President of Israel. She arrived in Palestine in 1912, and during her lifetime played many different roles, from teaching, working the land, assisting in DP camps, travelling

abroad to talk to Pioneer women's organizations, authoring numerous books and assisting her husband in his Presidential duties.

Here we can see the results of her interest in the words of the pioneering women of the Mandate time.



Glenda Woolf, a frequent contributor to Jewish Affairs, is a novelist and essayist whose articles and stories on Jewish themes have appeared in Jewish publications worldwide. Her novels, published under the name Gita Gordon, include: South African Journeys (2002), Flashback (2007), Mystery in the Amazon and Scattered Blossoms (both 2008) and Guest House (2012).



Antisemitic Plant Names: Uprooting the Wandering Jew

Peter Houston

Abstract

Worldwide, anti-Black words have been used to describe flora. As a result of its strongly racist history, there is extreme sensitivity to racial differences in South Africa. The removal of racist plant names is far advanced in South Africa and more appropriate common names have come to the fore. However, the common usage of the plant name “Wandering Jew” is still widespread, despite its historical use in supporting antisemitic stereotypes. This paper explores the Wandering Jew as a plant, Christian myth and antisemitic trope and argues that South Africa follows the recent international trend of adopting alternate plant names.

Introduction

Words are not neutral. They influence and define how we see one another. Words express how we categorise those like us and label those different to us. Unpleasant words remain in use because they assert power with derogatory words being a subtle form of coercion.[1] Words express prejudices – fear or hatred of the Other, for example, with racism, sexism and antisemitism. Not surprisingly, given the power dynamics at play, disproportionately large numbers of pejorative terms abound in contemptuous reference to [historically] disempowered groups.[2]

Worldwide, anti-Black words have been used to describe flora (plants). *Echinocactus polycephalus* and *Bertholletia excelsa* (Brazil nuts) have ugly colloquial names that have only recently fallen out of usage.[3] The species name for *Erythrina caffra* (African coral tree) contains the Latin form of a deeply offensive racial slur and the common name in use a generation ago was even more blatantly so. Most of the problematic names that are encountered in botany were established when there was little respect for the humanity of communities that fell outside a set of exclusionary norms.[4]

Many of the most shocking words are racist terms, which have particular power in multi-racial countries such as South Africa.[5] As a result of its strongly racist history, there is extreme sensitivity to racial differences in South Africa, and terms to refer to various racial groups – official and unofficial – abound.[6]

Before the dawn of South Africa's first multi-racial elections in 1994, Hauptfleisch listed thirty-six English common names of flora in 1993 that contained negative racial slurs.[7] He notes that as a result of name components such as *Bushman* (*boesman*), *Hottentot* (*hotnot*, *hottentot*), *Kaffir* (*kaffer*), *khaki* (*kakie*), *coolie* (*koelie*); *meid*, *nigger* and *oumeid* having at present acquired an undeniably racist register, the question arises how fauna and flora names containing such components can best be substituted by generally acceptable vernacular names.[8]

The solution has been to either refer to the Latin name, if it is not offensive, or to adopt a neutral common name. Thus, in common vernacular, k*****r corn becomes sorghum, k*****rlelie becomes clivia, and the k*****r tree (k*****rboom in Afrikaans) becomes coral tree with the Latin name *Erythrina* also widely used. For example, research *Erythrina caffra* on the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) website and the information page gives the Latin name and the common names in four South Africa languages, namely, coast coral tree (English); kuskoraalboom (Afrikaans); umsinsi (Zulu); umsintsi (Xhosa). In relation to the older offensive common name, the SANBI states, "Today the word is not used as it is an offensive slur. It was used in older botanical works, and generally indicates that the plant was found along the southeastern seaboard of South Africa." [9] The removal of racist plant names is far advanced in South Africa and more appropriate common names have come to the fore. The same cannot be said about the common usage of the plant name "Wandering Jew".

The Wandering Jew – the Name of Several Insidious Plants

Wandering Jew is used to describe a variety of plants worldwide. In South Africa, the name Wandering Jew is given to several plants, many of them problematic alien invasive species. The Benghal Wandering Jew (*Commelina benghalensis* / tropical spiderwort) is one of "the world's worst weeds reported in 25 different crops such as soybean, maize and sugarcane in 29 different countries." [10] The Centre for Agriculture and Bioscience International (CABI) describes it as "an annual or perennial herb with fleshy creeping stems that root readily at the nodes. It is equally abundant on all soil types." [11]

The Purple Wandering Jew (*Tradescantia zebrina* / cockroach grass) originates in Mexico and is described by CABI as "a succulent, trailing herbaceous plant, distinguished by its paired, silvery green leaves flushed with purple on the upper surface and purple underneath, asymmetrical at the base. It has bright pink flowers with three petals. The fruit are small capsules containing greyish-brown seeds." [12]

This version of the Wandering Jew is popular as a garden ornamental, grown as a colorful ground cover. Yet *Tradescantia zebrina* is a declared invader in South Africa and must be controlled, or eradicated where possible. [13]

CABI also lists *Tradescantia fluminensis* (Inch plant), a plant endemic to the tropical rainforests of south-east Brazil, as Wandering Jew and describes it as "a persistent invasive weed of natural areas where it carpets the ground and prevents native regeneration." [14] *Tradescantia fluminensis* is a declared invader in South Africa and must be controlled, or eradicated where possible. [15]

What is common to most of these plants called Wandering Jew is that they are alien invasive species, they are problematic, they tend to thrive in shadowy places, they need to be rooted out and exterminated before they take over. Not only is the Wandering Jew detrimental to their host environs, but in some instances cause rashes in humans and dogs.

It is decidedly odd, if not sinister, that so many different plants have come to be named Wandering Jew. Perhaps stranger still, is that in an era when there are heightened social and academic sensitivities in South Africa to the offensive nomenclature of some plants, the use of Wandering Jew is widespread and without clarification. Pick up a copy of *The Gardener* and it refers to Wandering Jew.[16] Look up the plant on any number of botanical and agricultural South African websites and it is still accepted usage. Contrast this with the offensive racist plant names that have been removed and when occasionally referenced, always with an explanation of its derogatory nature. But what is the offensive nature of the term Wandering Jew?

The Wandering Jew as an Ancient and Enduring Antisemitic Projection

The Wandering Jew is an ancient Christian myth. It is an “antisemitic iconic projection that encodes and enforces difference using a vocabulary of attributes seen in sources ranging from medieval manuscripts to neo-Nazi blogs.”[17] The Wandering Jew is a figure condemned to wander by Jesus until his second coming for having taunted him on his way to the crucifixion.[18] Brichetto notes that

“The Wandering Jew appears in a Latin chronicle from Italy in an entry for the year 1223. In this text, *Ignoti monachi Cisterciensis S. Mariae de Ferrara chronica et Ryccardi de Sancto Germano chronica priora*, the Wanderer is described as a Jew who has been seen in Armenia and who has been cursed to wander the earth since the Passion, when he assaulted Christ.”[19]

Early Church theologians taught that the Jews were cursed of God. The most important interpretation of this curse being the dispersion and oppression to which the Jews were subject, with the Wandering Jew coming to symbolize this belief.[20] Whatever its origins, by the thirteenth century, early versions of the myth had merged and travelled to Western Europe along with a body of Eastern oral tradition, which was catalysed by the Crusades. [21]

The concept of the Wandering Jew has since been used for centuries to define Jews as the eternal Other.[22] It reinforces the view of Jews as the eternal Foreigner.[23] Brichetto comments that “folktales, broadsheets, poems, songs, films, operas, novels, plays, political writings, Nazi propaganda, eyewitness accounts, advertisements, and countless literary allusions attest to the fact that the Wandering Jew was a useful and flexible vehicle.”[24] The resulting body of literature and images has victimized an entire people.[25] Jewish communities have therefore been associated with and always marked as Wandering Jews, “always from elsewhere despite a presence of centuries”.[26] The diasporic Jew belonged nowhere yet was found everywhere.[27]

There have been periods of history where the Wandering Jew narrative evolved and expanded significantly. At the beginning of the seventeenth century the Christian myth of the Wandering Jew became prevalent.[28] With the rise of the printing press and on the back of Martin Luther’s Reformation, chapbooks – a type of printed street literature – were efficient disseminators of religious polemic and later even more so as disseminators of popular

entertainment.[29] In 1602, an illustrated German chapbook “A Brief Description and Narrative Regarding a Jew Named Ahasverus” propelled the Wandering Jew (now somewhat mysteriously called Ahasverus) to bestseller status and underwent 86 print runs until the end of the eighteenth century.[30]

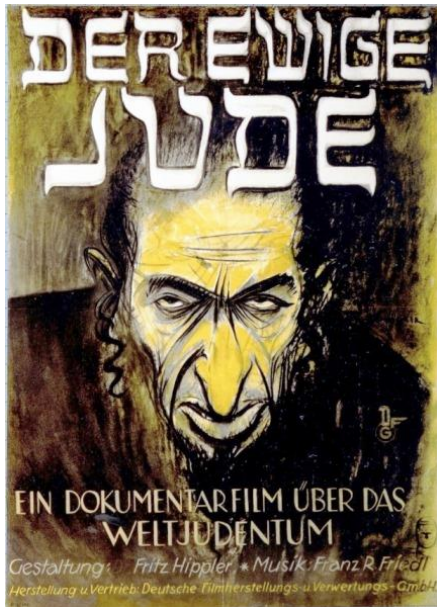
This personification of the Wandering Jew was of a whole range of negative attributes that were then projected upon the Jewish people.[31] Despite this hostility, Dan Cohn-Sherbok remarks that “Jews were not subject to any violent onslaught until modern times when the methodological elevation of the Jewish people became a central policy of the Third Reich.”[32] Yet another amplification of the concept of the Wandering Jew happened through Nazi propaganda (art and film) during World War II.

An infamous German poster entitled *Der Ewige Jude*[33] from 1937 advertised an exhibition by that same name, which presented “scientific” proof of the inherent inferiority of Jews.[34] The words *Der Ewige Jude* anchored the bottom of the picture and were the color of blood, referencing one of the most ancient and enduring antisemitic tropes, that of Blood Libel. Even the font used deliberately mimics sacred Hebrew calligraphy.[35]

The exhibition gave rise to a documentary film in 1940 also called *Der Ewige Jude*. A review of the documentary, published in the Nazi Party’s monthly *Unser Wille und Weg*, said:[36] “The Eternal Jew is the first film that not only gives a full picture of Jewry, but provides a broad treatment of the life and effects of this parasitic race using genuine material taken from real life. It also shows why healthy peoples in every age have responded to the Jews with disgust and loathing, often enough expressing their feelings through deeds”. Just like rats, the Jews 2000 years ago moved from the Middle East to Egypt, at that time a flourishing land. Even then they had all the criminal traits they display today, even then they were the enemies of hard-working, creative peoples. In large hordes they migrated from there to the “Promised Land,” flooded the entire Mediterranean region, broke into Spain, France, and Southern Germany, then followed the German colonists as they moved into the countries of the East. Along the way they remained eternal parasites, haggling and cheating. Poland above all became the enormous reservoir from which Jewry sent its agents to every leading nation of Europe and the world.

The review continues in the same vein, exhorting people to fight back and eradicate an alien invasive species (to use and make the link with modern botanical language). The nameless author of the review concludes “We must win this battle for ourselves, for Europe, for the world. This film will be a valuable tool in that struggle.”[37] *Der Ewige Jude* ends with a speech by Hitler proposing “the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.”[38] Six million Jewish men, women and children were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during the years 1933 – 1945.[39] This amounted to the death of 60% of European Jews or in countries like Greece and Poland it was closer to 90%.[40]

The narrative, image and influence of the Wandering Jew did not die with the end of World War II. Bricchetto remarks that “the image remains a favorite of neo-Nazi websites.”[41] The legend of the Wandering Jew has resurfaced during the Covid-19 pandemic and yet again become “a metaphor for many of the baseless conspiracy claims about Jews that we see on the rise again today.”[42]



The Wandering Jew and Antisemitism in South Africa

South Africa is not immune to these conspiracies as the ugly social media incident of Simone Kriel demonstrated in 2020.^[43] Asked if Kriel's supporters represented the views of a growing number of South Africans, Milton Shain said, "It seems to me this is a fringe group living in the world of social media. To what extent these voices reflect wider sentiment is difficult to know. What it does show is that the insidious world of the dark net is influencing a new generation in ways inconceivable only 10 years ago. It should also not be forgotten that Holocaust denial has a long history in South Africa on the far white right, as well among sections of the Muslim community."^[44]

This long history Shain refers to involves Wandering Jew canards, conspiratorial ideas of Jews exploiting South Africa and having little commitment to the country, which can be traced back to at least 1896.^[45] Antisemitism has waxed and waned in South Africa. In 1930 the Quota Act was passed which led to a dramatic decline in Jewish immigration.^[46] If that was not enough, in 1936 the ruling United Party introduced stiffer educational and financial immigration requirements and in 1937 passed the Aliens Act, which effectively prevented German Jews from seeking refuge in South Africa.^[47] The radical right agitated for greater restrictions and saw no place in South Africa for Jews.^[48] Shain notes "The Jew as an outsider, an alien in the body politic, was increasingly perceived as an unwelcome component of South Africa society."^[49] DF Malan had astutely perceived this trend early on and had commented in an interview with *Die Burger* back in November 1931 that "it is very easy to rouse a feeling of hate towards the Jews in this country."^[50] By 1937 he had abandoned any reservations about attacking Jews for political gain.^[51] In 1937 Malan pronounced that Jews were "an *imperium in imperio*^[52] in all countries."^[53]

Antisemitism was not confined to the fringes of society. It was found in the corridors of power in government. It was found in the corridors of esteemed academic institutions such as the University of Cape Town (UCT). Professor J. Kerr Wylie, writing to Sir Carruthers Beattie (Principal of UCT) in 1936 said, "If you read the history of the Jews throughout the Middle Ages and in modern times, you see the same facts always repeating themselves. The Jews are received into a country, kindly treated, allowed to accumulate wealth, etc. Then they

invariably overreach themselves.”[54] Here is the Wandering Jew trope in evidence, cursed to ever wander the world – always from elsewhere despite a presence of centuries.

Conclusion

Globally, the common usage of the plant name Wandering Jew is increasingly being called into question. There are multiple examples of changes in the USA in the past ten years at least. A blogger, James Nyun, in San Diego expressed his disquiet with the name:

Trying to come up with other plant names that have left me a little queasy I thought immediately about the common houseplant, Wandering Jew, *Tradescantia albiflora*. The former owners of my house planted some in a bed, and I’m still trying to eradicate it, twenty years later. I keep telling myself that “wandering Jew” is just a plant name and I’m not being antisemitic when I take the weeding fork to it.[55]

Stephen G. Saupe, a professor in the biology department of the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University, writes that “regrettably, plants can have racist names, too. A familiar example is Wandering Jew. Fortunately, this antisemitic name for one of our common houseplants has been replaced by spiderwort.”[56] Companies such as the House Plant Hobbyist have also picked up on the need to change after receiving feedback on the Wandering Jew:

Many people dislike the use of a common name that has a history of racism and bigotry, and would like to see us encourage the use of the scientific name or other common names, and we’ve listened. WE’RE NO LONGER ALLOWING THE USE OF THIS COMMON NAME...[57]

The trend is uncertain in the UK but changing the common name seems to be an outlier at present. The Bloombox Club online gardening company issued the following insight in 2019: We assumed the name referred to the Israelites, cursed to ‘wander’ through the desert in search of the Promised Land until the last member of the original generation (Moses) dies. But further research revealed ‘Wandering Jew’ to be connected to an apocryphal myth, one that has been used to justify antisemitism since at least the 13th Century.

The story goes that one of the men who taunted Jesus on his way to be crucified was cursed to walk the Earth until the Second Coming. In the context of the observable Jewish diaspora; the displacement of Jewish peoples from the Southern Levant in ancient times, and subsequent statelessness from antisemitic regimes, we are profoundly uncomfortable with using this moniker.

Unfortunately, most of the internet doesn’t seem to feel that way. Although *Tradescantia zebrina* has other common names, including Spiderwort and Inch Plant, ‘Wandering Jew’ seems to be the only one that’s stuck. [58]

New Zealand has also recently acknowledged the offensive history of the term, although the changing usage has come about reluctantly or so is seemingly the case, at least with the example of Massey University. A university statement, last updated in 2021, says: “*Tradescantia* is more correctly known as wandering Jew in New Zealand, but as this name is considered offensive to some people, it has been decided to call it *tradescantia* on this site. Some in New Zealand have decided to call it wandering willie, though many organisations

within this country have to the name of tradescantia to get away from the offensive nature of the official name.”[59]

The Massey University statement makes reference to a blog by MJ Jackson from August 2020 called “Racism in Taxonomy: What’s in a Name?” Having first highlighted the offensive nature of racial slurs in plant names, she turns her attention to antisemitic associations. She argues: There are also plant names with offensive origins that aren’t as obvious. *Tradescantia zebrina*, for example, is currently called “Wandering Jew.” This name is based on a fictional character who was used to support antisemitism from the 13th century through the Nazi propaganda of WWII. “Why would we continue using that?,” you may be asking. It’s possible that the covert nature of its history has allowed the name to stick around for so long. People may unintentionally justify the name through assuming it has Biblical or geographical origins, or just by not asking questions altogether.[60]

Plant names with negative racial connotations are no longer acceptable or in use in South Africa yet Wandering Jew has seemingly not been flagged as having profoundly problematic antisemitic associations. This common name is used across all platforms, whether gardening magazines or government departments, botanical blogs or agricultural assessments. Learning from international trends as described above, there seems to be general ignorance of the terrible association of the Wandering Jew propaganda with Nazi Germany and its problematic Medieval antecedents. Worse still, it is part of antisemitic canards that endure to this day. Ignorance is not a ready defense when using other offensive terms.

To end on a personal note, my wife and I are keen gardeners. We moved into a new home in 2019 and the garden required a lot of work. It was full of alien invasive species from trees through to a problematic rambling ground cover that we were told was Wandering Jew. I can no longer use this common name in good conscience and will seek to educate others not to do so. Perhaps in time we will see publications and websites in South Africa simply add:

This name is no longer used by the horticultural world due to its historical use in supporting antisemitic stereotypes[61].

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Lost in Time, Transmission & Technology

Charlotte Cohen

Reminiscent of an article written only a few years ago, which emphasized the incredible speed and technological advances with which the world is radically being changed, older generations (many born even before the advent of television) are left floundering in this miraculous new age in which we find ourselves.

It has been noted: "The future is already here". For many though, it is a case of: "Hold on: We haven't yet caught up with the present!"



When Woody Allen's computer crashed, he yelled, "Quick, call a child!"

With much truth spoken in jest, Woody Allen recognized a new role reversal: Not the 'male/female' shift, but that of the adult/child. Today babies are born with a new-age intelligence and aptitude which did not exist when *their* elders were adult. They are born technologically adept. They are techno-fundis before they are four. They understand immediately what we grapple to grasp. Older people rely on the younger generation, with their innate, inborn knowledge of I.T. for guidance and direction. Children are telling their parents what to do.

My grandmother lived 96 years from 1883 until 1979. When she was born, no plane had yet left the ground. By the time she died, a man had walked on the moon. The electronic age had

not yet been born. Faxes, personal computers, cell-phones, remote controls, digital cameras and drones, were still to come.

Growing up in an age where we were expected to listen to our elders (not necessarily heeding their advice), we nonetheless took their injunctions with a certain tolerance and inevitability. That was the order of things.

But those days have gone.

As with the discovery of the wheel, penicillin, the invention of the motor-car, Xrays, airflight, space travel, etc., we are experiencing an electronic explosion in a runaway non-reversible technological era. Never before in any one lifetime (ours) have there been so many changes and advances. Children of today could not visualise a world without television, remotes, cell-phones, I-pads, play-stations, Excel, Powerpoint, Twitter, Instagram or Snap Chat.

What was previously safely the parents' role as educators has now been relegated to those born into this new age.

Familiar with a language and way of life that is foreign to many of us – electronics, computer-speak, codes of dress, music, social reins and attitudes have shifted into the hands of the young.

Today, youth rules.

A recent-e-mail shows a picture of an exasperated 3-year old saying to his grandmother on the phone, "No grandma, listen!! Double click on the chrome icon!" (Someone pointed out that the video was very old because a 3 year old today wouldn't know what a landline was).

Language has been reborn. We have new synonyms: A 'virus', 'mouse', 'worm' or 'ram' does *not* now necessarily describe a living creature.

A website has *not* been spun by a spider.

It has given rise to a new technology tongue that never existed a generation ago. 'Bluetooth', Cyberspace, World Wide Web, Megabyte, Gigs, Flash drive, router, Data Bundles, Dongle, Pentium, Modem, Scanner, an X box" Acronyms like "PC, CD, SMS, DVD, EFT and XP enter our conversation with practiced ease (often without our having the foggiest idea what they stand for.)

We are learning 'techno- manners' (not that anyone really pays any attention to it), i.e. Turn off your mobile before a meeting. Don't speak on it when you're out for dinner. Look up every quarter of an hour or so from it when you're at a family function. Delete all previous recipients and addresses before forwarding emails. Check 'warnings', political and racial hate-speech and scandal with 'Snopes' before sending on. And be *very, very* careful before putting comments – *and* photos – onto social media.

In a time of turbulent change, where world order has been revolutionized by role reversal –

single parents, same sex marriages (together with increasingly rapid technological advances), attitudes and social norms have changed irrevocably: On every front, from on-line dating to porn to cyber-bullying to the iniquity of terrorism, we see how social media has taken control of our lives. We are very often more connected verbally, emotionally and intimately with someone who lives hundreds of miles away than we are with our own families.

We are swimming upstream in a bizarre technological tsunami.

Since my grandson was born in 2004, Amazon Echo, Siri and Alexa offers voice recognition which answers us when we request music, news, the weather, people, street directions ... anything. Artificial intelligence is now a reality. It might start thinking for itself and override that of human beings who are programming it. Electric cars have become another reality. Some already drive themselves.

And one also wonders how the world will cope with the copious redundancy and technology 'waste' that awaits us.... or when Google will not be able to deal with the mountains and mountains of information that is being fed into it every day. Where will they store it?

How will his world be in 50 years' time? It is futuristic, fascinating and frightening.

On a recent radio program, the discussion centred on 'The Acceleration of Social Media'; 'Technology Moving Faster than Society' and what was referred to as the "Disconnect" caused by them from normal life. A man phoned in and said he didn't "get it" – about *any* of them: Facebook, Twitter, Linked-In, etc. He said he didn't *want* to know when anyone else was eating dinner or showering or going to a movie – or *what* movie! He didn't *want* to wade through hundreds of puerile responses like "I'm with you", "Good luck" or "Get Better Soon" – when he didn't know them, didn't *want* to know them – and didn't care what they did or didn't do, anyway.

He completely echoed my sentiments. Having been led fairly successfully (albeit kicking and screaming every step of the way along the IT route), I still face my Facebook Phobia, for want of a better description. I hate it when Facebook in particular, continually asks me whether my password is valid, makes me repeat it, refuses to take it because it is incorrect, refuses to take my comment (why, I have no idea!), asks me if I have forgotten my password and whether I want them to contact me for a new password. In fact, I heard of someone who gave himself a password "Incorrect", so that every time the computer said: "Your password is incorrect", it would remind him what his password was.

To add to my discomfort (I often dry up when trying to think of a comment on Facebook. It feels like I'm in a room with hundreds of people – suddenly expected to pipe up and say something meaningful. ... I can't even think of another platitude like "Well done!" – never mind something I will regret or be held accountable for later.

So, like returning to what is familiar – I'm more at home with e-mails, where I can (or think I can) talk on a one-to-one basis specifically to the person I'm addressing.

... Mind you, even e-mails are becoming overwhelming.

The plethora of e-mails, text messages, social media and the information on Google and

youtube (where the world is served to us on a plate) is making me realize there is too much on my plate.

At what point do we say: “Slow down! I need to catch breath! I crave a world that I remember – gardens, walks, comfortable silences. ... It’s all too much and too fast.”

So just as I am desisting from attending every meeting to which I’m invited, I have started discovering the benefit of allowing myself some time off from this social quagmire of having a thousand friends all over the planet – none of whom I know personally or actually give a fig about or what or why they doing what they do – or joining them in the exchange of idle, trivial, chinwag in order to waste more precious time.

So I have made a decision: I am going to give myself more ‘me time’. I have made a promise to myself: a promise I intend to keep. Precious Privacy has become pivotal. I am about to embark on a strict IT diet. Starting from now, I am going to turn off every electronic device for at least two hours a day.

... Ag, hey, sorry, man. I’ve got to go now. My cellphone is ringing.

Postscript: This article was originally written for the West Coast Writer’s Circle 2013 competition (winning 1st Prize). What we could never have imagined three decades ago is now an actuality – with holograms, Zoom-rooms, and possible trips to Mars. And what will be an actuality in three decades time, is probably, for most of us, beyond imagination.

As we face an accelerated future of ‘Artificial Intelligence’ and ‘Virtual Reality’ etc., it may be worth remembering that the ‘4th revolution’ has been built on early ideas, trials, experiments – and multiple mistakes. .. And as they say, “The best thing about making a mistake, is that it is the best lesson from which one can learn.’

At Rosh Hashona, besides looking forward to the future and at the same time, back to the past, we also look inwards at Yom Kippur, when we ask forgiveness for wrongdoings. Putting our remarkable technological progress into perspective then, perhaps it is also a time to forgive ourselves for past mistakes.

A toast written to ‘The Old You’ at the time of the calendar new year reads: “If you feel inspired to use the new year to help you reset or change habits: Great. ... – and yet, the old you has survived every terrible day, every hardship, every awful circumstance and every heartbreak you’ve ever felt. The old you is a fighter – and that’s worth celebrating. “

Charlotte Cohen, a regular contributor to Jewish Affairs, is an award-winning short’ story writer and poet whose work has appeared in a wide variety of SA publications since the early 1970s.



Tradition among the Changes

Zita Nurok

Roodepoort's small shul building was the place that held our community of approximately sixty Jewish families together. There were families that originated in Eastern Europe, from places such as Lithuania and Poland and from Germany, as well as those born locally. The shul was a communal house of worship for all.

Adjoining the shul was the Morris Hockman Talmud Torah Hall, a social hall with classrooms built by and named after a generous member of the congregation. It too united us, in celebrations of barmitzvahs, weddings, parties, holiday events and often *kiddushes* after Shabbat services. Children attended *cheder* during the week in one of the classrooms, while adults held meetings to discuss community issues. We belonged to youth groups, such as Habonim, that met on Sundays to enrich and reinforce our Jewish backgrounds and cultivate an understanding of Zionism and love for Israel.



**Grave of community stalwart Morris Hockman,
Roodepoort Jewish cemetery**

While growing up in small town South Africa, we focused on the richness of our Jewish life, which was part of the surrounding secular world in which we lived. Our parents came from Lithuania in the 1920s in search of meaningful opportunities, so different from the way they'd lived in Europe where antisemitism and anti-Jewish policies caused many to flee their world. From the mid-17th Century up until the Second World War Jews lived mainly in *shtetls*, generally small market towns made up of close-knit Jewish communities where Jewish culture and traditions thrived, albeit under exceedingly difficult circumstances. Those who left were willing to make changes, to forsake the former lives and abandon what was familiar in order to reach new destinations where they could fulfil their hopes and dreams. But what stayed with them were traditions they had known all their lives.

My father, who had not lived in a shtetl, followed in the footsteps of his brothers who sought economic security in the diamond fields of Kimberley. First, however, he remained in Lithuania so that he could complete his studies at a yeshiva in Shavli before embarking for South Africa. He was proud of his education and always wished that he could have used his knowledge of the Jewish studies he held dear and to pass it on to others. However, this did not come to pass. Instead, like other immigrants, he devoted his energies to establishing himself financially in order to support a family.

My mother left her Lithuanian hometown of Riteve in order to better her life. She intended bringing her mother and sister to South Africa, but tragically they became victims of the Holocaust.



My father's student ID, Ponevezh Jewish Gymnasium (High School)

Observance of holidays and Shabbat brought us to shul year-round, establishing a routine that created a comfortable feeling of security. Although we didn't attend shul regularly on Shabbat, our father did, ensuring that he contributed to the minyan every week. For us the relationship between our home and the shul, reinforced and strengthened our Jewish way of life. The traditions our parents brought with them were perpetuated throughout our growing years, and so love for traditions ran deep in the roots of our family. Our mother recognized the holidays or Shabbat by preparing distinctive culinary delights for each, and she told us stories of her life in Riteve. She told how she helped her mother to bake challah, or how they filled *hamantaschen* with poppy seed, or how they made *geschmirte matza* on Pesach, and more. Candle lighting every week and at holiday times was a valued ritual in our home. The polished brass candlesticks that Mother had brought with her from her own home in Riteve glowed under the light of the candles she placed in them. It was a special moment to see her cover her eyes and recite the blessings. We grew up knowing that the tradition of reciting Kiddush comes before drinking wine, as is reciting the blessing before eating *challah*, but the blessing for the candles is said after the candles are lit. This age-old tradition reaches back to Biblical times.

Our father enjoyed his ability to recite and read the appropriate prayers for each occasion, holding our attention as the words rolled off his tongue with ease. A particular tradition that I remember well occurred to usher in the holiday of Pesach. My father would make his way through our home with a feather and a paper bag to sweep away all the *chametz* in each room. He loved music and an exciting annual activity at Chanukah time was when he, my brother and I would take the train into the city, and go to the Wolmarans Street shul (or Great Synagogue) in Johannesburg to listen to the choir singing inspiring and beautiful Chanukah songs.

Some of the traditions of early Jewish music are described in *A History of Western Music* by Burkholder, Grout and Palisca. In the 16th Century a cantor or Chazzan sang responsively with a congregation, and in the 17th Century Cantillation - the chanting of prayers & responses - became the primary form of Jewish music, resembling what is heard in Orthodox synagogues today.



Annual servicemen's Chanukah service, Great Synagogue, circa 1970s

Changes came to our town, and the community gradually diminished in number. Some families moved to join their children in the big cities, and a few immigrated to Israel. Eventually no one was left of the community, as occurred in other small towns across South Africa, resulting in Jewish populations of those bigger cities increasing.

The shul building still stands in Roodepoort. It's different now but remains the place that played an important role in shaping who we were as Jews, who we became, and even who we are today. Over the years changes were occurring throughout the country. Political, economic uncertainty, and also concerns for personal safety caused major upheavals at various times, which led to the emigration of many families who were seeking security and opportunities for improvement. The changes caused disruptions. Little did those who had left Europe years before believe that unsettling times were to be repeated, and that their own children would leave their homes just as they had although for entirely different reasons. They have scattered across the globe to the United States, Israel, Canada, Australia, and Britain, adapting to different lifestyles in new environments. Traditions among many of these families continue to be valued as they had been in previous generations.

Our family left during apartheid times. Upon mentioning that we were moving to the United States, responses were that it wouldn't be that different from life in South Africa because everyone spoke English. This was indeed comforting, but it didn't take into account the myriad of differences both good and more challenging, to which we would adapt. Having no family proved to be a major difficulty, since we missed not only the availability of relatives to whom we could turn in times of need, but also partaking in all family events that were happening in South Africa. Celebrations in the United States such as barmitzvahs, weddings, and sharing all the holiday observances and events were largely held for us with new-found friends but it was at these times we recognized and appreciated certain similarities in the practice of traditions and rituals that we held dear. Interacting with grandparents was restricted to the yearly visits either to South Africa

or the once-a-year visits from grandparents who travelled to visit us. We missed the multicultural environment of 'African-ness' created by Black people, Colored people, Indians, immigrants from Portugal, Italy, Greece, and more. However, attitudes towards child rearing were largely different and far less authoritative, allowing and encouraging children to have their opinions stated wherever feasible. We admired the way that people were able to express their thoughts and opinions openly with ease, and mostly with confidence. It also felt good to be in a place where at least in principle all citizens are treated equally. Moreover, climbing the ladder to success is possible in the US if one is prepared to recognize and take advantage of the many educational and other opportunities along the way. Over the years the feeling of being an immigrant in a new country was gradually replaced with many more positive feelings of belonging, as our family became integrated into our new country.

South African Jews have been able to maintain their Jewishness in the South African culture without feeling discriminated against. Although emigration has torn many families apart, the remaining Jewish communities in the country continue to flourish, to lead vibrant and comfortable lives with many fervently embracing their Judaism.

Will connections to Jewish traditions anchor those who emigrated and endured many changes to who they are as Jews wherever they may live? I believe so.

***Zita Nurok**, a regular contributor to Jewish Affairs, is a former elementary school teacher who grew up in South Africa. In 2019, she retired after 48 years of teaching, nine of which were at the then Jewish Government School in Doornfontein. She is a member of the National League of American Pen Women, and has served as Vice-President and President of the Indianapolis branch.*