

# JEWISH AFFAIRS

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

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

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

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# JEWISH AFFAIRS

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## **Reform Judaism for Litvaks? A new history of the Progressive Jewish movement in South Africa**

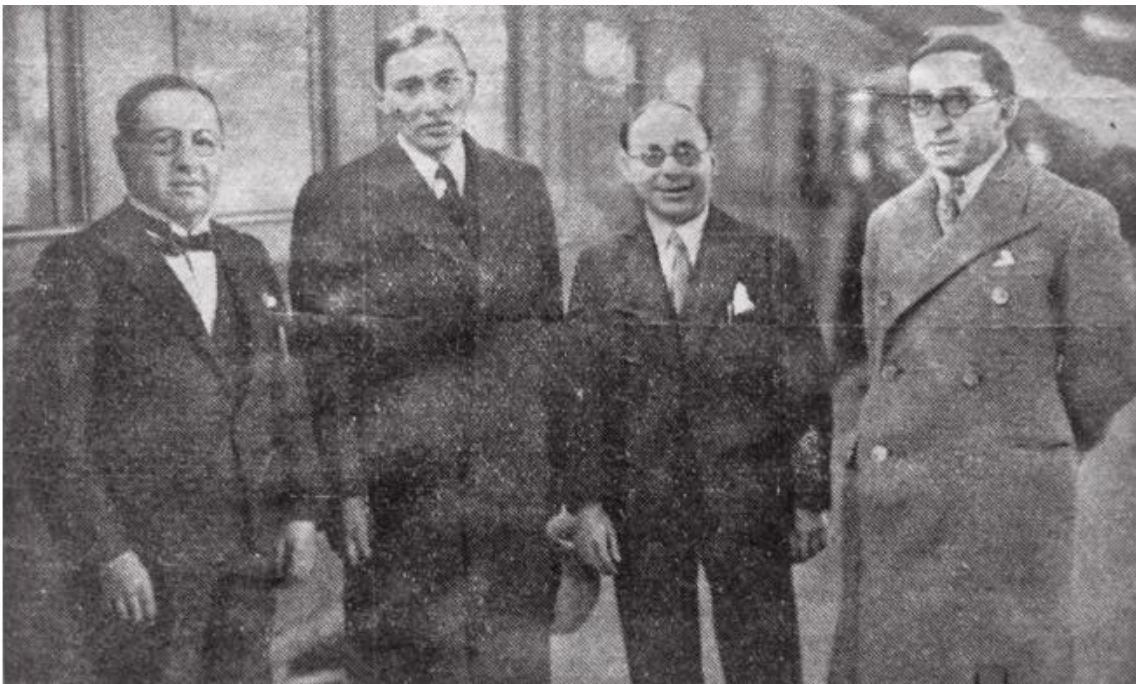
**David Saks**

*David Saks is Associate Director of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies and editor of Jewish Affairs.*

Of all South Africa's minority groups, the Jewish community is "among the most thoroughly dissected and psychoanalysed" observes Irwin Manoim at the beginning of *Mavericks Inside the Tent – The Progressive Jewish movement in South Africa and its impact on the wider community*, his ground-breaking history of the Progressive Jewish movement in this country. He could in fact have easily omitted the 'among' altogether,<sup>[1]</sup> but as a seasoned journalist probably decided to play it safe. Manoim's point is that despite the plethora of publications on multiple aspects of the community's history that have appeared over the decades, no proper history of Progressive (or, as it was long called, Reform) Judaism in South Africa has to date been written. His book, meticulously researched and compulsively readable (a rarity with institutional histories) thus fills a glaring gap in local Jewish historiography, but it also sheds light on a movement which, as the author correctly stresses, has been greatly undervalued in terms of the impact it made on the Jewish religious and communal scene.

Perhaps an explanation as to why it took so long for a detailed history of the Reform-Progressive movement to appear can be found in much of what appears in Manoim's book itself. This relates to the remarkable frequency with which the Progressive community found itself convulsed by internal dissention, certainly from the early 1950s and to an extent before that. Of course, the Orthodox mainstream also had to deal with periods of conflict within its ranks (it took less than half a decade for the mother congregations of both Cape Town and Johannesburg to split, for instance), but this did not lead to the same degree of institutional paralysis, crises of leadership and fragmentation that the Progressive community was prone to. So bitter, prolonged and self-destructive were these confrontations that later Progressive leaders may well have preferred to allow the past to take care of itself rather than risk reopening old wounds. That a proper history has finally been produced is perhaps an indication of the movement having achieved a reasonable degree of internal peace and stability in recent years. Manoim certainly does not play down the periods of internecine conflict that rocked Progressive Jewry and undermined its growth, and is forthright in identifying the factors that caused them. These ranged from failures of

leadership, strategic missteps such as neglecting to take advantage of the opportunity to increase its membership provided by the influx of German Jewish refugees in the mid- to late 1930s, the failure even at the height of the movement to establish a Reform day school and the perennial bugbear of regional turf wars, particular those conducted along north-south lines. As he insightfully writes, “The great fault line in South African politics falls somewhere between Johannesburg and Cape Town. Name almost any aspect of South African history and a Cape Town-Johannesburg dispute will be found”. This north-south cultural split, probably inevitably has also bedevilled Jewish communal affairs. One of the first really serious internal splits we read about occurred in the early 1950s and concerned Cape Town’s categorical rejection of a proposed creation of the position of Chief Minister under which all Progressive congregations would fall. Had that become a reality, the appointee would certainly have been Rabbi M C Weiler, the movement’s much revered and highly capable founding minister and spiritual head of its mother congregation, Temple Israel in Johannesburg. Much as the various Reform/Progressive congregations insisted on maintaining their autonomy, having a central authority authorised to represent and speak for the movement as a whole may well have made future internal disputes that much more manageable. As it turned out, comments the author, “Reform seemed a headless entity”, settling for the model whereby the movement was a “loose federation in which congregations made their own decisions and could pick and choose what central decisions suited them”.



Arrival of Rabbi M C Weiler (*Rand Daily Mail*, 31.8.1933): From left, Dr Louis Freed, Rabbi Weiler, Jerry Idelson, Max Franks

In addition, the debilitating ‘chief minister’ controversy seems to have achieved what the previous twenty years of strident Orthodox opposition had failed to achieve, which was to demoralize and disillusion Rabbi Weiler himself. Later that decade, he would resign his position and make aliyah, despite only being in his early fifties. The Progressive movement would never again have a leader of his calibre, one who had been able to combine firm (bordering on autocratic) leadership within his own congregation with knowing even then when it was necessary to compromise and with the diplomatic skills enabling him to avoid or defuse confrontations with his own constituency and the wider Jewish community. Observes Manóim, he had somehow “managed to be a unifier rather than a divider, with a flexibility to change tactics, conscious always of never pushing too much beyond what he thought his constituency would tolerate”. The contrast in this regard between him and his successors is striking, particularly concerning Rabbi Adi Assabi who arrived in the late 1980s. While no less gifted and charismatic as Rabbi Weiler, Assabi became increasingly out of touch with key elements in his constituency in his single-minded drive to revitalise and ideologically remodel Progressive Judaism in South Africa and ultimately split the Johannesburg community altogether.

The fact that Rabbi Weiler carefully steered clear of confrontations with Orthodoxy and the mainstream community in general did not mean that he was compliant or compromising when it came to running his own congregation. In fact, in this regard he exercised a degree of authority that a good many Orthodox rabbis of those times would probably have envied. When it came to services, he insisted on strict discipline and decorum, especially during his meticulously prepared and often quite lengthy sermons. Indeed, when he was preaching the doors would be locked to prevent people wandering in and out, and children were expected as a matter of course to listen and behave themselves. At the same time, Rabbi Weiler knew when it was necessary to compromise, such as in agreeing to including the custom of breaking a glass at weddings and, more importantly, in retaining the barmitzva ceremony at the traditional age of 13 instead of replacing it, as was done elsewhere, with a ‘confirmation ceremony’ at a later age. Had it been up to him, he would have dispensed with both, but he recognised that this not only would alienate many of his own congregants but would give ammunition to those who accused Reform of being ‘inauthentic’. This combination of firmness and ideological consistency with pragmatism were essential to his success in establishing the movement on solid foundations, initially in Johannesburg and later in other centres. (Whether or not it was a mistake to wait until the movement in Johannesburg had been properly consolidated before looking to establish branches nationally is nevertheless a legitimate question, which the author discusses as well).

While the connection between the majority of South African Jews and traditional Orthodoxy at the time of Reform's arrival was undoubtedly rather shallow and half-hearted, it is nevertheless highly unlikely that Classical Reform of the type then operating in the US and UK would have gained more than a handful of adherents had any serious attempt been made to introduce it in this country. The great majority of the community came from an East European background, where Reform was unknown, and the pull of tradition, even when limited to emotional rather than practical expression, remained strong. Weiler's enduring achievement was to develop a mode of Reform worship, belief and practice suitably adapted to South African conditions. Sometimes referred to as 'Weilerism', this amounted to a new kind of Reform, one tailored to the inherent conservatism of the local community and which while "rather more cautious than the principles of his American and British counterparts" was quite radical by South African standards. One could almost describe it as 'Reform for Litvaks', at least of the South African variety. It helped immeasurably that Weiler himself was a Litvak (a Latvak, strictly speaking, since he was born in Riga, Latvia, but no serious distinction has ever been made between the two, at least among SA Jewry).

Among the innovations introduced were that services would be in English and Hebrew with Sephardi pronunciation (which, as Manoim observes, was "in line with Zionist thinking of the time, but a radical step for a community with few Sephardis"), complete gender equality in terms of serving on synagogue committees and, over time, the introduction of the batmitzvah ceremony. Apart from English language prayers, these changes were eventually implemented by most Orthodox congregations as well. Other innovations, such as the replacement of Hazzanuth by professional mixed choirs were obviously not, although at that time the Orthodox Yeoville synagogue, albeit controversially, still featured a mixed choir – one of the immediate reasons, as it happened, why around this time a group of newly arrived German Jewish immigrants broke away from Yeoville to form what was probably South Africa's first genuine Haredi community, the Adath Jeshurun Congregation. The latter developed into one of the main vehicles of the subsequent 'Baal Teshuva' (lit. "those that return") movement in Johannesburg from the late 1960s. Finally, and critically so far as making headway in South Africa were concerned, the local Reform movement has differed from its counterparts abroad by being fervently Zionist from the outset.





Batmitzvah at Temple Israel, 1950s

A second major concern of the book inevitably deals with the periodic confrontations that erupted between the Orthodox establishment and the new religious movement that was challenging its hegemony. Indeed, as Manoim puts it, “a state of siege between Orthodox and Reform has been a characteristic of relations in Johannesburg for over 80 years, with only occasional moments of truce”. He adds that relations had likewise been tense in other centres (at one time, Reform had active congregations not only in Johannesburg (four), Cape Town (three), Durban, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth and East London, but in Bloemfontein, Springs, Klerksdorp and Germiston as well. Across the border in the then Rhodesia, there were for a long time congregations in Bulawayo and Salisbury), there had “been exceptions, particularly in smaller and more isolated communities where ‘sticking together’ has greater meaning”.

It is in fact arguable whether Orthodox-Reform ructions have played as much of a role in Jewish communal politics, even in Johannesburg, since at least the turn of the century. On the whole, things would appear to have been comparatively quiet on that front, one of the main reasons being that Orthodoxy, which confounded many sceptics by embarking on a sustained period of impressive growth from at least the early 1970s (not the 1990s as Manoim claims) no longer regarded the Progressive movement as a threat. This was certainly not the case, though, when Reform arrived in the early 1930s. That Jewish religiosity was at a dismally low ebb could not but be acknowledged by the disheartened rabbinical leadership of the day. Here Manoim quotes, among others, Chief Rabbi of the Johannesburg United Hebrew Congregation J L Landau, who lamented, “We are in a condition of



moral and religious bankruptcy”, that the younger generation was “conspicuous for its absence from synagogue services” and therefore that the advent of Reform could “only result in completely alienating a number of younger members from Judaism”.

Apart from the then very small number of seriously practising Orthodox Jews, the mainstream Jewish leadership seemed to have objected to the new movement less for theological reasons than because of concerns over unnecessarily dividing the Jewish community – a regular refrain in Jewish communal affairs over the decades. To be fair, the advent of Reform did indeed, and inevitably, cause divisions, often flaring up into open confrontations. These were highly acrimonious, particular when they involved – as they often did – disputes over burial rights in Jewish cemeteries. Over time, compromises and accommodations were reached, sometimes by the local Reform/Progressive community (such as in Durban and East London) establishing its own Chevra Kadisha, at others by setting aside a separate section of the cemetery where burials could take place under Progressive auspices. There were also regular spats over the absence of Progressive teachings, and teachers, in the newly-established Jewish day schools, chaplaincy services for national servicemen belonging to the movement and, most of all, the right of equality of Progressive ministers in terms of reading prayers at major community events like SAZF and SAJBD conferences and Yom Hashoah. Here too, accommodations were arrived at over time but the Orthodox establishment, whose reach, influence and stature steadily increased as the post-war era progressed, actually conceded very little, and the much smaller Progressive grouping could only grudgingly accept whatever was offered.

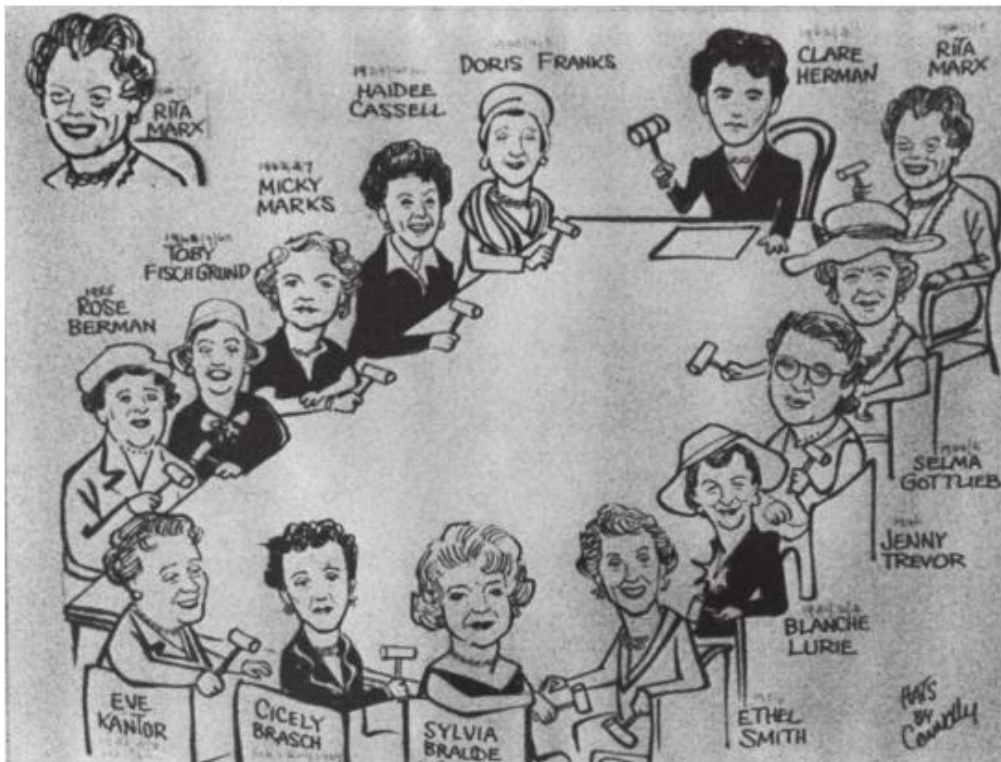
Manoim delves deeply into the curious episode in local communal history, grandly termed at the time the ‘Casper-Super Concordat’ (1965). Theoretically, this was a mutually agreed-upon set of rules of engagement between the official heads of Orthodoxy and Reform, Chief Rabbi of the Federation of Synagogues Rabbi Moses Casper and the Chief Minister of the United Progressive Jewish Congregations Rabbi Arthur Saul Super. However, its real impact was not on what it purported to achieve (which in practice was to do little more than confirm the status quo) but on the disastrous fall-out for the Progressive movement as a whole. While lauded by the Jewish establishment (for example, the SA Jewish Board of Deputies termed it “a very sensible and practical agreement”, the *Zionist Record* expressed the hope that it would “mark the beginning of a new era of peace and dignity in the conduct of our communal affairs” and the *SA Jewish Times* congratulated both signatories for “their statesmanlike conduct”), it was widely regarded in Progressive circles as a capitulation (“a shameful document in which Reform formally acknowledges its own second-class status” as one critic put it). Apart from Rabbi Super being authorised to

speak only for the three Johannesburg congregations – not that he claimed to be doing otherwise - and the fact that the Orthodox monopoly on officiating at public gatherings remained untouched, what was found to be especially objectionable was the passage reading:

**From the religious point of view there is an unbridgeable gulf between Orthodoxy and Reform. Therefore there can be no question of Orthodox Rabbis, Ministers or Chazonim participating in any Reform services, or vice versa; nor can there be any joint Orthodox-Reform religious services.**

Super stated that this conclusion was arrived at “after a thorough examination of the Halachic situation and the Halachic principles involved”. His Cape Town counterpart Rabbi David Sherman by contrast said it amounted to “allowing ourselves to be read out of the community of Klal Yisrael”. As for the ‘unbridgeable gulf’, this was something that since Reform’s inception its ministers had striven to bridge. Thus did the movement again find itself seriously divided, against largely along north-south lines.

The preamble to Chapter 22 (all the chapters are usefully introduced with a short summary of the contents) asks whether there was “a match between religious liberalism and political opposition to apartheid”, the answer being “Yes, but...” This section uses as its starting point the role played by three Reform rabbis, Andre Ungar (see elsewhere in this *Jewish Affairs* issue), Richard Lampert and Adi Assabi. Manoim also reviews the more ambiguous activist career of the tempestuous Rabbi Ben Isaacson, who spent seven years in the movement before returning to his Orthodox roots, and the involvement of Rabbi A S Super. One concludes that while Progressive rabbis were far more likely to speak out than their Orthodox counterparts, their respective congregations were generally more cautious. Where the Progressive movement certainly did make a lasting difference was in the field of outreach, notably with the establishment, with the subsequent support by its United Sisterhood of the M C Weiler School in Alexandra and of the Mitzvah School on the premises of Beth David in Sandton during the turbulent late 1980s.



Portrait of United Sisterhood chairs, circa. 1957 by Bob Connolly (*Rand Daily Mail*)

Despite internal ructions, Manoim notes that at the time of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Reform movement (as it was still called) was at its height in terms of numbers, resources and self-confidence. Much of what follows traces how badly things unravelled thereafter, whether due to self-inflicted blows like the Assabi fiasco or to factors beyond anyone's control such as the white exodus following the 1976 Soweto Uprising, the effect of sanctions on overseas funding and what the author describes as "an unexpected surge of Orthodox religious zeal in the early 1990s". Once an attractive option for young community members disenchanted with what it saw as outmoded forms of Jewish worship, the Progressive movement unexpectedly found itself losing many of its younger members to a resurgent Orthodoxy. Two attitudinal surveys on SA Jewry, conducted in 1998 and 2005 by the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape, showed the extent of the Progressive decline. In both, only 7% of respondents identified themselves as Progressive, less than half the percentage of the movement at its height (generally estimated to have been around 15%). Moreover, it was found that the Progressive membership was relatively aged compared to that of the Orthodox community. Writing in *Jewish Affairs* (Vol. 61, No. 3, Rosh Hashanah 2006), Shirley Bruk pointed to this "an unhealthy situation for the Reform/Progressive sector", one that should worry those concerned with the future of the movement. The tendency towards under-representation of younger age groups and over-representation of older age groups had already been reflected when the first of the above-mentioned surveys were conducted, but had intensified seven years later.



**Bnei Mitzvot ceremony, Temple Shalom, with Rabbi Walter Blumenthal**

Given this downward trend, one would have expected the results of the next Kaplan Centre survey to show even further decline. Instead, they bear out Manóim's observation that "after years of flagging membership, there are recent signs of a Progressive revival". According to the latest findings, 12% of South Africa's estimated 52000 Jews now identify as Progressive.<sup>[2]</sup> In Johannesburg the percentage remains at 7% but elsewhere it ranges from 18% in Cape Town to 25% in Durban.

How did this reversal come about? Much of it is due, as he writes, "to a younger generation of rabbis bringing renewed energy". Even more important, though, had been the remarkable and wholly unexpected wave of conversions that have taken place under Progressive auspices, a high proportion of these being by people of colour, from roughly the beginning of this century. According to official figures, some 500 such conversions took place in the period 2002-2018, making up a high proportion of a total Progressive membership numbering around 5000. The 2020 Kaplan survey further found that converts make up 6.7% of the Jewish community and that of these, just under half (48%) were converted under Progressive auspices. Converts to Judaism in South Africa thus number roughly 3500, of which around 1700 are Progressive. Of those who converted, women outnumbered men in a 4:1 ratio.<sup>[3]</sup> If these figures are correct, than at least

a quarter of Jews who identify as Progressive and perhaps more are, to use the expression now favoured by the movement, “Jews by Choice”. As the author concedes, “the widespread suspicion that the Progressive movement is heavily sponsored by conversion thus has some validity”.

Beyond mere numbers, converts (a growing proportion of who have not converted for purposes of marriage, or at least not solely for that reason) are revitalising Progressive congregations in other ways. Many are noticeably more committed and involved than their Jewish-born congregants and converts are disproportionately represented on synagogue leadership structures. With so many converts now in the system, many of them being “Jews of colour”, a process of “cultural hybridization” is underway. On the other hand, as Rabbi Greg Alexander of Cape Town’s Temple Israel is quoted as saying, “the steady influx of Jewish by Choice has camouflaged a serious problem: the lack of sufficient organic growth within the community”.

There are other serious long-term implications, not discussed by the author, of this burgeoning of the number of converts, and children of such converts, within the Progressive movement. When Progressive Judaism arrived in South Africa, in practice there was little to distinguish its membership from the Orthodox mainstream. As Manoim correctly puts it, “Almost the only thing that separated the ‘un-observant Orthodox’ from their Reform brethren was a label”. Thus, for the greater part of the local movement’s history, Reform/Progressive Jews could join Orthodox synagogues if they chose and, more importantly, there were rarely any obstacles to Orthodox and Reform/Progressive Jews intermarrying with one another. Increasingly, that is no longer true. Since Orthodox Judaism does not recognise Progressive converts, it follows that they do not recognise a substantial proportion of today’s Progressive community as being Jewish at all. Added to that is the fact that only those born to a Jewish mother are considered Jewish under Orthodox law, hence the children of Progressive converts (who, as noted, are mainly women) are likewise not recognised. The end result can only be that these two sectors of SA Jewry are destined in time to evolve into completely distinct communities, religiously and to a growing extent even ethnically distinct from one another.

*Mavericks Inside the Tent* is a lively, insightful, judicious and consistently readable exploration of Progressive Judaism in South Africa. The author has done an outstanding job in piecing together the story of this feisty, if often internally-conflicted movement, one that while always a relatively small minority, played and continues to play a significant role in the greater saga of Jewish South Africa.



*Mavericks inside the tent: The Progressive Jewish Movement in South Africa and Its Impact on the Wider Community* by Irwin Manoim, University of Cape Town Press & Juta, 2019, includes photographs, glossary, bibliography & index, 528pp. ISBNs: 781775822646 (Print) 9781775822653 (e-PDF)



**Simchat Torah ceremony in Cape Town, led by Rabbi Emma Gottlieb**

## NOTES

[1] Good luck to anyone who wants to actually prove it, but in point of fact no other section of the population comes anywhere close to the Jewish community when it comes to writing about itself. In addition to the innumerable histories ranging from that of the community as a whole to that of just a small segment of it (just two recent examples are the histories of Brakpan and Potchefstroom Jewry by Mo Skikne and Paul Chaifetz respectively), there has been a continual stream of academic papers, works of fiction, demographic and attitudinal surveys and a growing body of publications of a purely genealogical nature relating to the community. To this can be added an apparently endless stream of biographies, memoirs and family histories. Jews appear to be especially keen on telling their own stories. Looking at Jewish political activists alone, those whose memoirs have appeared since the end of apartheid include Ben Turok, Norman Levy, Lorna Levy, Joe Slovo (posthumous), Ronnie Kasrils, Albie Sachs, Lionel Bernstein, Dennis Goldberg, Isie Maisels (posthumous), Rica Hodgson, Baruch Hirson and Raymond Suttner. No doubt that list could be added to.

[2] <http://www.kaplancentre.uct.ac...>

[3] Ibid.



# The loud-mouth rabbi who was told to go

**Irwin Manoim**

*Irwin Manoim is a researcher attached to the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies at UCT, with an interest in exploring neglected aspects of South African Jewish history. This article is an extract from a chapter exploring Jewish attitudes to apartheid, from his recently published book *Mavericks Inside the Tent*, a history of the Progressive Jewish movement in South Africa and its impact on the wider community (reviewed by David Saks elsewhere in this issue) An exhibition based on the book will be held at the SA Jewish Museum in Cape Town towards the end of this year.*

On a Tuesday afternoon in early May this year, Rabbi Andre Ungar, aged 90, settled down for his afternoon nap. He never got up, dying peacefully in his sleep. Due to Covid19 lockdown regulations in New York, where he had retired, only three people were allowed to attend his funeral, not even a minyan.

Rabbi Ungar has been largely forgotten in South Africa, where he served a brief, but stormy tenure as rabbi of the Reform congregation in Port Elizabeth more than sixty years ago. But his death provides a useful occasion to recall his role here, because his story lays bare the ambiguous and conflicted attitudes of South African Jews during the early apartheid era.

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A few months after Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, Julius Weinstein, president of the SA Zionist Federation told the movement's 41<sup>st</sup> congress that South African Jews had always been in the forefront of the struggle against apartheid.<sup>[i]</sup> This opinion went down well at the conference, but was not universally shared. Rabbi Richard Lampert, himself a victim of police harassment, remarked that "The Jewish community developed a conscience on the day after Mandela was released."<sup>[ii]</sup> The political analyst Steven Friedman, writing in Jewish Affairs near the close of the apartheid era, said: "Most of the time, with a few honourable exceptions, no Jewish leaders – religious or communal – gave any public indication that events in South African society as a whole concerned them ... The silence was sharply ironic, since for much of the time Jewish leadership nominally represented a community justly perceived as a source of active anti-apartheid sentiment."<sup>[iii]</sup>

Gideon Shimoni, in his book *Community and Conscience*<sup>[iv]</sup>, usefully summed up the issues that confronted Jewish South Africa. A despised and persecuted minority in Europe, they fled to South Africa. Despite confronting local anti-Semitism in a

fervently Christian society, they became an accidental part of the privileged white caste, narrowly escaping being classified as “Orientals” along with the Muslim merchants who were migrating to South Africa at the same time.

Many of the Jewish emigres had been involved in radical, anti-Tsarist politics in Eastern Europe. They continued to identify with radical politics in South Africa. Jews were disproportionately strongly represented among anti-apartheid activists, a point frequently made by hostile authorities. But the most outspoken, committed and courageous of the Jewish anti-apartheid activists were largely secular, operating outside the organised Jewish community.

Over the years, a number of rabbis spoke out against racial discrimination, some more loudly than others, but they were very much a minority. The community itself was often split, between those who spoke out, and those who remained silent, some arguing that speaking out would inflame anti-Semitism.

The Jews in South Africa were unusual in that, despite being accorded the privileged badge of whiteness, they never quite belonged. As Milton Shain and others have demonstrated, both English and Dutch administrations discriminated against the Jews.<sup>[v]</sup> Dr DF Malan’s National Party was loudly anti-semitic from the moment of its birth, explicitly excluding Jews from party membership, and driving the legislation that kept Jews out of the country. The party’s polemical anti-semitism quietened down after the Holocaust made such sentiments politically imprudent, but a low-key anti-semitism continued.

Nonetheless, there is also no denying that the Jews, whether loved or unloved, benefitted from apartheid’s bounties much as other whites: they could buy and sell property, live in comfortable suburban homes, own businesses, earn good salaries, vote in elections or run for political office, send their children to better schools and universities, enjoy the benefits of superior medical facilities, golf clubs, hotels and beaches, and never have to fear a police pass raid or sit on the hard benches of a third class train carriage. <sup>[vi]</sup>

### **The case of Rabbi Andre Ungar**

An interesting illustration of the tensions between liberal and conservative factions of the Jewish community, between rabbis and their congregants, and between Jews and the outside world, can be found in the case of Rabbi Andre Ungar, the only rabbi to be deported from South Africa.

Ungar was born in July 1929 to a prosperous Modern Orthodox family in Budapest.<sup>[vii]</sup> Ungar’s pleasant suburban childhood came to an abrupt end with the Nazi occupation of Hungary, late in the war. The Jewish population were rounded up; in a single bloody year their numbers were cut down from 800 000 to 160 000. The Ungar family hid away under false identities in a non-Jewish part of

town. The horror of Nazism, witnessed at first hand, would colour Ungar's attitudes for the rest of his life. [viii]

He was selected to join a group of Eastern European teenagers invited to Manchester, England, by the youth movement Bnei Akiva, for a six weeks course in advanced Jewish studies. He received word from his father that the Russians were about to seize control of Hungary and he should not return.[ix] He studied philosophy at the University of London, became a vegetarian, and began having his first doubts about Orthodox Judaism. He trained as a minister at Jews College, and was ordained a Reform rabbi in 1954 by no less a mentor than Rabbi Leo Baeck, the sole surviving leader of German Jewry, who had miraculously survived the concentration camps.

He received a tempting invitation to become rabbi to a four-year-old Reform congregation in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Ungar flew to Port Elizabeth in January 1955 with his wife Corinne, and baby daughter Michelle, to a generous reception. [x] His first introduction to the peculiarities of South African practice was when he arrived at his new apartment to find an African woman sitting in the kitchen, and was told that he was expected to engage her as a maid.[xi]

He was excited by the colour, energy and exuberance of the town, delighted by the Temple that had recently been built on Upper Dickens Street, and by the generosity of the congregation itself, 250 families strong. "They were kindness itself. Invitations to dinner by the dozen, completely unwarranted gifts galore, an attitude of deference which, aged twenty five and green as I was, I found embarrassing." [xii]

The sunshine, the fine sea views and the friendly people were the surface of a harsher political reality. The Eastern Cape had been the frontier for more than a hundred years of wars between black and white. The animosities aroused by the bloodshed turned the area into the cradle of black resistance and the African National Congress. But it was also a cradle for the most virulent strains of anti-Semitism. Two decades earlier, a local Nazi group claimed to have found in the Port Elizabeth synagogue a document outlining a Jewish plot to divide Christians and run the world. The claims had received generous coverage in the Afrikaans newspapers. [xiii] Despite being refuted in a court case, the sentiments continued to linger. Politics took a brittle form in Port Elizabeth.

Rabbi Moses Weiler, leader of the Reform movement in South Africa, flew down from Johannesburg for Ungar's induction in March 1955. Perhaps the older man sensed some rebelliousness in the new rabbi, because his induction speech was something of a lecture on correct behaviour. As the Jewish Times reported it: "Rabbi Weiler stressed the importance of co-operation between spiritual leader and congregation. A rabbi who was not at one with his congregation, but stood apart, living in a cloud of his own, was a failure. He emphasised the virtue of possessing the courage of restraint." Rabbi Ungar clearly interpreted this as a challenge. "He

said a minister's ultimate responsibility was to God alone, and transcended the narrow boundaries of any one congregation or religious movement." [xiv]

Ungar started asking his congregants questions about the silent, ubiquitous but invisible, host of black servants and labourers in their employ. "How did they live? What were the relationships between them and us? Naively, I voiced such questions before my new-made friends. The response shocked me by its violence of tone. That, I was told, is a lifetime's study. You must be born here to understand it. Foreigners can know nothing about it. Besides, it is an unsavoury topic, a communist thing to worry about." So he chose to do his own research, making use of his "rickety old car" to "take me places".[xv]

He found black friends. "An unforgiveable sin ... they came to my home. I went to theirs. I would actually be seen going for a drive or a walk with a coloured person ... More impudently still, I did invite my white and black friends together, at the same time, not necessarily having warned the white against the ploy in store for them. You should have seen them squirm when faced with the dilemma of whether to accept the outstretched hand and shake it or pretend it was not there or simply walk out in a huff! If only they ever discovered that on a weekend trip I actually shared a bed with a black man – a doctor, one of the brightest, kindest human beings I have ever met before or since ..." [xvi] His friends included Govan Mbeki, later the Robben Island cellmate of Nelson Mandela, and the father to President Thabo Mbeki. Another friend was the poet Dennis Brutus, who would be jailed, then flee into exile.[xvii]

There was disapproval that the nanny was left to babysit in the living room, that the cook was paid a pound more than the local average, that the maid was given a lift by car to her family home. [xviii] Ungar raised money to offer a scholarship to a promising African student. Although Rabbi Weiler had instituted a similar bursary programme in Johannesburg, the Port Elizabeth Sisterhood resisted, urging that the money be given instead to a Jewish candidate.[xix]

Irene Zuckerman, who was a member of an amateur theatre group in Port Elizabeth along with an emerging playwright named Athol Fugard, recalls that Rabbi Ungar allowed them to secretly stage a new play at the temple one night, indeed it was the rabbi who opened the door to let them slip in. This was a bold move: the play, written by Fugard, starred two unknown black actors, John Kani and Winston Ntshona. Staging a play with black actors would have been socially unacceptable, if not illegal, in the nineteen fifties. Indeed, she recalls police prowling outside, not sure whether to break into a house of worship and arrest everyone. [xx]

The rabbi began giving sermons with a political edge. The first to cause controversy beyond the walls of the Temple, discussed the case of a local schoolboy, Stephen Ramasodi, who had won a scholarship to a prestigious American college, but was refused a passport. The sermon referred to the Torah portion of the week, in which Moses was denied entry to the Promised Land. The

rabbi made parallels with Ramasodi, who had been denied his dreams, yet was innocent of any crime. The next morning's Eastern Province Herald, under the headline "Rabbi Slates Passport Refusal to Boy", gave generous space to the rabbi's argument, and quoted it with some sympathy. But one sentence in particular stood out: "The harsh verdict over this young man was passed by arrogantly puffed-up little men in heartless stupidity."<sup>[xxi]</sup>

A letter of response to the newspaper came from J Jankelson of Port Elizabeth: "I wish to express the hope that the majority of the Jewish people, local and general, will ... dissociate themselves from the remarks made by that Rabbi, especially his adjectives referring to our government."<sup>[xxii]</sup> Others joined in and soon the Afrikaans press took up the controversy. As far afield as Bloemfontein, Die Volksblad reported "Skerp Aanval deur Rabbyn op Regering. Vergelyk Naturel by Moses". (Sharp Attack by Rabbi on Government. Compares Native to Moses.) The article described a huge row in the English press in Port Elizabeth, and anger at the phrase "arrogantly puffed-up little men". <sup>[xxiii]</sup>

By now the rabbi was a favoured villain - particularly to the Afrikaans press - and his name would pop up in their columns regularly. His congregants became increasingly uneasy:

"And so began a series of episodes, small events, almost ridiculous to recount; yet in the context of South African tension, they were always charged with a meaning that seemed to render them instances of treason, or defiance, or insinuation. Cumulatively, they added up to a battlefront. While remaining deeply affectionate and friendly on a personal level, the Temple and its rabbi were strained in antagonism. Members were frightened for the rabbi's sake, and his family's and their own. He, in his turn, became more and more convinced that no religious leader is worth his salt if he shirks the responsibility of moral, if need be political, thinking and action."<sup>[xxiv]</sup>

Ungar did, however, receive some prominent support. A letter arrived from his former mentor, Rabbi Leo Baeck. "I think you will mean something in South Africa, and open a new way ... Please do not be afraid of the Big Brother; mostly the Younger Brother does carry the day. Nor be worried about polemics, polemics prove that we are alive."<sup>[xxv]</sup>

Despite such encouragement from far away, Ungar decided to leave<sup>[xxvi]</sup>. The Temple management, despite their differences with the rabbi, were stunned when he announced his planned departure, and begged him to stay on. When it became apparent that he had made up his mind, they asked for six months' notice to arrange for a successor. This he agreed to. <sup>[xxvii]</sup>

Meanwhile, the political controversies continued. The rabbi was one of seven speakers at a meeting on 13 November 1956, at the Feathermarket Hall in Port Elizabeth, which drew an audience of 750. Messages of solidarity were read out

from the likes of Liberal Party leader Alan Paton, then at the height of his fame as author of “Cry the Beloved Country”. But it was Ungar’s speech which made the headlines. The Evening Post reported that he had warned white residents of the better-class suburbs of Summerstrand, Parson’s Hill and Mill Park, “who were watching and doing nothing” that retribution was bound to come over their inaction. He described how Hungarian Jews had been driven into the ghettos by the Nazis, and how he was seeing something similar again, “under our eyes and with our connivance”.<sup>[xxviii]</sup>

A more explosive report appeared in the Afrikaans newspapers, Die Burger and Oosterlig. “Rabbi says Hitler Marches Again in South Africa.” The article began: “Race hatred is an abomination and the Group Areas Act is a despicable abomination, said Rabbi A Unger on Monday evening in Port Elizabeth at a protest meeting. This was one of the vicious attacks by seven speakers at the Feather Market Hall on the Group Areas Act ... the audience, which consisted of a small group (klompie) of white men and women among hundreds of natives, Asians and Coloureds, greeted the attacks with applause and jeering laughter ... Rabbi Unger said that Hitler was once again on the march in the Transvaal, Natal, the Cape and in the ironically named Free State ...”<sup>[xxix]</sup>



The article drew a response in *Oosterlig* from “Jewish Reader” of Port Elizabeth, who was at pains to distance the Jewish community from the rabbi. “I want to state



only that this rabbi represents only a very small section of the Jewish community in Port Elizabeth, namely the “Reformed Jewish Church” and that his behaviour is not approved of even by his followers ... the use of the word ‘rabbi’ in your report is of course, not incorrect, yet most misleading, as the largest section of the Jewish community in South Africa do not voice Rabbi Ungar’s opinions and do not belong to his sort of church.”[xxx]

It may have been the Hitler reference that finally sealed the rabbi’s fate. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of December, the Eastern Province Herald announced prominently on its front page “City Rabbi Ordered to Leave Country”. The report said a letter from the Secretary of the Interior had been delivered to the secretary of the Temple Israel congregation, announcing that Rabbi Ungar had until 15 January 1957 to leave the country. The letter read: “By Direction of the Honourable the Minister of the Interior, I have to inform you that ... you are hereby ordered to leave the Union of South Africa not later than the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 1957 ... If you fail to comply with this notice, you will be guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding £100, or in default of payment of the fine, to imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months.”[xxxi]

Rabbi Ungar pointed out some curious features to the deportation order. The first was that it was common knowledge, reported in the press, that the rabbi planned to leave at the end of January. The deportation order was therefore unnecessary. The second oddity was that the order was delivered first to the synagogue committee, and only followed later with a letter to the rabbi. The obvious conclusion, he said, was that the deportation was a deliberate attempt to intimidate the Jewish community “if not into active conformity, then at least into a fearsome silence”.[xxxi]

The organised Jewish community found itself with a dilemma. On the one hand, it wished to distance itself from the troublesome rabbi; on the other, it did not wish to be seen as overly supportive of a political party which had shown no great kindness to Jews. There had also, in recent months, been pressure from the Afrikaans press on an old theme, that Jews were not patriotic citizens.

In February 1955, the political correspondent of Die Transvaler wrote that “The question occurred to me whether the Jews are not abusing the safety of South Africa. They live well here and they do not complain ... If they cherish love for South Africa and have ideas about South Africa, as befits South African citizens, they show it very seldom indeed.” In November, the columnist “Dawie” in Die Burger (a pen-name, usually for the editor himself), wrote: “I want to go further and ask whether the Jewish community as South Africans do not support the Government against the interference policy of the UN ... Will the South African Jews use the unquestionable influence they have in Israel to present the South African case and recruit support there for South Africa just as they recruit support for Israel over here?”[xxxi]

The Board's discomfort can be tracked back six months earlier, to August 1956, when the chairman of the Eastern Province committee of the Jewish Board of Deputies, Mr AM Spira, wrote to the Board's head office in Johannesburg asking for guidance as to how to deal with the increasingly embarrassing saga of Rabbi Ungar. He received in return a telegram telling him "SITUATION COMPLEX. TAKE NO ACTION", followed by a letter from the general secretary Gus Saron, advising him: "We decided that the Board cannot and should not express opinions on political matters or matters that may be interpreted as political. On the other hand, it was felt that we have no right to interfere with the freedom of individuals to express themselves according to their own convictions; that applies also to a minister of religion. We don't think it appropriate that our ministers should indulge in political statements, but if they feel that certain issues touch basic ethical principles or fundamental human rights, they should be free to express their views."

Nonetheless, Saron, in his day one of the most influential leaders of the Jewish community, gave his own opinion on this: "Of course, one expects a minister, especially in the current situation, to act with a due sense of responsibility, and especially in the case of someone who is not long in the country, it would be a wise practice that he should consult with some of the more mature members of the congregation before making statements."[xxxiv]

But in December, after Ungar's deportation order and his remarks about the "intimidation" of the Jewish community, Spira was quick to write to the Evening Post [xxxv], arguing that the Jewish community, like other communities, consisted of individuals "of all shades of opinion" who were entitled to their own viewpoints. Likewise, government spokesmen were entitled to express their opinions about individual Jews, and these criticisms could not in any way be regarded as an attempt to intimidate the Jewish community as a whole. Rabbi Ungar spoke only for himself, "neither for his own congregation nor for South African Jewry as a whole." Spira ended by saying that "despite Rabbi Ungar's suggestion, the withdrawal of his temporary permit should not be, and is not regarded by the Jewish community as an attempt by the Government to intimidate such Jewish citizens of South Africa who may be critical of Government policy."

The president of the SA Union of Progressive Judaism, J Heilbron of Durban, wrote Ungar a private letter, "the advice of a very old man with a great deal of experience in these matters ... I do not doubt your honest feelings in this matter ... but I do deplore the words you are reported to have used to describe the members of our Government, men with outstanding careers behind them, and men who have been appointed to act as this country's leaders and spokesmen ... You are new to this country and cannot possibly in the short time you have been here fully understand the political problems with which we have to deal in South Africa."[xxxvi]

An editorial in the Jewish Review, the publication of the Eastern Province Jewish community, criticised the local press for making a huge “tzimmes” over the deportation issue, and said the “entire Jewish community resents Dr Ungar’s act of making a publicity stunt of it.” The writer wondered whether the rabbi had insufficient work that he could waste his time on attacking the government and said that “Dr Ungar’s departure from our country will be received by some of us with a sigh of relief”. [xxxvii]

A handful of Jews expressed support for the rabbi; none of them lived in Port Elizabeth. One Jewish writer from Cape Town complained that the leadership of Port Elizabeth’s Jewry was notoriously willing to “kow tow” to the government.[xxxviii] For the most, the local Jews were hostile. One, dispensing with the usual racial delicacies, said that the majority of whites supported segregation, and asked “who could honestly say that he would like Native neighbours in say, Mill Park or Summerstrand?”[xxxix]

To be fair to the Temple Israel congregants, on the Sunday morning of the rabbi’s departure, almost the entire membership arrived at the airport for a farewell ceremony, where the Hebrew School children loudly sang “Haveinu Shalom Aleichem” in the departure lounge. Newspaper photographs show some of the children crying. As the rabbi himself put it: “In the eyes around me, there were relief and regret, affection and annoyance, pain and puzzled apology ... A silent group of dark skinned friends stood in the opposite corner, aware that any gesture from them would land them in jail ... Then a few of them, in a mad mood of daring, walked over and hastily whispered their greetings. I shook hands with them, horrifying the white onlookers by kissing my dearest friend’s wife on the cheek ...”[xl]

Rabbi Ungar can recall receiving only one message of support from a Jewish religious leader. It came in the form of a cryptic telegram from the Orthodox Chief Rabbi, Louis Rabinowitz, who had hitherto been no friend of any Reform rabbi. The cable said: “RESPECTFUL SALUTATIONS - CHIEF RABBI RABINOWITZ.” But although Rabinowitz made a number of political pronouncements at the time, he made no public mention of Ungar.[xli] The rabbi also received a letter of support from the last remaining Jewish member of the Senate, the Liberal Party’s vice chairman Leslie Rubin, saying that “Dr Dönges has in effect certified that you are on the side of all that is worthwhile in the values of western civilisation”.[xlii]

## NOTES

[i] Lead article in the Herald Times, 14 September 1990.

- [iii] Interview with Rabbi Richard Lampert, 29 January 2018.
- [iii] "What will the neighbours think?" Essay in *Jewish Affairs*, May 1992.
- [iv] *Community and Conscience: The Jews in Apartheid South Africa*. David Philip Publishers, Cape Town, 2003.
- [v] Milton Shain, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in South Africa*, University of Witwatersrand Press, 1994; *A Perfect Storm. Anti-Semitism in South Africa 1930-1948*. Jonathan Ball, 2015.
- [vi] In his submissions to the Truth Commission, Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris covered many of these issues with an admirable honesty. (Reconciliation – A Jewish View. Submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, January 1997).
- [vii] Personal communication from Rabbi Ungar, courtesy of Judy Ungar. July 2017.
- [viii] According to Ungar's own two-part account of Hungary under Nazi rule, in the US publication, *Jewish Spectator*. (Hungarian Memories, June and October 1959.) Also, New Jersey *Jewish Standard*, op cit.
- [ix] New Jersey *Jewish Standard*, op cit.
- [x] Personal communication from Rabbi Ungar; *Jewish Spectator*, op cit; New Jersey *Jewish Standard*, op cit. There was a competing invitation from Australia, but South Africa seemed closer to Europe.
- [xi] *New Jersey Jewish Standard*, op cit.
- [xii] *The Reconstructionist*, 18 March 1960, op cit.
- [xiii] Milton Shain, *A Perfect Storm. Anti-Semitism in South Africa 1930-1948*. Jonathan Ball, 2015. Op cit.
- [xiv] *SA Jewish Times*, 1 April 1955.
- [xv] *The Reconstructionist*, 18 March 1960, op cit.
- [xvi] *The Reconstructionist*, 18 March 1960, op cit
- [xvii] Personal communication from Rabbi Ungar, July 2017.
- [xviii] *The Reconstructionist*, 18 March 1960, op cit. Another cause for surprise was that he took over some of the babysitting and bathing so that his wife could go out. (Eastern Province Herald, cutting in Ungar personal papers.)
- [xix] *The Reconstructionist*, 18 March 1960, op cit. The idea was regarded as too "bolshie", or communist.
- [xx] Personal correspondence with Irene Zuckerman, May 2020.
- [xxi] *Eastern Province Herald*, 30 July 1955. "A young man, almost a child, had his dreams of entering what, in his circumstances, must be the nearest equivalent of the Promised Land, most cruelly shattered. Moses was old and had learnt to bear disappointment, but youth is naïve and trusting".
- [xxii] *Eastern Province Herald*, 3 August 1955
- [xxiii] *Die Volksblad*, 8 August 1955. (Press cutting in Jewish Board of Deputies archives, Johannesburg.)
- [xxiv] *The Reconstructionist*, 18 March 1960, op cit. But the rabbi did get some support. "Others pressed my hand. 'Thank God, at last somebody says what must be said.' Many more murmured, 'Yes of course you are right, but is it safe? Think of the consequences, for yourself, for all of us'" (*Jewish Spectator*, My Ten Synagogues, op cit.)
- [xxv] *The Reconstructionist*, 18 March 1960, op cit.
- [xxvi] An old contact in London had offered him a plum post at an English synagogue.
- [xxvii] No successor had been found by the time the six months was up.
- [xxviii] "A Price to be Paid. Warning to PE Whites." *Evening Post*, 13 November 1956.
- [xxix] *Oosterlig* and *Die Burger* (identical text) 13 November, 1956. (My translation from Afrikaans.)
- [xxx] *Oosterlig*, 23 November 1956.
- [xxxi] *The Reconstructionist*, 18 March 1960, op cit. A slightly different wording in the notice to the Temple Israel secretary said that the rabbi's temporary residence permit had been withdrawn.
- [xxxii] *Evening Post*, 17 December 1956.

[xxxiii] The Israel reference relates to Israel joining in a United Nations vote condemning apartheid.

[xxxiv] Letter from GS (Gus Saron) to "Bobby" (AM Spira), 1 August 1956. Board of Deputies archives, Johannesburg.

[xxxv] Letter to *Evening Post*, 14 December 1956. Spira was responding to Ungar's initial claims about "intimidation", made immediately after the deportation order was issued.

[xxxvi] Letter in the Rochlin Archives, Jewish Board of Deputies (Courtesy Professor Adam Mendelsohn).

[xxxvii] *Jewish Review*, December 1956. (Jewish Board of Deputies archives, Johannesburg).

[xxxviii] Cape Town Jewish Citizen in *Evening Post*, 22 December 1956. "I have been shaken by the reaction (or lack of it) by Port Elizabeth's Jewry" adding "no man who supports the racist policies of this government has the right to call himself a Jew".

[xxxix] Immigrant of Walmer, *Evening Post*, 11 December 1956. "We should always be ready to give a fitting reply to any foreign busy-body offering cheap criticism."

[xl] *The Reconstructionist*, 1 April 1960, op cit. Rabbi Ungar would spend 44 years as rabbi

[xli] Personal communication from Rabbi Ungar, 1 December 2017, op cit. Rabinowitz, who tended to come out fighting on almost any topic, spoke out more strongly against apartheid than most other rabbis of his generation, as Shimoni has shown. (Shimoni, op cit.) But Rabinowitz too, had plans to leave the country.

[xlii] *The Reconstructionist*, 1 April 1960, op cit. Until the arrival of Helen Suzman, Rubin was the most outspoken Jew in parliament.



## ‘A Ceylon of the Cederberg’: Benjamin Ginsberg and the commercialisation of Rooibos Tea

**Boris Gorelik**

*Boris Gorelik is a Russian writer and researcher and faculty member at the Institute for African Studies - Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow. He has an MA in linguistics from Moscow State University (2001).*

The beginnings of the rooibos trade, one of the youngest tea industries in the world, were undistinguished. South Africans saw rooibos as an ersatz tea for the lower classes. Its quality was inconsistent, and both consumers and the industry regarded its absence of caffeine as a big disadvantage. The beverage was marketed as a cheap alternative to the imported product from China and Ceylon. But the drink of need has become a drink of choice. Nowadays, rooibos is among the most popular herbal teas in the world and an important export item for South Africa. International celebrities champion rooibos drinking. Rooibos is costlier than mass-market teas: it is served in upmarket cafes and restaurants. Marketers talk of single-origin, or ‘estate’, rooibos, which commands stiffer prices.

Because of the initially low status of this beverage, its history was never researched comprehensively. Therefore, little is known about the Jewish contribution to the rooibos industry. In fact it was a Jewish family, the Ginsbergs, who helped to bring rooibos tea to homes across the country and pioneered its exports.

Benjamin Ginsberg, an immigrant from Russia, helped to turn a crude tea-like infusion, suitable only for boiling and stewing in a stove all day, into a modern product with reliable standards of quality. He was responsible for creating a unique and remunerative agricultural crop that brought financial benefits and increased economic security to many people in those dry, marginal farming areas.

Ginsberg’s story begins in Moscow, beyond the Pale of Settlement. The old Russian capital prided itself on being a thousand miles away from those areas. Few Jews had permission to reside in Moscow, but Aaron Ginsberg, Benjamin’s father, enjoyed that privilege.

At twenty-one, Aaron was called up. His regiment was quartered in Moscow and he had a rare opportunity to escape from the Pale once his term ended, as retired Jewish soldiers could make their home wherever they pleased. Several thousands



of them had put down their roots in Moscow. Together with Jewish artisans, traders, hawkers and rag-and-bone men, they made up 3% of the city's population.[1] Even if they could afford to stay only in poor areas, they preferred it to the squalor of the shtetls. Aaron's hometown of Daugavpils (or Dvinsk as it was known at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century) in the present-day Latvia looked far better than the typical Jewish villages, but he wanted another kind of life.

When Aaron was transferred to the reserve, he brought a bride, Elke, from his hometown. They were married in Moscow in 1885.[2] The couple started at the bottom, renting a flat in the city's most notorious district. Such was its infamy that the streets were later renamed to blot out the memory of what was going on in Aaron's time. The rent was low and – apart from pimps, prostitutes, drunkards, criminals and watering-hole keepers – the district attracted cash-strapped but respectable tenants like the Ginsbergs (as well as the soon-to-be-famous Anton Chekhov, who produced his earliest published stories there).



**Benjamin Ginsberg's birthplace, Moscow**

By the time Benjamin Ginsberg was born in 1896, his parents had realised that it was a wrong place to bring up their son, but Moscow could offer nothing better to them. After a year or so, the family returned to their native town of. There Benjamin spent his childhood and early teens. As you approached the town, you passed large forests of pines with crooked branches, interspersed with birches and spruces. The terrain was rather flat, with mist hovering over the river on bleak autumn mornings.

Dvinsk ranked among Russia's industrial, commercial and railway hubs. Although some of the large companies were owned and managed by Jews, most of the Jewish residents were artisans, workers, clerks or small traders. Aaron made his living by embroidering carpets in the town, dubbed 'Little Manchester' for its bustling textile trade. Thanks to his skilled, highly paid occupation, he could rent a flat for himself, wife and nine children in a central middle-class district.

What made the Ginsbergs eventually leave Dvinsk and take the long journey to the Cape? Dvinsk saw no pogroms, although there were tensions between Jews and

Gentiles. Possibly, Aaron did not want his six sons to be conscripted. His brother-in-law, Solomon Slavin, had departed for the Cape in the early 1890s, at the peak of Jewish emigration from the Russian Empire. Slavin settled at the south-western border of the Clanwilliam district and took up farming, supplying fresh horses for the Namaqualand postal coaches. He also opened a shop at the foot of Piekenierskloof Pass. It seems that he invited Aaron and Elke to join him once he had applied for his naturalisation papers.

Benjamin arrived at the Cape at the age of fifteen.[3] By that time, his father had become a general dealer and produce buyer. Apart from running the shop in that sparsely populated region, Aaron would deliver his goods to local farms. Many shopkeepers started as hawkers and peddlers, who moved around the district selling and bartering their wares. They served as liaisons to remote farms and villages, negotiating poor roads and treacherous mountain passes.

By 1904, the Ginsbergs had opened a coaching stop and trading post on the wagon road to Clanwilliam.[4] That old outspan place on the present-day Hexrivier farm – thirty kilometres south of the capital of the district, between the right bank of the Olifants Rivier and the Cederberg mountains – was called Rondeboschen. Aaron disliked the name and changed it to ‘Black House’. The locals, however, quickly dubbed it ‘Blikhuis’ (Tin House) because of the iron-sheet buildings that he put up.

Benjamin joined his father’s business and, being the junior partner, was entrusted with peddling trips in the area. At first, he visited his customers in the valley by foot. Later, when money started coming in, he drove a mule cart.[5]



**Benjamin Ginsberg (1896-1944)**

Imagine how different it all seemed to him, by comparison with his Dvinsk experience. There was no Jewish community to speak of, with a mere twenty-odd Jews in the entire district.[6] Instead of the plains and marshes, Benjamin saw a dry rugged landscape, of which many peaks remained unclimbed.[7] Instead of snow, there was sand under his feet. Instead of the rainy Latvian summer, he faced the scorching dry heat of the Cederberg.

Most locals were poor. They shared flour, coffee or sugar with their neighbours and slept on pine- or cedarwood beds with stretched thongs of ox hide as mattresses. People kept their clothes in large cedar chests and sprinkled a pinch of strong tobacco over them to keep moths at bay. Their floors smelt of dung, which they applied to the clay base every other week. They got around on donkeys, hitching two or three pairs to a cart or seven pairs to a wagon.

Goats gave them milk, bees gave them honey, and wild birds and rock rabbits were a ready source of meat. They baked scones in ash and enjoyed them with cold water to soften them up. They ate veld plants too, such as currant-rhus fruit or black candle-bush berries. If they got sick, there was plenty of buchu and other medicinal herbs.[8]

However, not everything was strange to Benjamin. His knowledge of Yiddish, with its Germanic words and grammar, helped him to get the gist of Afrikaans. Before long, he learnt to speak it without an accent.

The local tea-making ritual would remind him of home: like Russians, who had their samovars going for hours, people of the Cederberg region kept their kettles on the stove all day. Sometimes it was Asian tea which they purchased from Cederberg traders, or during their rare journeys to Clanwilliam or Cape Town. More often, they would have decoctions that they called 'bush tea'. The kind that caught Benjamin's eye was known as *naaldetee*, or 'needle tea'. Some also called it 'rooibos'.

The young salesman was introduced to it in the Grootkloof valley, ten to fifteen kilometres from Hexrivier.[9] He would have seen 'stations' on mountain slopes where Coloured pickers processed rooibos, buchu, kliphout bark and cedarwood before bringing it down to the village. When Benjamin and his father got to know rooibos tea, they added it to their product mix, buying from or bartering with pickers in the area.[10]

In 1912, after a decade in South Africa, Benjamin got married.[11] His young wife, Bertha Abramowitz, came from a wealthy Jewish family in Grodno, now part of Belarus. Having found herself living in Blikhuis, with its trading post by the old dusty road, Bertha felt uncomfortable. The middle of nowhere was *not* the place for her and Benjamin, she decided. The young family thus moved to Clanwilliam, where they opened their own small shop at the southern end of Victoria Street (now Visser Street).[12] Their first child, Henry Charles, was born in this town in 1913. The family did extraordinarily well for themselves in Clanwilliam, having transferred their business to fancier premises in Victoria Street, the current Clanwilliam Hardware.



**Benjamin Ginsberg's shop in Visser Street, Clanwilliam**

During the First World War, Benjamin began to consider the marketing potential of rooibos tea in earnest. It could find a ready market not just within the district, but elsewhere in the Cape and the rest of South Africa, because the imports of the *Camellia sinensis* from Asia dried up. The Ginsbergs probably knew about herbal teas in their homeland. The most popular hot beverage in Russia throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was *ivan-chai* [13], an infusion made from the rosebay willowherb by people who could not afford Asian tea. Its narrow bay-like leaves were also used to counterfeit Chinese teas. If the raw material was unadulterated, the colour of the brew resembled that of the oriental product.

Rosebay willowherb was a common plant in that part of the world and, like wild rooibos, the plant thrived after fires. The more the Russian government raised duties on Asian tea, the more lucrative the *ivan-chai* industry became. In season, a family of peasants could produce over two tonnes. In the Petersburg Governorate alone, the annual yield of this herbal tea reached hundreds of tonnes.[14] The rank and file in the Russian army, like Aaron Ginsberg, were loyal consumers of *ivan-chai*.

The Ginsbergs would have also been aware of the crisis of the emerging tea industry in South Africa. Plantations in Natal had been recruiting thousands of pickers from India before the government put an end to it. The shortage of workers and capital forced many estates to abandon tea in favour of sugar.[15] The Ginsbergs could have reasoned that the diminishing output of Natal would not be much of a problem for the rooibos trade.

‘I’m going to make a Ceylon of the Cederberg’, Benjamin told his wife. He started buying rooibos from all over the region and encouraging farmers and pickers to deliver rooibos on a large scale.[16] His shop in Victoria Street became their offload site. This new side-line proved important to these farmers and pickers. Anecdotes exist about Ginsberg’s early attempts to promote rooibos tea in Cape Town. They say, for instance, that he used to drop small packs of rooibos on pavements to be picked up by curious Capetonians.[17] His other (more conventional) approach was to put up stalls in Adderley Street and hand out free samples with instructions for making the tea. [18]

Standard Bank inspectors at Clanwilliam first recognised the existence of this ‘bush tea’ in their report of 1910. Throughout the following decade, they believed that another indigenous product of the district – buchu – showed greater promise. But as the popularity of the local tea grew, collecting buchu became a side-line to harvesting and processing rooibos tea.

Early rooibos pickers used to pluck or break the twigs off by hand.[19] Later, they started using knives or sickles. The sheaves of harvested tea were laid out on a flat surface and cut it into small pieces by means of hand axes, with handles made from

hard, durable wood. ‘You put your left hand on the branches, grabbed the axe with your right hand and started chopping’, recounts 80-year-old Johannes Ockhuis of Heuningvlei. ‘The pieces had to be short enough to fit into a sack. It wasn’t a work for a couple of hours. You chopped all day.’ Afterwards, the pieces were crushed with heavy wooden poles or mallets (*mokers*), like the one on display at Clanwilliam Museum. In the evening, they moistened the batches of rooibos, covered or rolled them up in sack cloth and let the tea ‘sweat’ (oxidise) overnight. [20] ‘In the morning,’ continues Ockhuis, ‘you checked if the tea had turned brown. If you saw many green bits, you covered it again and let it sweat some more. Then, you removed the sacking and left the tea to dry under the sun.’ [21] On the following day, two people heaped the rooibos into a large sieve and swung it to and fro, until all the leaves slipped through and only the ‘sticks’ remained.[22] The tea would then be packed into sacks and delivered to the shop. When the picker reached the shop – with a bag of rooibos on his shoulder or across the donkey’s back – the tradesman would weigh it, give him the price and re-grade and re-sift the rooibos if necessary. The picker returned to the veld to fetch more tea, trying not to forget the amount he was due. He would be paid at the end of the week or month.[23]

Benjamin Ginsberg – one of the main wholesale buyers of rooibos – understood that if the market for it was to grow, this crude technology had to evolve. An urbane, cosmopolitan man, he got along with farmers and pickers, both White and Coloured, English and Afrikaans. At the same time, he could relate to what consumers in cities and larger towns required. Although he was a trader, not a producer, he had the knowledge and social skills to give momentum to the industry. Somebody, he realized, had to set quality standards for rooibos, as urban consumers expected a refined product, not a ‘poor man’s brew’. Furthermore, the *Camellia sinensis* industry had taught them to expect consistency in the tea they bought. If rooibos was hewn with a hand axe, how could uniformity of cut be achieved? With the primitive oxidising method, how could you guarantee a palatable taste and the intense reddish colour?

Benjamin’s black leather display case (pictured, left) of 38 bottles with different varieties of rooibos and herbal teas, each carefully marked, is shown in the Clanwilliam Museum. This artefact indicates his fascination with reviewing and establishing standards of quality for the *Aspalathus linearis* beverage.





Ginsberg helped to introduce chaff cutters and encouraged their use for chopping the tea evenly. [24] Pickers used to pull rooibos through the cutters like straw, as no machines had been especially designed for this industry yet. He also experimented with oxidation, sweating rooibos tea in barrels covered in damp sacking. By the end of World War 1, the *A. linearis* infusion had become a 'fairly common' beverage with 'well-known tonic properties'. [25] This could have been a turning point for Ginsberg: in the next decade, rooibos tea became his company's priority.

Most of the rooibos in retail was still offered loose and unbranded, and Ginsberg believed that a trademark was a seal of quality for the consumer. A rooibos with a recognised commercial name looked almost as attractive as the 'real thing', *Camellia sinensis* tea. Ginsberg already had his own brand of rooibos – Eleven o' Clock – and constructed a packing facility next to his Victoria Street shop. The brand name gives away its colonial origin: the tradition of 'elevenses', a mid-morning tea with buttered scones, was cherished in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Cape. It was everyone's welcome break on factories, farms and shops across Britain and the dominions.

Bertha Ginsberg remembered the day her husband pulled his watch from his waistcoat pocket, put it next to a piece of paper and drew a dial with the hands at eleven sharp. [26] You will still find that image on the packs of Eleven o' Clock, the oldest existing brand of rooibos in the world. The Eleven o' Clock packet also

featured an illustration of a mother with the fashionable permed hairdo pouring a cup of rooibos for her young daughter in a gymslip dress. The image conveyed the message that packers of *Camellia sinensis* teas had been promoting for three decades: ‘Safe for the family’.

All rooibos was still collected in the wild. To satisfy the demand, farmers and pickers resorted to what we would today call ‘unsustainable practices’. Pickers cut rooibos bushes back so greedily that many of the plants did not survive. Another destructive method was patch burning. Tea pickers were aware that it sped up the regeneration of rooibos plants, which were the first to flourish before competing species overgrew them. But excessive burning brought about veld degradation and soil erosion. This alarmed Dr Peter Nortier, a Rhodes scholar who settled in Clanwilliam as the district surgeon. He believed that rooibos ought to be domesticated. ‘It would then become a non-paying business to rob the veld, and, in consequence, veld-burning would cease’, he wrote.[27]

With Benjamin Ginsberg’s encouragement, Nortier took it upon himself to convert the Cederberg tea into a proper agricultural crop. Ginsberg fretted about the future of the rooibos trade and the fact that annual yields fluctuated depending on whims of nature. Farmer friends of theirs, Oloff Bergh and William Riordan, provided the land for the experiments in cultivation. These four men – Nortier, Bergh, Riordan and Ginsberg – did more than anyone at the time to have rooibos grown and harvested in plantations, much like Asian tea. Although other industries in South Africa could borrow ideas from their overseas counterparts, the rooibos pioneers had to pioneer almost everything in their field. Nobody had tried to domesticate this tea elsewhere because it did not grow anywhere else.

The variety that the doctor developed – the *Nortieria*, or *mak tee*, cultivated tea – grows upright. Its lifespan is five to fifteen years, whereas uncultivated varieties can be harvested for decades – a wild rooibos bush was known to have yielded tea for half a century.[28] Yet, the cultivated variety has become the mainstay of the rooibos industry, enabling it to expand and provide jobs and income for hundreds of people in the rooibos-growing regions. Although less robust, the *Nortieria* is more predictable, delivering tea of consistent quality year by year.

Nortier’s goal has also been achieved: those who make a living from cultivated rooibos no longer need to burn the veld. Because the *Nortieria* cannot withstand the flames, farmers do their best to prevent wildfires from spreading.

The leading tea traders in South Africa showed no interest in rooibos until the late 1930s. The demand for rooibos tea was concentrated in the Cape, where consumers economised by mixing it with imported tea. In other provinces it was still a niche product, with low prices and sales volumes that did not entice the big companies.[29] Soon, that situation changed thanks both to the black tea shortages

of the Second World War and the marketing prowess of Benjamin's son, Henry Charles. Their company became the largest buyer of rooibos tea in the Clanwilliam district.[30] Once Chas Ginsberg had set up a sifting and packing factory in Cape Town, their tea was delivered directly to the city and marketed from there.[31]

In 1944 Benjamin Ginsberg died, aged 58. He was by then no longer just a country general dealer. He owned several properties in Cape Town and had accumulated close to an equivalent of today's two million pounds in net assets.[32]

Chas Ginsberg inherited the family business and in the following decades, extended it countrywide. Most farmers still collected their tea in the wild, and he could not get the amounts that he needed. [33] That is why he went into farming. H C Ginsberg established the first large commercial 'plantations': his three farms in the Olifants River Mountains were producing half of the entire rooibos crop.[34] By the early 1950s, he was the biggest grower, buyer and marketer of rooibos tea.[35]

To break into the markets of Johannesburg and Pretoria, Ginsberg collaborated with Fred Smollan (incidentally, the second Jewish rugby player to be capped for the Springboks). Fred was also a founder of the present-day Smollan Group, a multinational corporation. With his brother, Len (also a rugby forward who played in the Transvaal squad), Fred pioneered field marketing services in Johannesburg. Chas appointed the Smollans as his agents in the Transvaal. Thanks to them, the first packs of Eleven o'Clock appeared in the Witwatersrand and the rest of the province.



Through Chas Ginsberg's efforts, rooibos became available at every grocer's across South Africa. For several decades, he served as Chairman of the Rooibos Tea Packers Association and on the executive of the Cape Chamber of Industry. He also served on the co-ordinating body of all agricultural Control Boards, representing the Rooibos industry and ensuring that all developments and refinements in agricultural crop management and planning and general agricultural Control Board functions were translated and communicated by its cooperative producers, representatives in the management of rooibos of this sensitive climate-unpredictable crop. [36]

His son, Bruce Ginsberg, introduced rooibos tea to the United Kingdom in the 1970s. He owns the bestselling British rooibos brand, Tick Tock, and continues the family tradition by offering his customers the iconic Eleven o' Clock.

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# Helen Aron, champion of Johannesburg's heritage

**Kathy Munro**

*Kathy Munro is an Honorary Associate Professor in the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand. Having trained as an economic historian, she now researches and writes on historical architecture and heritage matters and has a regular book review column on the online Heritage Portal. She is Vice-chairperson of the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation and a voluntary docent at the Wits Arts Museum. This article has been adapted from her original tribute that appeared on the Heritage Portal in February 2020 and appears with the kind permission of same.*

Art publishing impresario and photographer Helen Aron, who passed away in Johannesburg on 11 January 2020, was a unique Johannesburg character. A documentary and art photographer of Johannesburg's disappearing past and a woman of passion, intelligence, flair and great courage, she will be well remembered by the Heritage community.

Helen Aron was born on 30 November 1939 to German Jewish immigrant parents Arthur and Sofie Aron. There is an entry for her father in *South African Jewry*, 1965 (p201). He is described as a "Business Proprietor" and their family address given as Orapa Mansions, Yeo Street, Yeoville. So Helen was a daughter of Yeoville when it was very much a Jewish suburb with its synagogues and Jewish bakeries and grocery stores along Raleigh and Rokeby Streets. She was unusual in that unlike most other Jewish people, she continued to live in this node of Johannesburg – Yeoville, Berea, Hillbrow and Bellevue.

Helen matriculated in 1957 at Barnato Park, or as it was more formally known, Johannesburg Girls High School in Berea. For a century, this was *the* Girls' high school (of course, only for white girls). It was a fine institution, modelled on the belief that girls too should be educated in literature, languages, sciences and mathematics, and also be sports women. It welcomed immigrant children and moulded them into liberal English speaking South Africans, with questioning minds. There were many fine career teachers at the school.

Helen did not go on to university and always said she regretted not having a higher education. Nevertheless, she was an avid reader, particularly of newspapers. Mary Boyeas remembers being told by her that she had worked in Public Relations at Anglo American on that remarkable in-house journal OPTIMA. That perhaps





**Helen Aron and Noel Hutton (town planner), photo by Marion Laserson**

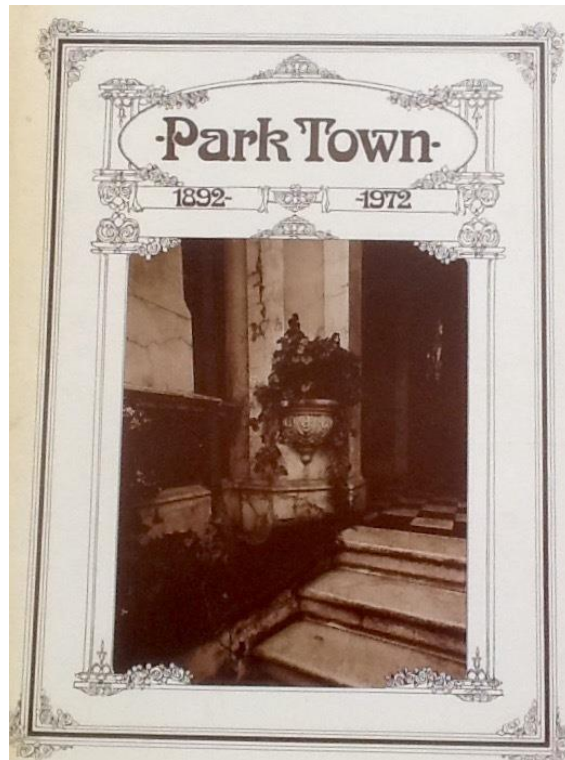
explains her early photographic work. Fellow heritage champion Marian Laserson relates that one of Helen's early jobs was photographing the horse race finishes (those photo finish shots) – requiring lightning reflexes and rushing to her studio to develop and print if there was a dispute as to who won. She adds that she never learned to use a digital camera, believing in an older technology, when photography really did require an artistic eye and careful attention to shutter speeds and light. Helen was also an active and keen member of the Institute of Innovators and Inventors. According to Laserson, she invented a complicated storage system of boxes about the size of large shoe boxes which could clip together and would be strong enough to form a partition in a room.

A Johannesburg person through and through, Helen enjoyed living in 'old' Johannesburg – she stayed put when others migrated or emigrated in the face of a demographic and political revolution. At the time of her passing she lived in a lovely small apartment block in Sharp Street, Bellevue, called Panoramic View. It was a block that was probably erected in the fifties or sixties, when Bellevue was a popular and pleasant place to live and be a city girl. Arthur Aron was a property owner and she inherited a couple of buildings from him. There was thus that side of Helen that practically applied herself to repairs, renewals, tenant problems and partnership with "bakkie builders". She always cared about people and had no side or snobbishness.

At the peak of her career, Helen was a champion of Parktown (or Park Town as she always called it). She undertook the massive project of the special commemorative boxed portfolio *Park Town 1892 – 1972*, with 51 of her photographic images of



disappearing Parktown together with commissioning the significant book on Parktown with the essays by Clive Chipkin, Arnold Benjamin and Shirley Zar.



Benjamin wrote on the social history of Parktown, Chipkin about the baronial architecture of the suburb and the use of prefabricated iron and Zar on Parktown as the garden suburb and its town planning. The campaign to save Parktown was solidly underpinned by these serious, significant research studies. Helen was the one who coordinated the publication, which absorbed her time energy and investment for many months, and she is acknowledged for her conception and realization. The Portfolio was beautifully printed in limited edition in Switzerland on thick cream card/paper.

As Parktown began to change and disappear so did this portfolio raise the flag and awaken the city fathers and citizens to the history of Johannesburg and the importance of conserving what remained in that suburb. After all, in 1972 Johannesburg was just 86 years old - a young city with no respect for its important buildings. Joburg's habit was to invest, speculate, build, use, demolish and rebuild new and bigger buildings. Helen was one of a small group from the Parktown and Westcliff Heritage Trust who fought the loss of Parktown, as office blocks appeared and developers offered home owners tantalizing prices.

The expansion into Parktown of higher educational institutions, such as Wits, was both a negative and a positive. The coherent pattern of residential clusters gave way to large scale campus development and residences, though some prime heritage houses such as Outeniqua and North Lodge were saved. The old Transvaal

Provincial Administration was the biggest destroyer of all with their triumphal positioning of the then new all white Johannesburg Hospital (now the Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital) and the Wits Medical School on the Parktown Ridge. By the time the Parktown portfolio had appeared, the M1 motorway had sliced through estates, houses and gardens, pulverising the Witwatersrand Parktown Ridge. It was all ‘progress’ and it all but obliterated the old expansive, grand Parktown, whose history dated back to the 1890s. The Aron portfolio served as a record of its social history and was an epitaph of note. It was also an expression of Helen’s defiant activism in the face of the bulldozers and insensitive new town planners.

The portfolio of her photographs and the Parktown book rapidly became collectable. Comments Marion Laserson, “What was unusual was that Helen financed the publication herself, through her photographic company, Studio 35 publications and was much admired for both the photographs and for her energetic entrepreneurial enterprise. She was doing self- publishing well before the internet age made it all so much easier. I am still of the opinion that the series of essays commissioned by her hold their own and remain pioneering benchmarks. The portfolio was a work of art”.



Helen’s photo of the new College of Education Campus on the Parktown site - old Parktown demolished to make way for a sports stadium and new brutalist architecture of the academic buildings.

**Clive Chipkin** remembers: “*Anyone who knew Helen Aron encountered a formidable, talented, eccentric, engaging personality. We met in 1970 when she came charging into the Parktown office where I was working and said without introduction, “I’ve found you – we have got to work together on Parktown before its gone”. This was the beginning of that marvellous book Parktown 1892-1972,*

*with its evocative sepia photographs. It was the beginning too of a six month period of chaotic interruptions with her maniac drive to get the book done against the odds. Those atmospheric sepia photos, which she took, caught the neurotic quality in late Victorian era continuing into the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century”.*

**Shirley Zar** remembers Helen as a talented, perceptive photographer: *“Helen broke new ground before everyone else talked heritage and conservation. She recognized why Parktown’s disappearance should be recorded. Helen made a masterpiece of her production of the Parktown portfolio. She wanted an artefact – a work of art.”*

**Flo Bird** writes: *“Helen served on the board of the Parktown and Westcliff Heritage Trust for many years. Her enthusiasm stemmed from the work she had done photographing the houses which were mostly demolished for the development of the Johannesburg College of Education. But she also protested vehemently against noise and graffiti. Helen became a keen environmentalist as well as a heritage conservationist”.*

**Alkis Doucakis** remembers: *“One just cannot forget Helen Aron! We met only a few times -- the first was in the late 1990s, the last about five years ago -- yet it was she who always saw me first and, with a loud, "Hello Alkis", and a big smile would rush to give me a big, sincere warm hug. She would then start chatting, also in a rush, before proceeding with her work or to greet someone else. Helen was a most sincere person.”*

Of her friend Helen, **Marion Laserson** remembers: *“I knew Helen well. She was often at my house; at least once a month and sometimes even three or four times a week. Sometimes she was in a rush to go somewhere else and sometimes she needed my knowledge of computers. In the early 1990s she took it upon herself to promote the Johannesburg Historical Foundation. Helen got the idea that this amazing thing called a facsimile machine would be the way to go. So she would come to my house with a list of all the local publications and a hand written notice for the event. I would then produce the notice for her on my computer – always several times while she supervised every underline, colon, spacing, etc. – and she would sit at my fax machine sending out these notices to about twenty different publications. It took half a day. She also promoted the Shakespeare society in a similar way.*

*Illness barely slowed Helen down. One always felt that there had been a cyclone around when she left”.*

Marion sadly passed away herself not long after writing this, on 11 July 2020.[1]  
In 1980 Helen published a limited edition of a portfolio titled ***Witwatersrand Heritage Commemorative Issue... portfolio one .. Crown Mines est. 1909***; this

comprised four sepia toned photographs of the Crown Mines site taken by her in 1972 plus a folio page about the establishment of Crown Mines Ltd and its later history and a final reproduction of the share certificates. Franco Frescura designed and handled the lay-out of the historical information sheet. It was a limited edition of 1000. The somewhat nostalgic look was achieved with the decorative, overly elaborate scroll borders, giving the set the appearance of a modern day adaptation of an illuminated manuscript. But the photographs convey a severe and sombre mood. My favourite of this selection is the image of No 15 Shaft headgear at Crown Mines, with wild Highveld African grass in the foreground. The light and shade is the grass giving that look of abandonment of an old mine property. Crown Mines became the site of Gold Reef City and that faux heritage re-creation of Johannesburg circa 1890. That was heritage as fun fair and entertainment! Helen did not approve.



**Crown Mines, Johannesburg (photograph: Helen Aron)**

In the 1990s, Helen was an active member of the Johannesburg Historical Foundation with Alan Bamford. She was in charge of publicity and marketing the lectures and talks and reaching the newspapers. Her name appears in the annual reports and the journals of those years. Johannesburg Heritage Foundation was very grateful to Helen for her recent donation of a brand new copy of the Parktown Portfolio, which we sold at the Fund raising auction in December. Rest in Peace Helen - your passion for your city will be remembered. We have lost a pioneer in heritage and conservation.



**Helen Aron at the Holocaust Museum, Johannesburg, 2019 (photographer Gail Wilson). This photo captures Helen's mood and sadness in response to the visit to the Museum. Lewis Levin was the architect. Here the exterior façade is clad with "railway lines" and stones embedded in the concrete. Railway lines, transportation to death camps and cattle trucks represented the journeys of so many Holocaust Victims. The railway line images are not straight but are intended to show confusion of genocide. Helen's parents in the thirties fled to South Africa to give birth to the next generation.**

## Notes

[1] [A similar tribute to her is scheduled to appear in a future Jewish Affairs issue – Ed.]



## Celebrity concerts for Israel in 1950s South Africa - Louis Kentner, Danny Kaye, Chayela Rosenthal and others

**Gwynne Schrire**

*Gwynne Schrire, a veteran contributor to Jewish Affairs and a long-serving member of its editorial board, is Deputy Director of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies – Cape Council. She has authored, co-written and edited over twenty books on aspects of South African Jewish and Western Cape history. The following article is based on a copy of a 1955 concert programme organised by the Bnoth Zion Association in Cape Town to raise money for the Jewish National Fund.*

A recent gift to the Cape SA Jewish Board of Deputies of a 1955 Jewish National Fund (JNF) charity programme has brought back memories of a forgotten part of South African Zionist history. Exploring the ramifications of this programme opened up a treasure chest of stories of lives disrupted by antisemitism and Nazi persecution, linked by music with, as a common thread, a desire to help raise money to develop Israel so that other Jewish victims of antisemitism could be settled and integrated. The programme was for two concerts in Cape Town organised in 1955 by the Bnoth Zion Association (BZA) to raise money for the JNF.

The JNF, Keren Kayemet LeYisrael, was founded in 1901, the same year the BZA was founded in Cape Town, for the purpose of raising money to buy and develop land for Jewish settlement in Ottoman Palestine (later the British Mandate and still later the State of Israel). Support for the JNF soon spread throughout southern Africa, the Rhodesias and even the Belgian Congo. The Tikvath Zion Society in Ceres was the first society to inscribe itself in the JNF's Golden Book in Jerusalem, with the Bulawayo society following suit a few weeks later.<sup>[i]</sup> Once the State of Israel was established, the need to develop the land and settle the hundreds of thousands of destitute immigrants pouring in from the DP camps and from other Middle Eastern and Northern African countries was urgent. As the first Prime Minister of Israel David Ben Gurion wrote, <sup>[ii]</sup> in the period from May 1948 until the end of December 1951 alone, 689 275 immigrants arrived in the country as compared to 363 914 during the thirty years of the British Mandate.

The Jewish communities throughout the world opened their hearts and their purses to assist. Many acclaimed international Jewish performers agreed to come to South Africa to help raise funds for the JNF.

The programme cover read: "LOUIS KENTNER for the Jewish National Fund with the CAPE TOWN MUNICIPAL ORCHESTRA, Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> June 1955 and at the WEIZMANN HALL on Saturday June 18<sup>th</sup> 1955 under the auspices of the

Bnoth Zion Association". The concert programme contained 296 adverts of all sizes, indicating how large the Cape Town Jewish community was[iii], how hard the Bnoth Zion Association women had worked to canvas advertisements, and how willing people were to donate money even if they could only afford to buy a line.



The programme was brought to me by Andrew Newall and had belonged to his mother, Steffie Buechler from Glauwitz, Germany (now Gluwice, Poland). Andrew also donated objects of Judaica to the Cape SA Jewish Board of Deputies in memory of his mother, and to the archives of the Cape Town Holocaust and Genocide Centre. Armed with a testimonials from the Paula Ollendorff Housekeeping School for Jewish women in Breslau, Germany (now Wroclaw, Poland), having taking a one-month needlework course “for female emigrant Jews”, another from the *Wartheim Children’s House*, Heiden, near Breslau where she studied domestic science from May 1936 – March 1937 and a third from the *Dr Beate Guttman* [iv] old age home in Breslau where she worked from October 1937 to October 1938, Steffie had at last been able to get a life-saving domestic workers’ visa to go to England. There she found work in Dorset in the home of a Jewish doctor and was reunited with her younger brothers Henry and Alfred, who arrived with the Kindertransport. They were not to see their parents again – having managed to get their children safely out of Germany but lacking an escape route for themselves, they were killed in Auschwitz (only 63km from Glauwitz) in 1944. Steffie later married Albert Newell, a talented artist, sculptor and photographer and moved to South Africa.



Steffie's life, and probably many others, was saved by the efforts of German Jewish organisations to assist in their emigration. Her Housekeeping School for Jewish Women was a home economics school founded by Paula Ollendorff,<sup>[v]</sup> Vice-President of the National Council of Jewish Women of Germany. This was an organisation of 60 000 members of which Dr Beate Guttman was president. In Breslau, Ollendorff built homes for Jewish infants and girls (a German article less tactfully called it a home for illegitimate children) as well as a school for domestic workers, while Dr Guttman established an old age home. Ollendorff visited America in 1933, lecturing on the importance of cultivating a Jewish social life if Judaism was to continue<sup>[vi]</sup> and (in 1934) on 'Recent Developments in the German Situation'<sup>[vii]</sup>, possibly to raise money for her homes. Returning to Germany, she was forced to immigrate to Jerusalem in 1937 and died the following year. As for Dr Guttman, she moved to Ecuador in 1939.

We do not know why Steffie kept this particular programme all her life. Had she heard or met Kentner in Germany? She never discussed her past.



**Steffie (Buechler) Newell**

Someone else who attended Louis Kentner's Cape Town concert was pianist Tessa Uys, Pieter Dirk Uys' sister. The UCT archives have a copy of the programme, with a handwritten note by Tessa reading, "He is grand but the Orchestra was shocking, drummer should peel potatoes instead."<sup>[viii]</sup>

The programme excited me for two reasons, one being that I was a long-time member of the Bnoth Zion Association and the other being that I had met the visiting pianist.

Not only did Kentner visit Cape Town, but he also spent time in Kimberley, where my mother was the chairperson and fund raiser of the Women's Zionist Association. He stayed with us in our house and I remember him as a very pleasant, avuncular sort of grownup. I remembered him as an old man, but looking at his photo on the programme cover I realised that he was not old at all, but that the passing decades had changed my perception of what is old. I had been given an autograph album for my birthday a few weeks before. As the convenor's daughter, I presented a book to Kentner the following morning as a gift and in return got his autograph in my album. My class mates (none of whom I remember) and the school head girl (as a great favour) had already filled in pages[[ix](#)] but Louis Kentner was the first really famous person to sign his name in the book. Unfortunately, the book vanished many years later in a tidy up session.

Few Kimberley Jews were interested in classical music. Kentner might have carried an international reputation, but to Kimberley Jewry he was unknown. Perhaps if they had been told that he had played Richard Addinsall's popular *Warsaw Concerto* in the 1941 film *Dangerous Moonlight*, they might have been more impressed. My Mother, to drum up business, told them that if they bought tickets she would invite them to snacks with Kentner at our house afterwards. No ticket, no invite, and the guests would then be able to see who had not bought tickets. It was a sell-out.

I was not considered old enough to go to that concert so I do not know what he played in Kimberley, but with the Cape Town Orchestra he played Beethoven's Coriolanus overture and concerto for Piano and Orchestra No3 in C minor, Weber's Oberon overture and Liszt's concerto for Piano and Orchestra No 2 in A Major and for a lighter programme at the Weizmann Hall he played Schubert's sonata in B flat, four Scherzi by Chopin, Poem of the Sea by Ernst Bloch and Venezia e Napoli by Liszt (He was President of the British Liszt Society). Born Lajos Kentner in Hungary, the future Louis Kentner was a musical prodigy who had trained at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest from the age of seven and started his concert career at fifteen. Seeing the writing on the wall, he moved to England in 1935, where he played under many of the great conductors such as Bruno Walters, Sir Thomas Beecham and Otto Klemperer gave radio broadcasts, composed works for piano as well as songs and orchestral and chamber music and, with his brother-in-law Yehudi Menuhin, gave many chamber music recitals. In 1978 he was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

I had heard about Kentner from another source, one of his pupils and concert pianist Evelyn Segal. Her father-in-law Leon was chairman of the Jewish Board of

Deputies (1942-1946) and his wife Mary was frequently chairman of the BZA,<sup>[x]</sup> going on aliyah in her 80s.

Evelyn's mother Jane was the younger of two children born to Mathilde and Louis Kasriel in Paris. Mathilde was renowned for her musical knowledge and was often referred to as "the music encyclopaedia". Louis manufactured organs and other keyboard instruments and employed his son Raymond. Both Raymond and Jane were fine pianists and liked playing duets together. Raymond used to tease Jane because she was unable to put two chords together without reading them from the score, whereas he could play anything by ear and enjoyed composing. Then Jane met Richard Levy, a young lawyer from England.<sup>[xi]</sup> They married and settled in London, where they had two daughters, Monica and Evelyn, both of whom became musicians.

When Germany invaded Paris, Jane lost contact with her family. Years later she learned from a family friend who had survived Auschwitz what had happened to them. Mathilde had become ill with terminal cancer. She begged her husband and son to escape but they refused and remained with her until her death. Their long-time maid then betrayed them to the Germans. On forcibly entering their flat, the SS told Raymond he would be permitted to live freely without wearing the yellow Star of David if he told them where other Jews were living. He refused, so he and his father were sent to Auschwitz, where they perished.

After the war, a friend involved in Louis' business contacted Jane and told her he had managed to salvage only one item before the Germans stole everything else and that was their Bechstein piano. It arrived in London on a Saturday when the family were all in the apartment. She sat at the keyboard in silence then started to play something no one had ever heard before, a profoundly moving work, a funeral march<sup>[xii]</sup>. Richard, assuming she had learned it especially for the occasion, asked her who had composed it. They were all surprised when she replied that it had just come into her hands. They were even more surprised when she was able to play it again, exactly as before. It did not seem logical that she should have suddenly developed this talent, so he asked Evelyn to approach her teacher, Louis Kentner, for a hearing.

Kentner reluctantly agreed to listen to Evelyn's mother, but once Jane started to play, his expression changed to one of keen interest and he asked who had taught her composition. He expressed total disbelief when Jane replied that she had never had lessons in composition or harmony. He told Evelyn later that her mother must have been "lying".

Evelyn Segal was persuaded to come out of retirement after 30 years to play in recitals at Leighton House, London to raise funds for WIZO. After this, she made some CDs including some of her mother's pieces and she gave me copies of her

CD 10 *Composers* for the Bnoth Zion Association to sell in memory of her mother-in-law, Mary Segal, and her mother Jean Kasriel.

The Kentner programme advertises the Bnoth Zion Association's HULEH FAIR for the JNF, Drill Hall, Cape Town, 20-21 June 1955 towards the reclamation of the Huleh swamps, and the Huleh Fair Businessmen's Luncheon at the Banqueting Hall on 21<sup>st</sup> June. Kentner's concerts and the Huleh fair were very successful.

Claude Reitstein,<sup>[xiii]</sup> honorary secretary of the recently established Jewish Sheltered Employment Centre (now Astra) remembered that; "The very first time we tried to sell our articles was at the Huleh Fair which the Bnoth Zion ran - we sold articles to the value of £40 and we were very pleased at this."

The Huleh swamps project was a specific fund-raising initiative of the South African women's Zionist organisations aimed at draining and reclaiming the Lake Hula marshes, a breeding ground for mosquitoes carrying malaria. I remember being shown a film of the project at the now defunct Bnei Zion youth movement I attended. It was a very boring black and white film showing large earth moving equipment moving back and forward – not the sort of film designed to interest children.<sup>[xiv]</sup>



**Jennie Tourel**

Louis Kentner was not the only performer who came out to Kimberley to raise funds for the JNF. Another was singer (she also played the flute and piano) Jenny

Tourel from Vitebsk.[xv] After the Russian Revolution the family fled to Paris, where she concentrated on singing. In 1940, just before the Nazis occupied Paris, she escaped to Lisbon and from there to the United States, where she sang in operas, recitals and orchestra engagements and taught at the New York Julliard School of Music and at the Colorado Aspen School of Music. Later, she taught at the American Institute of Musical Studies in Graz, Austria. Tourel was a keen Zionist. As with Kentner, in spite of her being one of the finest international singers, very few Capetonians had heard of her and Freda Raphael[xvi] remembered that they had to work hard to ‘sell’ her; the same went for Kimberley. Jennie Tourel was put up in a Kimberley hotel. She complained that the hotel room was so small she could not spin around in her wide evening dress so we children were turned out of our bedroom and she moved in with us for the duration of her brief stay. I did not find her as friendly as Louis Kentner, but she also signed my autograph album. In a new dress my mother had made me, with my hair in plaits with matching ribbons, I went onto the stage to curtsy and hand her a bouquet of flowers.

The caption[xvii] to the photo states that Jennie Tourel is holding a doll presented to her by students at Bantu University in Johannesburg (sic) to mark their gratitude. She told the reporter that black people had been kept away from her other concerts in South Africa by segregation laws and she had found them to be “the most appreciative audience of all”. Some of the other fine examples of native art and handcraft Miss Tourel collected are on the table near her.

Another one who came to Kimberley to raise money for the Huleh scheme was Larry Adler.[xviii] Deborah Sagorsky[xix] wrote that he almost walked out of a donor dinner in protest at being billed next to the chopped herring. As he did not stay with us, I did not get his autograph. He learned piano from the age of six, became a cantor in the Baltimore Synagogue at ten, was kicked out of the Peabody School of Music for playing the mouth organ and continued to play it as a soloist with some of the world's leading symphony orchestras including, according to the *London Jewish Chronicle*, to concentration camp survivors in 1945.

“I was playing to these living skeletons when one of them called out, ‘Play *Mein Shtetle Belz*’, a Yiddish folk song. He began to hum and I began to play”. In the McCarthy era in the 1950s Adler was among people in the entertainment industry blacklisted for suspected left-wing views.[xx] He refused to appear before the House of Un-American Activities Committee because, he said, “The only way to get off that blacklist was to go before the committee and shop your friends. There was no way I was going to do that”. He moved to England, where he wrote music for films. Adler was a high-profile liberal spokesman for many causes, including anti-apartheid campaigns[xxi] and, like Jennie Tourel, was a passionate supporter of Israel. He was one of the first overseas entertainers to play to Israeli troops during the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War.[xxii]



**Larry Adler**

Another visiting celebrity one was Danny Kaye (born David Daniel Kaminsky in the USA) who came in May 1954. Kaye was an actor, singer, dancer, comedian, musician and philanthropist who starred in 17 movies. He visited Israel dozens of times and conducted the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra at a number of benefit performances for Israel [xxiii]. As UNICEF ambassador-at-large, Kaye visited Africa under its auspices in 1954. Although I can find no record of him performing for JNF, I think he must have also have done so because this is one concert I was allowed to attend and the JNF gave him a plaque in 1958.

Yet another visitor to Kimberley was Manuel Villet, who was touring South Africa with Lord Yehudi Menuhin for the 1956 Festival of Johannesburg and performed with the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra. Villet hailed from George on the Southern Cape coast.[xxiv] After obtaining a BMus degree from UCT, he studied in Paris with Nadia Boulanger and settled in England, going on to appear as soloist in recitals and with leading orchestras, as well as in France and South Africa.[xxv] Levia Mauerberger approached him to give a concert for her Bnoth Zion Avodah branch.[xxvi] Her branch wanted to buy a cot for the Mothercraft Training Centre[xxvii] in their name.



**Manuel Villet**

“Villet was willing to give us a recital in Temple Israel for £100 but needed a baby grand piano, so we went to see a very wealthy man who had several pianos. He was reading the paper and ignored us. I said, “We are here, you know.” He said “Sit down, sit down.” I said, “I am not going to sit down unless you take the newspaper away from in front of you because I like to see your face.” So he said, “Well, what can I do for you or what can you do for me?” I said, “You are not going to do something for me, you are going to do something for the Bnoth Zion Association”. But when we went to the hall to put out the chairs we found that he had sent a tiny little piano instead and Villet refused to play on it. I had to go back to the owner to ask him to please lend us the baby grand. He said “You are asking too much. What are you going to give me in return?” In the end I offered to advertise him by placing a notice in front of the piano saying: THIS PIANO IS LOANED BY MR ISIDORE COHEN. He agreed, we got our piano and the Mothercraft Training Centre got a cot.” We sold about 700 tickets but it took a lot of motivation, persistence and drive.

“We also organised a very successful concert with Chayela Rosenthal who had recently come to South Africa from the Vilna Ghetto and the labour camps. We asked her to put on a concert for us with Pip Friedman and many other artists. She was a magnificent actress and it was the most wonderful evening.”

Chayela Rosenthal<sup>[xxviii]</sup>, known as the “Wunderkind of the Ghetto” was part of the Vilna Ghetto actor’s group, starring in many of their revues, until she was deported to labour camps in Kaiserwald, being liberated, thin and shaven haired in Lembork. She soon was performing in the Yiddish State Theatre in Wroclau (former Breslau) to audiences of survivors. With the help of New York impresario Sol Hurok, she toured DP camps in Germany and sang in Paris and other centres in Europe and America, starring on Broadway. She settled in Cape Town in 1951 and continued to perform and delight audiences, dying of cancer one week after finishing a tour as Golde in *Fiddler on the Roof*.



**Chayela Rosenthal**



As for Pip Freedman, he was a local radio comedian and film actor who had a long running show on SABC's Springbok Radio starting in the 1950s.[xxix]

Seventy years have passed. Israel is no longer a basket case, needing assistance from world Jewry to cope with the enormous welfare, military and infrastructural requirements of a developing country coping with huge inflows of penniless immigrants. It is the only thriving democracy in the Middle East with a remarkably healthy economy, the first Middle Eastern member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, based on its objective criteria as well as its high per capita exports in technology. Known as the start-up nation, Israel has developed more high-tech start-ups than all of Europe in recent years.

As for the JNF, since its inception it has planted over 240 million trees in Israel, built 180 dams and reservoirs, developed 1000 km<sup>2</sup> of land and established more than 1000 parks. However, the Huleh scheme, for which the South African women had been selling concert tickets and holding other lunches and fairs from 1951 to 1958, and which had been regarded as a great national achievement, freeing 15000 malaria-infested acres for cultivation, it was later recognised as being ecologically harmful. Not only did it cause the extinction of two unique cyprinid and cichlid fish species, but it had been a major stop for migrating birds, including tens of thousands of cranes migrating from Finland to Ethiopia every winter who feasted on the mosquitoes. Forty years later 1500 acres were restored, creating a wetland wildlife park interspersed with islands serving as protected bird nesting sites. This has brought back the birds – and the Huleh painted frog thought to be extinct. It has become a major stopover for birdwatchers and migrating birds flying from Europe to Africa and back. An estimated 500 million migrating birds now pass through the Huleh Valley every year and farmers set out food for them to keep them from damaging crops near the lake. The Huleh Nature Reserve is today listed by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, as a Wetland of International Importance. Israel's successes have come with major international challenges from anti-Israel organisations. Antisemitism now often takes the form of being anti-Israel, with Israel, like Jews, being viewed with an unreasonable hatred showing hypocrisy, double standards and demonization. Today well-funded organisations like BDS, locally now calling itself the Africa4Palestine “human rights movement” together with allies in the ANC, SA Communist Party and COSATU want to institute a cultural boycott on Israel and any show put on for the JNF would face a noisy campaign of delegitimization. Thus, in 2013 Dr Yossi Reshef, an Israeli concert pianist and conductor, who has performed in numerous countries, was invited to South Africa to perform at Wits University. Ticket holders, including ambassadors, had to push their way through threatening mobs to get in and the performance had to be abandoned after a horde of BDS-supporting students and ANC Youth League members stormed the recital, blowing vuvuzelas and singing “Shoot the Jews”. The offenders were punished by the university but would not obey the conditions set for them.

The cover of this 1955 Louis Kentner programme has uncovered forgotten information about some internationally recognised musicians, most of them scarred by the Holocaust, who visited South Africa to support Israel. We shall not hear their like again because of cultural boycott threats by the BDS with the willing support of people in government circles. All music lovers are the losers.

## NOTES

- 1) Gitlin, Marcia, *The Vision Amazing; The Story of South African Zionism*, Menorah Book Club, Johannesburg, 1950, 57
- 2) Ben Gurion, D, *Israel: A Personal History*, (Tel Aviv. 1972) 362
- 3) Muizenberg, a seaside suburb, had three different Bnoth Zion Association branches.
- 4) Dr Beate Guttman was a recognised woman activist, perennial president (to 1935) of the Association of Jewish Women (Jüdischer Frauenbund), and wife of the liberal Rabbi – Jacob Guttmann. There is a stolperstein outside her home stating that she fled to Ecuador in 1939. Mirosława Lenarcik Jewish charitable foundations ... - Medaon; medaon.de › pdf › A-Lenarcik-1-2007
- 5) Paula Ollendorff worked as a teacher in Wrocław, Budapest and London, married Isidor Ollendorff the civil rights lawyer in 1888, who obviously shared with her a concern for philanthropic and human rights causes. She was a co-founder of the Breslau branch of the Jewish Women's Association, for which she ran a kindergarten for many years and participated in the creation of the Jewish Welfare Office in Wrocław. After his death in 1911 she continued many of his social engagements and in 1918 she became the first woman in Germany to become a member of a city council in Breslau and was a leader in the German Democratic Party. Paula Ollendorff – Wikipedia de.wikipedia.org › wiki › Paula\_Ollendorff; Paula Ollendorff – Wikipedia Paula Ollendorff Collection : Free Download, Borrow, and ... archive.org › details › paulaollendorff
- 6) Urges Jewish Women to Cultivate Jewish Social Life - Jewish ... 1.1.1933 www.jta.org › urges-jewish-women-to-cultivate-jewish-social-life › amp
- 7) Talks on Germany - Jewish Telegraphic Agency www.jta.org › 1934/10/12 › archive › talks-on-germany › amp
- 8) Louis Kentner with the Cape Town Municipal Orchestra ,1955 ZA UCT BC1556\_AV\_AV1\_AV1.1
- 9) I remember two of the inscriptions : “You may think as you like of the weather/ Of the wonderful birds that sing/but when you sit on a red-hot brick/It’s a sign of an early spring.” I was indeed honoured to have so august a person as the Head Girl to sign my book – I had just turned 11. "My name is Gwen Jones/ My birthday’s in May/ I’m 16 years old/ There’s no more to say.”
- 10) 1939-1941, 1943-1946, 1948-1949, 1950-1952, and honorary life chairman 1960 - 1989
- 11) And subsequently Q.C. and chairman of the Monopoly Board who was described by writer Rebecca West as having a great Jewish mind as clear as Euclid.
- 12) The Marche Funebre (Funeral March) was Jane’s first composition created at the age of 43, and was followed by countless others of great variety, played in exactly the same manner, from start to end and immediately retained in her memory. This “catchy” light

music bore no resemblance to Raymond's strictly classical field of composition, but now, like her late brother, Jane also had and enjoyed the ability to play anything she heard, by ear.

13) Interviewed by Gwynne Schrire, 22.11.2000.

14) Another film they showed us Hill 24 Doesn't Answer about the War of Independence gave me nightmares for weeks afterwards.

15) Jennie Tourel, Mezzo-Soprano in Opera, Is Deal [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) › 1973/11/25 › archives › jennie-tourel-mezzosopran.

16) She chaired the Western Province, Women's Zionist Committee and was an Honorary Life Member of the World WIZO Executive

17) American singer Jennie Tourel holds a doll presented to her by ... Creator: Bettmann | Credit: Bettmann Archive, Information extracted from IPTC Photo Metadata. Images may be subject to copyright.

18) Humphrey Lyttleton, an English jazz musician and broadcaster commented: "He made wonderful music, you just can't get away from it, the sound he got out of the harmonica was as great as Yehudi Menuhin could get from a violin. He could express himself equally well in pop, jazz or classical music." .

19) Dr Deborah Sagorsky: WIZO Chairman 1941-1947; Report of Bnoth Zion Chairman's get together, 26.5.198

20) Larry Adler - Spartacus Educational [spartacus-educational.com](http://spartacus-educational.com) › American History › Theatre & Cinema

21) LARRY ADLER AND FRIENDS PAY THE PEABODY A VISIT

[Www.Nytimes.Com](http://Www.Nytimes.Com) › 1985/04/23 › Arts › Larry-Adler-And-Friends-Pay-The

22) ADLER, Larry: The Great Larry Adler (1934-1947) [www.naxos.com](http://www.naxos.com) › mainsite › blurbs\_reviews

23) Comedian Danny Kaye visits Beit Dolphin in 1950s, Shavei Zion celebrates 70 years – part 2 – Ynet; [newswww.ynetnews.com](http://newswww.ynetnews.com) › Travel › A Trip to the Past

24) George even named a street after Villet [www.georgemusicsociety.co.za](http://www.georgemusicsociety.co.za) › about\_us

25) [redbridgemusicsociety.org.uk](http://redbridgemusicsociety.org.uk) › about-us › president. He was its vice president

26) Interview, 22.11.2000

27) The Mothercraft Training Centre in Tel Aviv was a WIZO South Africa project that trained student nurses and housed baby and toddler welfare cases. Freda Raphael served as chairperson of its Advisory Board

28) Piatka, Xavier, Chayela Rosenthal- Piatka, in Schrire, Gwynne, In Sacred Memory: Recollections of the Holocaust by survivors living in Cape Town, Cape Town Holocaust Memorial Council, Cape Town 1995, 102-103

29) At one time he was married to my father's cousin and used to delight us children by imitating the sounds of musical instruments.

# Articles, Theses & Books pertaining to SA Jewry and Jewish Studies, 2019 & Additions for 2014-2018

**Juan-Paul Burke**

*Juan-Paul Burke is the Librarian and Archivist for the Pretoria Hebrew Congregation. He has previously worked for University of Cape Town Libraries in their Jewish Studies Branch Library housed in the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research.*

This is a follow on from the bibliography presented in *JA Pesach 2019 Articles, Theses & Books pertaining to SA Jewry and Jewish Studies, 2018 & additions for 2014-2017*. As the title suggests, you can expect to find the year 2019 well covered in this bibliography, as well as additions for the years 2014-2018 that had escaped my net.

As noted in my previous bibliographies I have excluded anything from local community publications since as goes without saying they will as a matter of course be filled with South African Jewish content. Also excluded are articles in non-Jewish or overseas newspapers and magazines. I have included academic, popular and religious texts found in academic journals, or as books or theses. A couple of new websites are also included as well as films. These are not hard and fast parameters, though, and there will always be exceptions.

This listing cannot be claimed to be comprehensive and it is more than likely that certain relevant items have been missed. I appeal to readers to inform me of any edits or suggestions of additions to the bibliography ([paysach12@gmail.com](mailto:paysach12@gmail.com)). My reference style is based on UCT author-date. The slight variance is for links at the end of a reference where I have dropped "Available:" before the link and the date accessed at the end. Several subjects are represented including education, history, antisemitism, holocaust, politics, literature, art, music, religion, business, genealogy and Yiddish.

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# GRIT in inteGRITy

**Charlotte Cohen**

*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 South African publications since the early 1970s.*

*The passage was a nightmare. Hundreds of Jewish emigrants Litvaks packed like sardines onto a vessel that would transport them - each with their life's possessions crammed into two suitcases - to a 'new world' ... each managing to get through the ordeal of the journey by their determination to discard their desperation and consummate the dream which would take them to a new home ... each concentrating on the opportunities and well-being that hopefully lay in wait for them ...*

## **BACKGROUND - Sophia Newstead (born Cynkin)**

I was born in April 1881 in Mir, a town in the province of Minsk. My formal schooling ended when I was ten, after which I went to work as a seamstress. Most of what I earned I gave to my mother. I continued my education by attending evening classes. Whatever little I managed to save, was carefully put away so that one day, it would help pay for my passage on a ship to an exciting new destination, leaving behind the nightmare of hatred, poverty and pogroms.

One of the people in our village had a cousin who had gone to New York. He sent a newspaper home once a month. Circulated to every family in the village, it was perused and pored over from cover to cover! They saw a new world! A better world! ... Even if it meant never seeing their children again, parents urged them to leave.

“Go!” they urged... “Go to freedom! Go to a better life.”

When I was seventeen I met Moishe who became my boyfriend. We shared dreams and were excited about plans to go to a new land. People leaving our town went either to America or South Africa.

At eighteen, with the money I had painstakingly saved and with what my parents managed to scrape together, there was enough for a single fare out of Lithuania. I chose South Africa because a Mr. Chaimowitz, a tailor who had left Mir a year

before and settled in Cape Town, promised my parents – and me – that he would have a job for me.

Moishe did not have enough money for a ticket. Actually he did not like saving or even working very much – preferring to spend his time playing or pretending to study. (I say this because with all the studying he said he was doing, he should have been much more learned than he was.)

When I told him that with the money that my parents had managed to get together for my fare, I would be going to South Africa, he was outraged. He said it was not right for girls to travel on their own. He said it was against the law. He told me to give *him* the money. He said that *he* would go, *he* would work and then send for me. I said I would rather use my money for my own fare; and that I would go and work and send for *him*.

He started shouting, insisting that it was unheard of for a woman to go on her own to a strange country - and ‘send for’ a man.

Nonetheless, I told him my mind was made up: and that my own money would be used for my own fare. He flew into a rage. He broke off our engagement and cursed me by saying that all my children would be born hunchback - which was the popular curse of the day.

As having children was the furthest thing from my mind, it did not bother me very much. I had much more to think about:

The long-awaited dream of starting a new life in another country, had become a traumatic reality with the filling-in and waiting for forms and more forms, the packing of my belongings, preparations for the journey and the unbearable finality of saying goodbye to my parents, family and friends, knowing that there was little chance of ever seeing them again.

The uncertainty of the future presented a strange mixture of trepidation and anticipation; enormous sadness, anxiety and fear intermingled with expectation, excitement and hope.

I was leaving a life I had known for eighteen years with a one-way ticket to the unknown.



Mir, an early 20th Century view

## GRIT IN GRAVITY

After an arduous journey, I eventually landed in Cape Town to be greeted with the shock of hearing that Mr. Chaimowitz, the tailor for whom I was supposed to be working, was bankrupt.

He had no job for me. He had no job for himself.

I could only converse in Yiddish. My scant knowledge of English was less than useless. I could barely speak it. I was completely on my own with no one to turn to. I was desolate and desperate. I had found lodgings with a Mrs. Melamed, who ran a boarding house in Cape Town especially for immigrant Jews.

For a rental of 17/6d. per month, I shared a bedroom with five other people. In the 'arrangement' for the accommodation, I was also to wash the pots every night and scrub the floors on a Sunday morning.

Being poor was no stranger to me. I did not mind the extra work I was expected to do. In fact, hard work was my best friend. I could rely on it. Work was my comfort, my security and my salvation.

But not having a job was devastating. I tramped from one place to another looking for work. The little money I had was running out .....

I prayed. ... I vowed I would never ask God for another thing if He would only provide me with a job.

## GRIT IN GRATITUDE

Soon after, I was recommended to contact a Mrs. Lerner, who ran a dressmaking salon which she called '*Madame Lerner's*'. She employed me as a seamstress. My hours were 7 o'clock in the morning until 7 o'clock at night. My wages were twenty shillings a month.

With the money I had over after paying my board, I bought bread, soap and tooth-powder.

Mrs Lerner brought sandwiches to share with me at lunchtime and gave me some left-over pieces of material so that I could make myself another skirt and blouse, as the few clothes I had were becoming worn-out and shabby.

Two months after I started working at '*Madame Lerner's*', a Mr. Bernstein (from 'der heim') came into the shop. He said my parents were anxiously waiting to receive a letter from me as they had not heard from me since I had landed in Cape Town. He asked me why I had not written home. I told him I did not have the money for the stamp.

He placed a coin on the counter.

"You can always come to me" he said. "I will lend you the money."

I left the coin where it was. "I cannot afford to pay you back." I said.

At night, after cleaning the pots, I was so exhausted that I did not hear the snores and grunts from the five other people with whom I shared the room when I went to sleep.

But my prayers had been answered: I had a job.

## GRIT IN GRAVITATION

One Sunday morning a handsome young man came to visit a friend who was also staying at the boarding house. He saw me kneeling next to the bucket, cleaning the floor. I was embarrassed and lowered my face, hoping that he would just walk past me. But he didn't. He stopped and introduced himself as Reuben Newstead and asked me my name. He told me he was a baker. He was born in Riga and had also come to South Africa an immigrant.

He approached Mrs Melamed and complained about my having to work on a Sunday morning. He told her that it was not right to have me do this extra work for her after paying for my lodging.

It was the first time anyone had protected me since I had arrived in South Africa.



Reuben was a strong, determined and ambitious man. He was also a caring man with nice eyes.

He asked me to go with him to a picnic at the Strand the following Sunday. I wanted to go, but was worried about my having to clean the floors.

Reuben sought out Mrs. Melamed again. He told her that he had invited me to go out with him the following Sunday; that I *would* be going and also that I would *not* be cleaning floors on any Sunday again.

It was the first time anyone had not only defended me since I had been in South Africa, but had stood up and asserted themselves on my behalf.

Mrs Melamed did not like it (nothing was more obvious than her tightly, pursed lips) - but she never mentioned my having to clean the floors again after that. Nor did she ask me to leave.

Reuben courted me after that. We went out only on Sundays. We were married seven months later. Over the next nine years, I bore him five children. None were born with a hunchback.



Reuben and Sophia Newstead c. 1905 (Portraits courtesy Bernice Kling)

## GRIT IN GRATIFICATION

We stayed on the third floor of a block of flats. Water had to be fetched and brought up three flights of steps in a bucket..

Reuben would get up well before dawn to make and knead the dough. Deliveries were made by horse-and-cart and had to be done before lunchtime. I went with him and remained in the cart while he loaded and off-loaded the bread.

One of my vivid memories was the day that the horse became detached from the cart and ran away. All the bread lay strewn over the ground. It blocked the road and took hours for us to clean it up.

Other than that, I stayed home to look after my growing family. It gave me a great deal of satisfaction that I had learned how to make do with what we had, and also, how to make what we had, stretch.

No one in my family ever went hungry. Everyone was always clean and neatly dressed.

Reuben bought me a new Singer sewing machine. Worked with a foot treadle, it sewed seams in a fraction of the time it took me to do by hand. I loved sitting before that black shiny machine, suspended for a while in a quiet, meditative world, where I could think, reflect, understand and marvel as I sewed. Reuben was observant. The rituals and legacy of the Jewish religion, together with our upbringing, were an integral part of our lives.

Whereas Moishe regarded religion as didactic, demanding and prescriptive, Reuben's religious expression was directed more by dedication and determination.

## **GRIT IN GENEROSITY**

There were only a few Jewish families living in the Claremont area at the turn of the century.

Reuben could not bear the thought that the Sabbath and the festivals would not be observed in the traditional way. He contacted every Jewish man living in Claremont and the neighbouring rural village of Lansdowne. Each one was placed under a moral obligation to make up a *minyan* and in 1904, the first regular *minyanim* were organized at Askew's Building on the Main Road, Claremont. High Festival services were held in the Town Hall opposite the Claremont Railway station. But the dream was to have our own house of worship.

One Sunday morning, with our son, Bonnie, in the horse and buggy, Reuben went to elicit money for the building of the synagogue. After he explained the purpose of his visit to Mr. Gorfinkel, the gentleman on whom he had called, Mr Gorfinkel responded, "That's a very good idea, Mr. Newstead. The next time you come around, I'll give, you something."

Reuben rode around the block. Ten minutes later, he knocked on Mr. Gorfinkel's door again and simply said, "It's the 'next time'!"

## GRIT IN GRANITE

In 1914, Reuben was joined in business by a Mr. Gershon Fine. But he was much more than merely a business partner. He became a lifelong companion and family friend. He supported Reuben in all his efforts and also become involved in Jewish affairs. Kneading machines, mixers and big ovens were installed at the bakery. It was given the name N. & F. (Newstead & Fine) Baking Company.

After the beginning of World War 1, there were about 20 Jewish families who had settled in and around Claremont. Services for High Holy Days were still being held in the old Town Hall with other services held in private homes. More than ever, Reuben felt the need for the community to pray in a proper house of worship. He called on the more affluent Jewish residents in the area to raise the funds. He was determined. In 1915, a Building Committee was formed. The dream which had been nurtured since 1904 became a reality in 1919. Claremont's first synagogue was erected at the lower end of Grove Avenue. Reuben was elected as the first president of the Claremont Hebrew Congregation.



Claremont shul choir, 1919

## GRIT IN INTEGRITY

At a ceremony four years later, in 1923, the community honoured Reuben by presenting him with a beautiful plaque. I was also mentioned in it. It read: *'The Congregation desires to offer you a heartfelt and unanimous tribute of respect and gratitude for your integrity and your years of service on their behalf. They feel that it is largely owing to your great ability and devotion in your work that the Congregation have realized their aims. They fervently pray that the Almighty may bless you, together with your helpmeet, Mrs. Newstead, and your children for many happy years to come, and may continue to crown your undertakings with His Blessing.'*

By this time I could speak English quite well, but still could not easily write it and there were words I sometimes did not understand. I looked up the word 'integrity' in the dictionary. The meaning was given as "uprightness, principle or honour". As I looked at it, I noticed there was also another word in it: It was the word 'grit'. I looked up that word as well. It gave its meaning as 'gravel' or 'sand.' It seemed fitting that that meaning of the word 'grit', would be *in* the word 'integrity'.

Experience had been a good teacher. For life is somehow always tied up with discipline; and discipline is found in hard work and restraint. I knew that if Destiny were a piece of ground given to us at birth, only by moving the gravel and working with the grit, could the ground ever become a garden. Hard work always brings its own reward. That is its blessing.

Reuben was made first Life President of the Claremont Hebrew Congregation in August 1935.



### Sewing it together

Just like the off-cuts given to her by Mrs Lerner, the fabric of this story was given to me in bits and pieces by my grandmother Sophia Newstead, nee Cynkin - and then sewn together with information kindly provided to me by the late Mr Herbie Merris (to whom I was referred by the late Willie Katz). Mr Merris lent me old papers and minute books which he still had in his possession. These gave me some dates and places<sup>[1]</sup> on which to hang the story. Then, using the yarn of my own imagination to give it expression, I embroidered it with the emotions I think my grandmother would have felt. ....

My grandfather, Reuben Newstead, died in 1955 at the age of 72.[2] Sophie lived another 24 years after that. She passed away in 1979 at the age of 96.

### Connection and Recollection

I was fortunate to have stayed next door to my grandmother for almost twenty years prior to her death. She had a good sense of humour, could be quite feisty at times - yet knew how to keep her own counsel.

She liked to play rummy and to attend the Saturday afternoon matinees at the cinema on the corner – for which she had made an arrangement with the manager whereby she could purchase her ticket on a Friday afternoon. She made the most marvelous *gerigten*, which I have never tasted again since she died. One of them (called ‘*lupchikes*’) made from fermented beetroot leaves and stalks, chopped and cooked with onion and served with sour cream, was like tasting a “one-way ticket to heaven”. I have only met one person who has ever heard of it.

She did all her own sewing, mending, shopping and cooking. ‘Work’ was always her best friend. She showed me how to make potato kugel (my most prized recipe with a special secret ingredient). When I think of how she handled transpositions in her life, I find I am more able to cope with the vicissitudes in mine. She has been, and still is, one of the greatest influences in my life.

My grandmother fell when she was 93. Although she walked again with the aid of a walker, she became very frail after that.

The beautifully framed scroll given to my grandfather in 1923 and which took pride of place in her hallway was passed on to her daughter, Dolly, and eventually on *her* death, to her son, my cousin Jeffrey. Before he immigrated to Australia, he gave it to me. Having had pride of place in *my* hallway for many years, it was recently passed on to the Jewish Museum in Cape Town for exhibition.



Sophia Newstead, 1883-1979



## REMEMBRANCE AND REMINISCENCE

My grandmother hardly ever proffered the stories and anecdotes of her past that I have used. They were related on the few occasions when I became curious and plied her with questions about her background.

Now I wring my proverbial hands when I realise how much I could and should have extracted from the history I *did* hold in my hands. .... Why did I not take more from her while I could? Why was she, herself, not more forthcoming about her early years?

A line in the beautiful song '*The Way We Were*' may offer some answers as to our parents and grandparents reticence about their past ... "*What's too painful to remember, we simply choose to forget.*"

The Jewish religion, however, does not forget. It keeps reminding us of our roots. It is infused with an intensity to recount what has been.

I remember once when my eyes were drawn to the framed plaque that had been given to my grandfather.

The word 'grit' in the word 'integrity' stared back at me.

I looked up the word in the dictionary to check whether 'grit' was Western American slang. 'Grit' was described as 'gravel' or sand' (as my grandmother had seen it); but was also described as 'courage, decision, nerve, firmness.'

What a coincidence that both meanings of the word 'grit' which appear in the word 'integrity' - each with a different interpretation ('gravel' or 'courage') - just as my grandmother and I may have applied them - are both so apt and appropriate..

This excerpt is taken from Dale Carnegie's scrapbook:

*So don't be a pifter, old pard*

*Just draw on your grit*

*It's so easy to quit*

*It's the keeping-your-chin-up that's hard.*

*It's easy to cry that you're broken and die*

*It's easy to crawlfish and crawl.*

*But to fight and to fight, when hope's out of sight;*

*Why, that's the best game of all!*

*And though you come out of each gruelling bout*

*All beaten and battered and scarred*

*Just draw on your grit. It's so easy to quit*

*It's the keeping-on-living that's hard.*



## RETROSPECTION

In the same way as children do not always see eye to eye with parents, or members of the same household disagree, there is nonetheless, a common thread that runs through our veins. It is a cord which irrevocably ties us. We belong to the same family.

Whether Jewish religious affiliation is Orthodox, Conservative, Progressive - or none, whatever our preference - we are knit with strands of the same skein. As it is with the word 'grit' in 'integrity', so are there wheels within wheels ... circles within circles. We are all irrevocably bound. We may differ in our thinking: But we are the same in recognising that 'grit' is one of the integral ingredients of integrity:

It takes grit to meet life head on.

It takes grit to keep trying.

It takes grit to be honest and to accomplish one's purpose.

It takes grit not to lose hope.

What carried my grandparents was courage. What sustained them was faith. Vision and determination drove them and hard work made it all possible

*'Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.'* (Soren Kierkegaard)



The Jewish New Year has within its heart a combination of chronicle and continuance. This is the time when history and destiny are tacked together. It is the time when we are able to cut pieces from the various fabrics we have worn, fit them together with fragments of material donned by our forefathers, and make ourselves a new 'coat of many colours.'

It is at this time that we 'understand' by looking backwards' and, at the same time 'live forwards' by looking to the future.

This Passport contains 33 pages.  
Hierdie Paspoort bevat 33 bladsye.  
Ce Passeport contient 33 pages.

No. of PASSPORT } *CT 15 517*  
No. van PASPOORT }  
No. du Passeport }

**PASSPORT.—PASPOORT.  
PASSEPORT.**

**UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA.—UNIE VAN SUIDAFRIKA.  
Union de l'Afrique du Sud.**

**NAME OF BEARER:—NAAM VAN BESITTER:  
Nom du Titulaire:**  
*Mrs Sophie NEWSTEAD*

**ACCOMPANIED BY HIS WIFE (Maiden Name):  
VERGESEL VAN SY VROU (Nooiensvan):  
Accompagné de sa Femme (née):**  
*Eynken*

(and by / children)  
(en van / kinders)  
(et de / enfants)

**NATIONAL STATUS. NASIONALITEIT. Nationalité.**  
*British Subject by marriage  
Wife of Reuben Newstead,  
a British Subject by naturalization  
(of Russian origin) certificate  
No. 1654 issued at Cape Town  
on 25th March 1942*

Sophia Newstead passport, 1962

# A Glass of Milk

**Clark Zlotchew**

When we were kids Grandma Rosie always cooked a big vat of chicken soup when we visited. I still remember the mouth-watering aroma, and the wonderful taste rolling across my tongue, and the warmth it produced in my stomach. Funny how those experiences of so long ago stay with you.

One day, when I was six years old, instead of being seated at the dining room table, I wandered into the kitchen while Grandma was ladling the soup into bowls. As I came in, I saw her depositing one little drop of milk into one of the bowls. I asked her why she did that. "Oh, it's just an old habit of mine," was her answer. Seven years later, as I prepared for my Bar Mitzvah, I asked her about it again, this time adding that surely, she knew it was against the kosher laws, because Jews are forbidden to eat meat or poultry at the same meal with a dairy product.

She shrugged. "What's one little drop of milk in a big bowl of soup going to do?" she said. I noticed she didn't make eye contact with me when she said it. She added, "And I do it only to my bowl of soup, nobody else's." "How come?"

She sighed, thought for a moment, and said, "Nobody else would want me to do that to their soup. Like you said, it wouldn't be kosher." She paused, then, "Herby, darling, do me a favor, okay?"

"Sure, what is it?"

Don't mention this little habit of mine to anyone, okay? After all, you know I have this strange habit, but the whole world doesn't have to know. All right?"

"Sure, Grandma, but why do *you* do it? You're Jewish, aren't you?"

She laughed, "Of course I'm Jewish, Herby."

"Then why...?"

"So, Herby, what are you learning in school these days, tell me."

Her changing the subject like that made me think she had reasons she didn't want to discuss, so I dropped it. But it increased my curiosity. I figured, what the heck, it's a weird habit she has, but maybe all old people develop strange customs at some point.

When I was seventeen and we were visiting Grandma, Mom told me to go into the kitchen and carry the soup bowls, one at a time, to the table, so Grandma wouldn't have to. I saw my grandmother as she was carefully depositing one drop of milk into her bowl, just as I had seen her do when I was a little kid. Except that now, her

hand shook so that a second drop fell into the soup. She clucked her tongue and shook her head. This strange habit of hers bothered me. Why on earth did she insist on putting one drop of milk into her chicken soup? It started to really drive me crazy with curiosity. I felt I just had to know why.

# # #

A friend of mine and I had joined the Naval Reserve when we were seniors in high school. This involved taking a two-week training cruise once annually plus meeting once every week for additional training. The meetings were held on Thursday evenings in Jersey City, close to the Hudson River and the Colgate soap works. After having graduated from high school, I worked in Manhattan. I would take the Hudson Tubes to Jersey City after work on Thursdays to have dinner with Grandma before attending the Reserve training session. And I would sleep at her house and go to work from there the next morning.

One cold winter day, she put out two bowls of chicken soup, one for each of us. She went to the refrigerator, brought out a container of milk, opened it and tried to pour a drop of milk into her bowl, but her hand shook so that it was difficult for her.

I said, "Grandma, let me do it for you." She let me have the container, and I started to open it, she said, "No, wait, Herby." She hesitated, then, "Herby, darling, put the container back in the refrigerator."

"Really?"

She nodded.

When I sat back down at the table, Grandma looked at me very warmly, and I noticed her eyes brim with liquid. She said, "Herby, you're the only one who knows my secret, my strange habit. I know you've wondered why since you were a child, and you kept your promise and never told anyone about it. You're a good boy, Herby." She thought for a moment, looked at me and corrected, "Sorry, I should say 'a good *man*,' because you *are* a young man now." She stood and said, "So, let's have our dinner and then I'll explain it all to you."

After dinner, we went to the living room and sat on the sofa. She told me to listen, because she was going to tell me a story. She said, "I was a little girl when it happened. It was a little after one o'clock in the morning and we were all asleep, my father and mother, my older sister and younger brother and I, when we heard loud banging on our door. It was frightening to be awakened like that in the middle of the night. My father got up, grabbed his bathrobe, put it on over his pyjamas and answered the door. I got out of bed and peeked out at the door. There was a man in a suit and leather coat, accompanied by two other men in black uniforms. They shouted their instructions: we were to come with them as we were. No time to put

on street clothes. I wondered, *who are these people? Why such a hurry? Are they the police? What crime could we have committed?* As you can imagine, it was terrifying for a little kid. More so, when I saw the looks on my parents' faces." She paused, then, "Well, you've had history lessons in school, you know about the Holocaust, what we Jews call the Shoah. You've seen movies, television series about it. I won't go over the details." She looked at the floor, and took a deep breath. "I *can't* go over the details. Too painful. I'll just get to the point as quickly as I can. So, we were shipped off in cattle cars to death camps." She looked down at her hands, shook her head, then continued. "Like I said, it's too painful to go into details; it hurts too much to remember. I'll just say that somehow, I survived but I never saw one single member of my family again. All murdered." Her voice broke at this point.

She straightened her back, took a deep breath and continued. "We were liberated from Auschwitz-Birkenau by Russian troops as they advanced against the Germans. I spent time in a Displaced Persons camp set up by the Allies, and finally a Jewish-American family adopted me. I was very glad for that, but, you know, never again to see my father, my mother, my brother and sister, my uncles and aunts, my cousins, knowing they, they..." At this point she broke down in sobs. I moved closer to her and put my hand on her frail shoulder until she stopped crying. I felt sorrow for her, but I also felt a burning anger, a desire to kill. She wiped her eyes, looked at me and managed to smile. "I'm okay, Herby, I'm okay."

She inhaled deeply, held her breath and finally expelled it in a long sigh. She looked at me and said, "So, you must be wondering why I told you this story now." She cocked her head. "You'll see. Just listen.

"Herby, those Jews who were murdered by the Nazis... Millions of them were religious and believed in God and followed His rules. They thought God would save them from destruction, they prayed for Him to save them. They expected a miracle. But they were horribly murdered, after being starved, beaten, humiliated. So, why didn't God save them? They weren't evil people. So, why?"

I said, "I don't know why, Grandma. Does anyone?"

She looked at me with love softly beaming on her face. "No. I don't know the answer. No one knows. But, now, think of this: Most of the survivors had once been faithful Jews, had obeyed God's rules the way you obey a father's rules. You want to please your father because you love him."

I interrupted to add, "And because he can punish us."

"Yes, true. That's why the upright are often called *God-fearing*." She nodded. "But they say that God is our Father in Heaven and loves us, His children. And we say that He is all-powerful. Yet, He allowed this terrible, terrible thing to happen to us. It's a mystery, they say. We can't know God's reasons, they say. Our intelligence is much too limited." She nodded, looked directly at me and continued. "You know how you could be standing right next to an insect or a worm crawling on the ground, and that insect or worm has no idea that you exist, let alone the reason you

do the things you do. It's like that with God. We have our five senses, but, like the insect crawling right next to our foot, even if it climbs on our shoe, we don't have the capacity to physically detect God's existence. We certainly are not able to understand His motives.

"So," she continued, "'what happened to the survivors' faith in God after this calamity?' you might ask. I'll tell you: Many of them held fast to their belief in God, saying that God gives us free will; we can do what we want. We can obey the impulse in us to do evil, or we can fight it and instead obey the impulse to do good. God won't stop anyone from doing evil, because He gave us free will. It's only afterward that He punishes the crimes of evil people. Okay, so many people still had that faith in God.

"On the other hand, many, so many, survivors lost their faith completely. 'There is no God,' they said, and still say. Funny, isn't it, how different people react so differently?"

"What about you, Grandma? Do you still believe in God?"

"Yes, Herby, I still believe. God is good and he wants us to use our free will to do good, not evil. There are things we won't do because we have a conscience, people say. I think that what we call *conscience* is God whispering to us, warning us. I'm telling you this, Herby, to explain why I have this silly habit of putting a drop of milk into my chicken soup."

I was confused. What did this chicken-soup thing have to do with the horrors of the Shoah? Grandma saw my confusion and said, "You know, Herby, I'm about to explain it to you, but now that I'm about to do that, to put my reasoning into words, I feel ashamed, because my reasons are so childish." She frowned. "But no matter, I'm going to tell you anyway."

She looked down at the plum-colored carpet for a few seconds, then,

"I don't know if you remember this, but a long time ago, when you were eight years old, your father told you never to eat candy within an hour of dinner time. He said it would spoil your appetite for real food."

"Right. Sure, I remember. He was worried about my being too skinny. And I never disobeyed that rule, because I knew he was right."

"Never? You're forgetting something. By the way, another reason for that rule: he wanted to protect your new grown-up teeth. But one day, no connection to candy, he gave you a spanking because he knew you knocked a boy's tooth out in a fight, and his mother had come to complain."

"Yeah, but the other kid started the fight. And not only did I get a spanking; he walked me to the boy's house and made me apologize to the other kid in front of that boy's mother."

"Yes. Well, how did you feel about that?"

"How would anyone feel? I was angry, very angry." I pictured that scene of so long ago and remembered I had felt a burning hatred for my father for subjecting

me to that, but I decided to withhold that information from Grandma. The hatred, of course, weakened in a few weeks and finally disappeared.

“Of course, you were angry. You suffered an injustice.” She grinned and said, “Do you remember what you did to get even?”

I had to smile as well, thinking about it. “Yes, I remember.” I chuckled. “Every day for months, maybe a half year, I purposely went to the candy store, bought a chocolate bar or a box of licorice, and ate it about a half hour before supper time. Pretty dumb, right?” I stopped talking and thought for a moment. Then I said, “Grandma, what the heck does all that business about me and candy have to do with milk in your soup?”

The old woman’s eyes moistened. She sighed and said, “The way you secretly defied your father? Well, that was kind of like what I did.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Look, Herby, you ate candy before mealtime, disobeying your father’s command. Right? Even though it did him no harm and for sure didn’t benefit you?”

“Yes, but I finally got tired of doing that. And I realized I didn’t really want to have sweets before supper anymore. I didn’t enjoy the food as much after eating candy.”

Grandma looked at me without saying a word, as though she were waiting for me to say something else. Things started to click. A little light went on in my thick skull. I said, “Wait. So, you’ve been putting a drop of milk in your chicken soup all these years to show God you were angry with Him for allowing the Holocaust?”

Grandma nodded and admitted, “Yes, Herby dear. Jewish law says we are not to eat meat, including, of course, chicken, at the same meal with milk or any dairy product.” She paused, looked down at her hands on the table and wrinkled her brow. “So, I was showing God, my Heavenly Father, I was angry with Him for letting my whole family be destroyed.” She started to weep.

I put my arm around her shoulders. I said, “Tell me, Grandma, do you think God really cares about that, about that drop of milk, I mean?”

She turned to me, eyes glistening, and said, “I don’t know.” After a pause, “Probably not. He has more important things to worry about, I’m sure.” She smiled.

“You know, Grandma, all the Torah says about this is that we should not stew a kid in its mother’s milk. Period. That’s all. We now know that this practice was a pagan Canaanite religious ritual. The Canaanites believed that stewing a young goat in its mother’s milk and spraying the stew on their animals and fields would promote fertility in their crops and livestock.”

“Are you serious? Did they really think that? And do that?”

“Yeah, they did. I’ve read about it. And, of course, we’re not supposed to imitate their pagan practices. But, you know, besides that reason, I think there’s another

reason: a mother's milk is for sustaining life in her baby, right? So, using a mother goat's milk to cook her dead offspring, seems cynical, unfeeling, and really sinful. It would be like adding insult to injury. But besides, that, Grandma, we're talking about chicken soup. Well, chickens aren't even mammals, so including chickens in the ban doesn't make sense. Anyhow, nowhere does the Torah say we couldn't eat meat at the same meal as milk, or cheese or ice-cream."

"So, how come...?"

"Much later," I explained, "the rabbis, who are mere humans, decided that if we were not allowed to mix meat and milk at a meal, that would certainly keep us from boiling a baby goat in its mother's milk. That's what they called 'building fences around fences.' Extra prohibitions to make sure we don't even come close to the central forbidden act."

She looked down at the carpet, deep in thought. Then she looked at me and said, "So, Herby, maybe my childish behaviour, breaking the kosher laws, didn't mean anything?"

"Did it mean something to you?"

She thought for a moment, "I thought I was sending God a message, just between Him and me."

"I'm sure He got the message, Grandma. He understood your motives. But just like my father would have understood if he had found out I ate candy before supper, he would be angry for a while, but would forgive me. After all, I'm his son and he loved me."

Grandma smiled, turned toward me and gave me a big hug. She then stood, smiled and said, "Come, Herby, let's eat!" She added, "And no more milk in my chicken soup."