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- **Front cover image:** SAJBD National President Zev Krengel (left) with Rabbi Doron Perez, during the shiva week for Rabbi Perez' son Captain Daniel Perez, October 2025. Cpt. Perez, a platoon commander in the 7th Armored Brigade's 77th Battalion, was killed battling Hamas on 7 October 2023. His body was taken to Gaza and held there for two years until being repatriated to Israel as part of a final ceasefire agreement between Israel and the Hamas regime.



ECHOES OF (POST) MEMORY: A JOURNEY THROUGH JEWISH POLAND, JULY 2025

Veronica Belling

At the beginning of 2025, a tour to Poland was advertised by the Cape Town Holocaust and Genocide Centre. It would be led by its new Director, Jakub Nowakowski.

Despite the fact that the tour did not include Lithuania, where my own family originates, I realised that this was a unique opportunity, not to be missed! Thus, when Bonny Feldman, editor of the *Cape Jewish Chronicle*, and herself a participant in the tour, requested that we submit our reasons for participating in the tour, I wrote:

My interest is historical and literary rather than genealogical. As a Jewish Studies librarian, researcher and teacher, I have studied Jewish history and am passionate about Jewish languages – both Hebrew and Yiddish. My own family, like most South African Jews, came from Lithuania, just after the Boer War, in 1903. I have visited Lithuania twice. On the other hand, with over 3 million Jews – versus 220 000 in Lithuania – Poland was the heartland of Jewry – and Vilna, the capital of Lithuania, was once part of Poland! Moreover, this tour is organised by the Cape Town Holocaust and Genocide Centre whose Director, Jakub Nowakowski, is himself a Pole, the former Director of the Galician Jewish Museum in Krakow. This is a first and I want to be part of it!

Both Jakub Nowakowski and his wife Gossia have master's degrees in Jewish studies from the Jagellonian University in Krakow, Poland, one of the oldest

universities in Europe. Gossia is a professional guide, educator and founder of Walkative, expert-led walking tours in cities across Poland and Europe.

With the exception of two Americans and two Canadians, participants in the group were either from South Africa or had a South African background and are living abroad. From Cape Town came Myra Osrin, founding Trustee and first Director of the Holocaust and Genocide Centre, Bonnie Feldman, editor of the *Cape Jewish Chronicle*, myself, an Honorary Research Associate at the Kaplan Centre, University of Cape Town, Jos Horwitz, a former Jewish kindergarten headmistress, and her brother, Saul Gorin. Both are first generation South Africans who hold Polish passports. The group also included a former member of staff at the Holocaust Centre, Ursula Gaffley (recently retired) and a new staff member, Avante Jafta. Former South Africans living overseas were Mandy Spiegel, who lives in the UK and Jackie Greis who lives in Chicago. From Boston, US, came a couple of retired medical doctors, Ruth Kandall and Kevan Hartshorn, with their son Max and his partner Jaime, from Canada. Ruth's parents met in the Krakow Ghetto and her grandfather is buried in the cemetery in Krakow.

In Warsaw, we stayed at the Sofitel Hotel. It is adjacent to Pilsudski square, named for Jozef Pilsudski (1867-1935), the first Chief of the State of Poland when it regained its independence in 1918 and who was known to have been good to the Jews.



At the outset, it was emphasized that for the Poles the history of Poland during the Holocaust is extremely problematic. During the war years, although only

one out of ten Poles were killed versus 9 out of 10 Jews, nonetheless the Poles still feel their suffering very deeply. German policy aimed to destroy the Polish nation and culture and ruthlessly exploit the forced labour of Polish peasants and workers. The Germans killed thousands of civilian leaders and many more were sent to concentration camps, such as the newly built Auschwitz, where until 1942, Poles constituted the majority of the prisoners. Large numbers of ethnic Germans were moved into Polish territory that had been emptied by forced mass deportations of ethnic Poles.



Sign in downtown Warsaw

A Polish government-in-exile was established in France and when France fell it moved to London. Its purpose was to co-ordinate the activities of the Polish home army. In August 1944, the Polish resistance staged a violent mass uprising against the Germans in Warsaw. The rebellion lasted for two months before it was eventually crushed. More than 200 000 Poles were killed in the uprising.^[1] 1 August, the day the uprising began, is a day of remembrance for the Polish people and a siren is sounded to mark it.

On the other hand, the Poles have a grim history of antisemitism, particularly in the aftermath of the Holocaust. According to *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, after the war, of approximately 275 000 to 380 000 Polish Jews left in Poland and the Ukraine, by 1950, mass migration had seen this figure being reduced to around 45 000 in Poland alone.^[2] Numbers continued to dwindle until finally the antisemitic campaign initiated by the Soviets, that reignited Polish antisemitism in the years 1967-1968, left an estimated Jewish population of between 5 and 10 000. March 1968 brought organised Jewish life in Poland to an end. ^[3]

After the fall of the Communist regime in 1989 the situation of Polish Jews normalized. Jewish life experienced a revival and growth to foster a thriving cultural and religious scene with young Poles increasingly engaging in Jewish history and heritage. This transformation was marked by the opening of Jewish community centres, cultural programs and festivals. The community saw an

increase in people identifying as Jewish including many who had rediscovered their roots.^[4] According to the 2021 Polish census there were 17 156 Jews living in Poland, but how many are Jews according to Jewish law is unknown. It is a sad reflection on the pre-Holocaust figure of 3.5 million.

The tour was advertised as “Echoes of (Post) Memory: a Journey Through Jewish Poland.” Each day we were handed an envelope with texts that contained the traumatic memories of Holocaust survivors. However, what I was searching for were, “Echoes of (Past) Memory.” In my mind the tour did not start in 1939 with the German invasion of Poland, but with the first evidence of Jews in Poland. Founded in the 10th Century, geographically Poland expanded from a nucleus between the Odra (Oder) and Vistula rivers, extending as far as the Baltic, the Dnieper, the Black Sea and the Carpathian Mountains. The earliest documentary references to Jews are made in a responsum of a rabbinical court in Krakow in the first half of the eleventh century. Sources in the high and late Middle Ages indicate the Germanic origin of the Jews in their acceptance of Ashkenazic rabbinic authority, the Yiddish language, and Polish coins inscribed with Hebrew letters, minted by Jewish minters. Jews were attracted to Poland by its increasing political stability and economic opportunities, and at the same time discriminatory legislation and increasing persecution forced them out of Europe.

I don’t think there is any other European country whose borders have changed as many times as has been the case with Poland. In 1569, Crown Poland – as it was known – formed a political union with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Known as the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, this became the largest country in Europe, encompassing all of post 1991-Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and Latvia as well as most of Ukraine and Estonia.^[5]



However, in 1795 Poland as such ceased to exist when it was divided between Russia, Prussia and Austria. Russia acquired the most territory, including significant parts of Lithuania, Courland and Volhynia; Prussia acquired central Poland including Warsaw and Bialystok until 1807 and 1815 when it was returned to the Russian partition; and Austria acquired areas in the south including Lublin and Krakow. The area of Poland that became a part of Austria, was known as Galicia, hence the name of the Galician Jewish Museum in Krakow. It was not until the end of the First World War in 1918, that Poland regained its independence.

The earliest concrete evidence of the Jewish presence in Poland that I was able to explore, was the Warsaw Jewish cemetery, founded in 1806, that by number of graves, over 200,000 – although not by area (33 hectares) – is the largest Jewish cemetery in Europe. The cemetery also includes mass graves of victims of the Warsaw Ghetto. As the cemetery was not included in the official tour, Jakub arranged a private tour for me in the early afternoon of the 20th.

The cemetery is situated on Okopowa Street, in a dense forest. There seems to be some debate whether its grounds were once partially located within the Warsaw Ghetto.^[6] However, a sign on a wall outside the cemetery states: “The Jewish cemetery was excluded from the ghetto in May 1941, yet burials still took place there.”

Highlights are undoubtedly the Mausoleum of the three writers: Yitskhak Leib Peretz (1852-1915), the most famous Yiddish and Hebrew author, Shin Anski (1863-1920), author of the famous play, *Der dibek* (*The Dybbuk*) and the, lesser known, Yiddish writer and editor Yankev Dinezon (1851-1919). The designer was Abraham Ostrzega, a Jewish sculptor of tombstones who was murdered in Treblinka in 1942.^[7] In 2016 the Cultural Heritage Foundation conducted the restoration of 24 of his tombstones in the Jewish cemetery.^[8] Alongside is the grave of the famous mother of the Yiddish theatre in Poland, Ester Rochel Kaminska (1870-1975), and to the left is the grave of Ludwik Zamenhof (1859-1917), who created the international language, Esperanto.



**Mausoleum of the three writers,
Warsaw Jewish Cemetery**



**Grave of Ester Rochel Kaminska, Warsaw
Jewish Cemetery**

Other memorials that particularly caught my eye were that of Me'ir Balaban (1877-1942), considered to be the founder of Polish Jewish historiography, and Adam Czerniakov (1880-1942), head of the Jewish council in the Warsaw Ghetto, who on being instructed to organize the mass deportation of the ghetto inhabitants to their death, committed suicide instead. The survival of the Jewish cemetery raises the question as to why the Nazis did not destroy it and use the

memorials as paving stones, as had happened in smaller towns. The answer is possibly because the stones were too large and it would have been too time consuming.

The official tour began in the late afternoon of 20 July in the Old City of Warsaw. In actual fact, as a result of the Polish uprising against the German occupiers in August-September 1944, Warsaw was completely destroyed. After the war it took the Poles five years to rebuild and reconstruct the city as it was before, and today it has been declared a Unesco Heritage site. We passed a church that was flanked by the statue of the Polish national poet, Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) as well as the Presidential Palace with the statue of Polish General, Minister of War, Prince Jozef Poniatowski (1763-1813). We crossed Castle Square, with the historic statue of King Sigismund III, erected in 1644 at its centre and walked through Market Square, with the Mermaid Statue, that was erected in 1904.



King Sigismund III statue, Castle Square, Warsaw

The following day was essentially dedicated to the Warsaw Ghetto in all its iterations. With 380 000 Jews the ghetto, established by the German authorities in November 1940, was the largest of the Jewish ghettos. With the suppression of the uprising (April 14 1943-16 May 1943), the surviving residents were deported to concentration camps and killing centres.[\[9\]](#) In the morning, our first visit was to view the physical remains of the ghetto, consisting of only a few walls, at 62 Zlota Streer. Our guide Katarzyna Jankowska, an expert on Warsaw's Jewish heritage, recounted the history, while Avante Jafta, an employee of the Cape Town Holocaust and Genocide Centre, read a moving poem. The site was a small courtyard, situated between closely built large multistoried rectangular buildings, typical of the former Jewish quarter in Warsaw. [\[10\]](#)



Remains of Warsaw Ghetto

From there, we were transported to the Polin Museum, situated on the site of the Warsaw Ghetto. We alighted adjacent to the square to view the Ghetto fighters' memorial that fronts the Museum, as we would be returning to visit the Museum itself in the afternoon. From the Museum square we walked to a nearby killing site, and then to a memorial at an *Umschlagplatz*, a holding area adjacent to a railway line for Jews from the ghetto who were being deported. From there we traveled to the Nozyk synagogue the only surviving synagogue in Warsaw.

Built in 1898, and named for its builder, Zalman Nozyk, at the time the Nozyk was one of around 400 synagogues in Warsaw. It is located at 6 Twarda Street in the Srodmiestie District. During the war it was devastated by the Nazis who used it as a stable and a depot. Today the restored synagogue is not only a place of religious practice but houses exhibitions, concerts and other cultural meetings. It is the only significant synagogue surviving in Warsaw.[\[11\]](#)



The Nozyk Synagogue

This synagogue has special significance to us South Africans as its last cantor, Chazan Jakub Lichterman and his wife Miriam, who survived the ghetto, came to live and work in Cape Town after the war. There are plaques on the wall of the synagogue dedicated to Cantor Lichterman. In the synagogue itself we were addressed by the present rabbi, an American.



**Chazzan Jakub Lichterman plaque,
Nozyk Synagogue**

From the synagogue we were taken to the Jewish Historical Institute, also known as the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute. A public cultural

and research institution chiefly dealing with the history of the Jews in Poland, it was founded in 1947 in Tlomackie Street 3/5, as a continuation of the Jewish Cultural Commission founded in 1944. It was no coincidence that the institute was established in Tlomackie Street, in pre-war Warsaw the site of the Great Synagogue. The centre of Jewish life and the symbol of Jewish culture in the city, the synagogue was destroyed by the Nazis in May 1943. Before the war the Jewish Historical Institute building was the home of a large Judaic library adjacent to the Great Synagogue. During the war years it was also the home of the 'Aleynhilf' – Self Help, the Relief Committee in the Ghetto. [\[12\]](#)



“In this building in the years 1940-1943 the underground Ghetto archive was created and developed by Dr Emanuel Ringelblum, 1900-1944. Murdered by the German killers”

The most valuable part of the collection is the Warsaw Ghetto Archive. Known as the Ringelblum Archive, it was collected by the Oyneg Shabbes group led by Emanuel Ringelblum (1900-1944), a Polish Jewish historian and relief worker who was killed by the Nazis, together with his wife and son, in March 1944. Only two members of the group of just over twenty writers and journalists who contributed to the archive survived the war. [\[13\]](#) The documents were concealed in boxes and in milk cans and buried, and most – but not all – were recovered after the war. The surviving archive contains some 60 000 documents on some 30 000 pages. Other important collections concerning World War II include testimonies, memoirs and diaries, documentation of welfare organisations active during the occupation, and documentation of the Jewish Councils. The collection also includes some 40 000 photographs of Jewish life in Poland. The Institute has published the full edition of the Ringelblum Archive, and an

English translation of the Archive is underway.[\[14\]](#) In 1999 the collection was entered into the Unesco Memory of the World List. It is one of only three Polish submissions along with those relating to the famous Polish musician, Frederick Chopin, and the astronomer, Nicolas Copernicus.



Published volumes of the Ringelblum Archive

After our visit to the Jewish Historical Institute, we finally made our way back to the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, where we had lunch in their kosher style restaurant. The Polin Museum, which opened in 2013, is spectacular. It was designed by a Finnish architect whose design was chosen from 100 submissions.

At the heart of the museum is the Core Exhibition – a journey through a thousand-year history of Jewish life in Polish lands from the Middle Ages until today. Here one will find answers as to how Jews came to Poland, how they became the largest diasporic community, how this came to an end and what is being done to revive Jewish life today. The exhibition is made up of eight galleries and is spread over 4000m². It shows the social, religious and political diversity, highlighting dramatic events from the past, the Holocaust and until contemporary times. The exhibit is made up of a fascinating combination of artifacts, paintings and interactive installations, reconstructions and models, video projections, sounds and words.[\[15\]](#) It features a stunning reconstructed 17th Century synagogue, as well as a street in pre-war Warsaw with its unique architecture.



Reconstructed 17th Century synagogue, Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews



Reconstructed pre-war Warsaw street

The following day we travelled from Warsaw to Lublin via Kazimierz-Dolny, a small historic town in eastern Poland 50 kilometres from Lublin, where we had

a guided tour and a lunch break. Now a tourist destination, the town enjoyed its greatest prosperity in the 16th and 17th centuries due to the trade in grain that was conducted along the banks of the Vistula. Since the 19th Century it has become a popular holiday destination attracting artists and today it has a gallery on almost every street.^[16] From a Jewish perspective its claim to fame is that the famous movie, *Yidl mitn Fidl* with Molly Picon, as well as Ansky's *Der dibek* (The Dybbuk) were filmed there. Kazimierz-Dolny also has a small synagogue that houses a museum that is used for art and photographic exhibitions. On leaving the town, we stopped briefly at the former Czerniawy cemetery that was used as a killing site. A memorial wall was constructed from the fragments of the tombstones.



Memorial Wall at former Czerniawy Cemetery

Our next stop, the city of Lublin, once contained one of the largest and most significant Jewish communities in pre-partition Poland. Its significance stemmed partly from the city's location on trade routes from Krakow to both Vilna and Lwow. The 16th Century was the heyday of the Lublin community, when education and culture flourished. Many eminent scholars of the day served as rabbis including Shelomoh ben Yehiel Luria, known as the Maharshal (1510?-1573). A famous yeshiva was founded around 1530 and a Hebrew press in 1547. The Council of the Four Lands, the chief Jewish authority in the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth was located there, from the late 16th Century until its dissolution in 1764. At the end of the 18th Century, Lublin became an important centre of Hasidism: the *tsadik* Ya'akov Yitskhak Horowitz (1745-1815), known as the seer of Lublin, was active there.



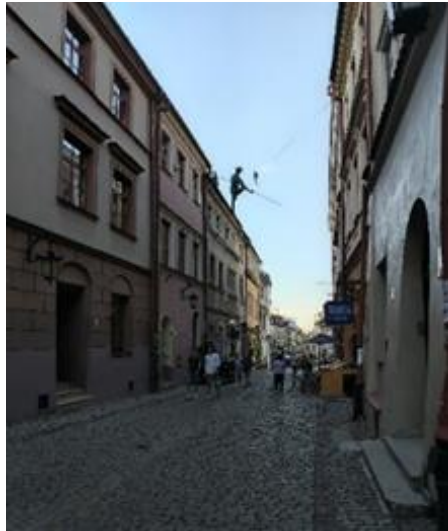
Hotel Ilan, in the former Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin

After the third partition of Poland (1795), when Lublin came under Austrian rule,^[17] its Jewish population numbered 4500. After the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) Lublin was incorporated into the Kingdom of Poland. In 1877 the opening of a railway to Warsaw resulted in an economic boom. By 1897 a total of 23 586 Jews, constituting 50.9% of the population, lived in Lublin. In 1916, a Jewish Public library was opened and in the same year the first Polish Jewish newspaper was published. In 1918 the first issue of the Yiddish newspaper, *Lubliner Togblat* was published that continued almost uninterruptedly until 1939. By 1921 the number of Jews in Lublin had risen to 37 337, forming 34.7% of the population. In the interwar years seven synagogues functioned, along with several dozen prayer houses. Yiddish newspapers flourished. In 1930 a yeshiva, Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin was founded by Rabbi Me'ir Shapira.

With the Nazi occupation in 1939, Lublin was home to approximately 38 000 Jews (31% of the population); this number rose to 45 000 (including 6000 refugees) by 1941, and a ghetto accommodating 34 000 people was established in March 1942; its inhabitants were deported mainly to Belzec and Majdanek concentration and death camps. ^[18]

In 2004 the building of the Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, was finally returned to the Jewish community. In 2007 its synagogue was restored together with community offices and a mikvah. In 2013, the Hotel Ilan, where our group stayed, was opened in the building.^[19] From there we explored the Old City of Lublin.

On top of one of the buildings, stands a statue of the “Magician of Lublin,” dedicated to the novel by Nobel prize winning author, Isaac Bashevis Singer. On one of the streets is a building that served as a Jewish orphanage whose inmates were all sent to their death. There is a plaque in their memory on the wall adjacent to the front door.



**Statue of “The Magician of Lublin”,
dedicated to Isaac Bashevis Singer**

We visited the Grodzka Gate, also called the Jewish Gate, that was on the border between the Jewish and Christian sections of the city. It currently houses the Grodzka Gate Centre – NN Theatre that commemorates among others the presence of Jews in Lublin. It also houses a multimedia exhibition showing the Jewish district before 1939.^[20] Today they are collecting oral histories and memories of Jews from Lublin. It is run by a young Polish researcher, Piotr Nazaruk, a Polish Catholic who speaks, reads and writes Yiddish.



Grodzka Gate, Lublin

We then explored the square in front of the neo-Gothic castle that served as a prison where Jews and Poles were held during the partitions, in the interwar period, during the Nazi occupation and after the war.[\[21\]](#) We examined the obelisk that stands at the bottom of the steps leading up to the castle, that contains a diagram of the layout of the old Jewish district, established as early as the 16th Century.

On leaving Lublin we visited the concentration and extermination camp of Majdanek on the southeastern outskirts of Lublin, that is only 15 minutes away by bus. Our guide was a Ukrainian, Volodymyr Dyshlevuk. Established in 1941, the idea of Heinrich Himmler, it first took in mainly Soviet prisoners of war. However, within a year it was converted into a death camp for Jews from Bohemia and Moravia (now the Czech Republic), and then from Poland, the Netherlands and Greece. With seven gas chambers, two wooden gallows, and altogether 227 wooden structures, it was one of the largest camps. In September 1943, the Nazis added a crematorium with five ovens. Initially the Nazis used carbon monoxide for the killing but then they changed to Zyklon B which produced quick killing hydrogen cyanide fumes on the Auschwitz model.[\[22\]](#) According to our guide on entering the camp all the prisoners had to shower. and small quantities of Zyklon B was used to clean, sterilise and delouse their clothes. It was only later that Germans realised that much larger quantities of Zyklon B could be used to murder people.



Barracks, Majdanek



Guard tower, Majdanek

Camp survivors perceived Majdanek as one of the most primitive of the Nazi concentration camps. The barracks were wooden, providing little protection against the weather.[\[23\]](#) One sees the plank beds as well as huge containers with the shoes of the victims. One of the barracks contains a museum with artifacts, photographs and video recordings.

On our way to Krakow from Majdanek, we stopped at the Lancut synagogue. It was built in 1761 on the site of a synagogue that had burnt down in 1733. It is a rare example of a vaulted synagogue with a bimah-tower that was built throughout Poland from the 16th through the 19th centuries. In September 1939 it was set on fire by the German army. Fortunately, it was saved from total destruction and converted into a granary. In 1980 it was converted into a Jewish Museum. The pillars and the walls are covered with decorative plasterwork that feature reproductions of the pre-war paintings created in the 18th Century. They include traditional Jewish subjects such as Noah and the Ark, signs of the Zodiac and musical instruments mentioned in the Book of Psalms. [\[24\]](#)



Lancut Synagogue

Shortly before we reached our destination, we stopped at a clearing in the forest to visit the unnamed graves at the Zbylitowska Gora Mass Shooting Memorial. There, 6000 Jews from the ghetto in Tarnow, including 800 children from the ghetto orphanage, were murdered.[\[25\]](#) It would seem that a group of Israelis had visited there recently as the graves were decorated with Israeli flags.



In Krakow we stayed at the Kazimierz Hotel. In the morning, we had a guided tour of the Old City of Krakow, the most popular city for tourists. Due to its former role as a Polish capital city and the seat of Polish kings, it has an accumulation of historical monuments and exhibits. It contains four Unesco Heritage sites, and three National Parks. We walked along the road of the kings from the Church of St Florian through the Florian Gate, along Florian Street to Wawel Hill with the Wawel Royal Castle with its beautiful courtyard and Cathedral. Described as the centre of Polish identity, it is called the Polish

Acropolis and Necropolis as so many great Polish people – kings, country leaders, poets and generals – are buried there. The buildings are encircled by a border of green plants, that was meant to take the place of city walls. From there we walked past the St Francis of Assisi Church, consecrated in 1296, with the famous Pope's window, to Krakow's Main Market Square, that is the heart of the Old Town, together with St Mary's Basilica.[\[26\]](#)



Old City square, Krakow

Next was a guided tour of the Jewish District of Kazimierz. In 1304, even before Krakow was declared the capital of the reunited Kingdom of Poland, a *Judengasse* is mentioned, in 1311 one hears of a Jewish cemetery, and in 1356, a synagogue. In 1494, a fire destroyed most of the Jewish quarter and the Jews were expelled to Kazimierz, on the other side of the Vistula river. Here the community continued to prosper. In 1578, Tax rolls reveal 2000 Jewish residents and in 1796 4138. During the 16th Century, Krakow developed into a Jewish centre of learning. The first yeshiva was founded towards the end of the 15th Century by Yakov Pollak (d.1532). It was later taken over by Rabbi Moses Isserles, (1525-1572), best known for his commentary, known as the *Mapah* (Tablecloth, 1571) on the definitive code of Jewish law, the *Shulchan Aruch*, (Set Table, 1565), by Rabbi Joseph Caro. [\[27\]](#)

We visited the synagogue named for Rabbi Moses Isserles, known as the 'Rema,' where he is buried. Designed in Renaissance style in the middle of the 16th Century, the Rema Synagogue is the smallest of seven synagogues in Krakow, and the only one that is still in use. After 1795, when Krakow was taken over by Austria, the city's Jewish elite increasingly identified as enlightened progressive, with the Tempel synagogue (established in 1862) as their centre – that we visited. The orthodox community still remained strong, and the influence of Hasidism grew. Members of Krakow's Jewish Polish speaking elite served on the City Council from the 1840s to 1939. [\[28\]](#) We also saw the remains of the walls of the Krakow ghetto which has a plaque inscribed in Yiddish that reads: "Here lived, suffered and were killed by the hand of the Hitlerist murderers..."



Remains of the walls, Krakow Ghetto



Rema Synagogue, Krakow

Since 2008, Krakow has had a secular Jewish Community Centre, opened on the initiative of the then Prince of Wales, now King Charles III. It is located in the Kazimierz section of Krakow and situated in a garden in the rear of the Tempel synagogue. The Centre fosters Polish-Jewish relations and acts as Krakow's Jewish visitor centre, and serves over 1100 Jewish members. About 20 children attend the FRAJDA Jewish early childhood centre, opened in 2017. It also has a student club under the auspices of Hillel International. Many of JCC's young members discovered their Jewish identities only recently as their families were forced to conceal their religious identities under communism. JCC is also the primary agency caring for nearly 60 Holocaust survivors. At the time we passed by, the centre was advertising Hebrew lessons and the pictures of the remaining Israeli hostages of the Gaza war were displayed on the wall.[\[29\]](#)



In the afternoon we visited the Galician Jewish Museum, which serves to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust and to celebrate the Jewish culture of Polish Galicia, presenting Jewish history from a new perspective. The Museum was founded in 2004, the brainchild of the British photographer, Chris Schwarz (1948-2007), together with social anthropologist, Prof. Jonathan Webber. [30] The group met with Prof. Webber and his wife Connie, who since 2012 have made a permanent home in Krakow. The main exhibition in the museum, “Traces of Memory” is divided into five sections: Jewish life in ruins; Jewish life as it once was; The Holocaust Sites of Massacre and Destruction; How the Past is being remembered; People making memory today. It welcomes over 30,000 visitors from around the world annually.

The tour climaxed with a tour to Auschwitz-Birkenau on the Friday. As the concentration camp is a huge tourist attraction we left early (7.30 in the morning) so that the queues would not be too long. Auschwitz is the German name for the Polish city of Oswiecim, located approximately 65 kilometres from Krakow. The Auschwitz concentration camp is located on the outskirts of the town and consists of three camps including a killing centre. While the original entrance with its iconic sign, “*Arbeit macht frei*,” is still there, a new entrance had to be built to cater for the large numbers of visitors. Throughout the camp, all the signs are in Polish, English and Hebrew.



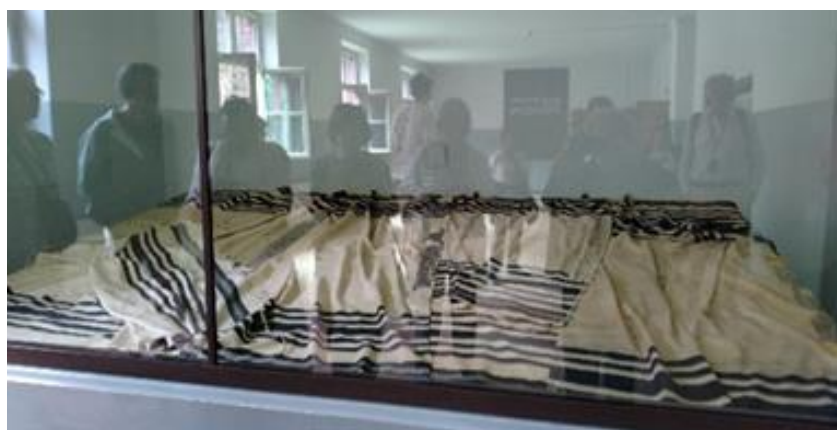
New entrance to Auschwitz



Auschwitz – original entrance

The first camp was referred to as “Auschwitz 1” or as “Main Camp.” The second, the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing centre, also known as “Auschwitz II,” is located near the village of Brzezinka (German Birkenau). This is just over three and a half kilometres from the Main Camp. The Germans started construction of Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1941.^[31] Auschwitz III or Monowitz was located near the Polish village of Monowice, about 6 and a half kilometres from the main camp.

Auschwitz 1 was built as an army barracks and hence its buildings are made of bricks. For the first year and a half Poles were sent there but after that the majority were Jews from all over Nazi occupied Europe. One of the barracks contains a museum that includes historical photos of the arrival of the deported Jews, and glass cases displaying items – shoes, clothes, personal items, *talaysim* – that they left behind when they were taken to the gas chambers. We were shown punishment cells and there is a memorial wall in a courtyard where people were shot. We were taken to see the gas chambers and the crematorium, a couple of which have been left standing. Our guide, who is employed by Auschwitz, was extremely impressive. He was very knowledgeable, and his manner was sympathetic and respectful.



***Talaysim* left by victims, Auschwitz 1**



Gas chamber, Auschwitz 1

After Auschwitz, we were bussed to Auschwitz-Birkenau. This was specifically built as a death camp with gas chambers and crematoria to expedite the killing and cremation of the victims. As the gas chambers and crematoria were destroyed by the Nazis once they realised that the Russians were approaching, little remains on site other than the iconic entrance building. The camp is dedicated to memorial sculptures with plaques commemorating the victims in Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew and English.

After our visit to the camps, we made our way to the town of Oswiecim. There we stopped briefly for a meal and to visit the synagogue where there is a small exhibition. In Hebrew Auschwitz is referred to as “*Oshpitzin*,” that is similar to the Aramaic word, ‘*Ushpizim*’ referring to the guests to the Sukkah on Sukkoth, the Feast of Tabernacles. It was understood that the Jews had traditionally considered themselves to be guests in the town.



Small synagogue, Oswiecim

In the evening for the first time, we met with members of Krakow's Jewish community, who hosted the group for a Shabbat dinner. We met at the apartment of a young Polish Jewish couple, Magda and Michael Rubinfeld, artists and activists. Besides our tour group, guests included two young women, a young Israeli and a young Polish woman, a student of drama at the university, who had just staged a Yiddish play in Polish translation. She was convinced that she had Jewish ancestors and was in the process of converting to Judaism.

The following morning, the tour concluded with a meeting at the Galician Jewish Museum, where we shared impressions and reflections. Although the tour was somewhat of a marathon, it was very cleverly constructed to acquaint us with the three main cities – Warsaw, Lublin and Krakow – (and everything in between) relevant to the history of the Jews in Poland. While the German death camps are iconic – and shocking – and it was instructive to see how and where they were built, they interested me less.

For me the pre-Holocaust history is by far the most significant and I was definitely inspired to read and to rekindle my knowledge of the significant personalities and events in Polish Jewish history. And in particular to examine the 175 volume series in Yiddish, *Dos poylishe yidntum*, published in Buenos Aires, in the direct aftermath of the Holocaust, 1946-1966, that became one of the most remarkable literary memorials to the destroyed Polish Jewish community.[\[32\]](#)

Whereas my former Holocaust knowledge was confined to the murder in the pits and the ghettos of Lithuania, now the social dynamics of the Warsaw ghetto, have captured my imagination. In this regard, I highly recommend Samuel D. Kassow's *Who Will Write Our History: Emanuel Ringelblum and the Oyneg Shabes Archive*. (Indiana University Press, 2007). In terms of Polish Holocaust commemoration, it is reassuring to note the initiatives made both by Polish public institutions – in the case of the Polin Museum for the History of the Jews – as well as by private individuals in smaller but no less impressive memorials, such as the memorial wall at the former Czerniawy cemetery outside Kazimierz-Dolny, and the small exhibition in the synagogue in the town of Oswiecim.[\[33\]](#) In conclusion I can mention that another tour is being planned for next year by the Cape Town Holocaust and Genocide Centre. This time it will be a combined tour of Poland and Lithuania, particularly to visit the brand-new Jewish museum that was recently opened in the town of Shadova, or Seduva, in Lithuania.

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THE HOLOCAUST AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

Gwynne Schrire

- *Author's note: This article is based on a zoom talk delivered to the Los Angeles Holocaust Centre on 23 October 2025. Many thanks are due to Justine Changunda for assistance with the photos, Dr Veronica Belling for information and the Jacob Gitlin Library.*

Unlike countries like America and Australia, owing to discriminatory laws to stop Jewish immigration, few Holocaust survivors came to South Africa. Even though the Holocaust had removed the threat of thousands of unassimilable aliens swamping the country, the anti-East European Jews *Immigration Quota Act* of 1930 and the anti-German Jews *Aliens Act* of 1937 were not repealed after the war. This is despite the SA Jewish Board of Deputies trying without success to get permission for survivors to come to South Africa from HG Lawrence, the acting Minister of the Interior, and JH Hofmeyr, Prime Minister J C Smuts' deputy. Holocaust or no Holocaust, more Jews were not wanted. In October 1944, opposition National Party MP Eric Louw had advised that if the Nationalist government came into power, it would not allow pogroms but would limit the liberties of Jews.[\[1\]](#)

One who came before the cutoff date clamping down on further German Jewish immigration was Ernest Ullmann, an artist. During the war he worked for the South African Army Intelligence Corps, designing advertisements portraying the misery and plight of the Jews affected by the Nuremberg Laws for its

journal, the *IC Digest*. The committee refused to publish them – they did not want to shock the general public.^[2] Even after news of the liberation of the camps, Afrikaans newspapers just mentioned “alleged” atrocities and, instead of photos of concentration camp corpses, published photos of suffering German women. National Party leader Dr DF Malan complained in Parliament in 1947 about “mass murder being committed upon the poor Germans on a par with the savage barbarities in the worst days of Central Africa”, saying further that “the crime of the Jews at Golgotha 1900 years ago still clings to the Jews.” This despite undeniable evidence of the real mass murder of Jews.



“Suffering in Germany”, with thanks to archivist Dmitri Abrahams

Jews felt differently. The editor of the *S.A. Jewish Chronicle* remarked that Malan had not offered a word of sympathy towards the Jews during the time of slaughter but now that a few Germans were suffering a tiny fraction, he found it necessary to speak up for them. As the news of the murders started to filter out in the 1940s, the SAJBD formed a Special Committee on the Tragedy of European Jewry to inform the Jewish and wider community and stir the public conscience ^[3] and held annual memorial gatherings with synagogue services and packed mass meetings.

A South African Jewish War Appeal was formed to raise money for the Jewish victims of the Nazis and sent money, food parcels, clothing and medicine to the refugees in DP camps. Clothing drives were arranged by the Women’s War Appeal. ^[4] After the war the SAJBD visited DP camps on behalf of the Appeal and invited survivor Levi Shalit ^[5] to address audiences in South Africa. He was refused a visa.



JEWISH DAY
of
MOURNING
and
INTERCESSION

*Tuesday 29th December,
1942*

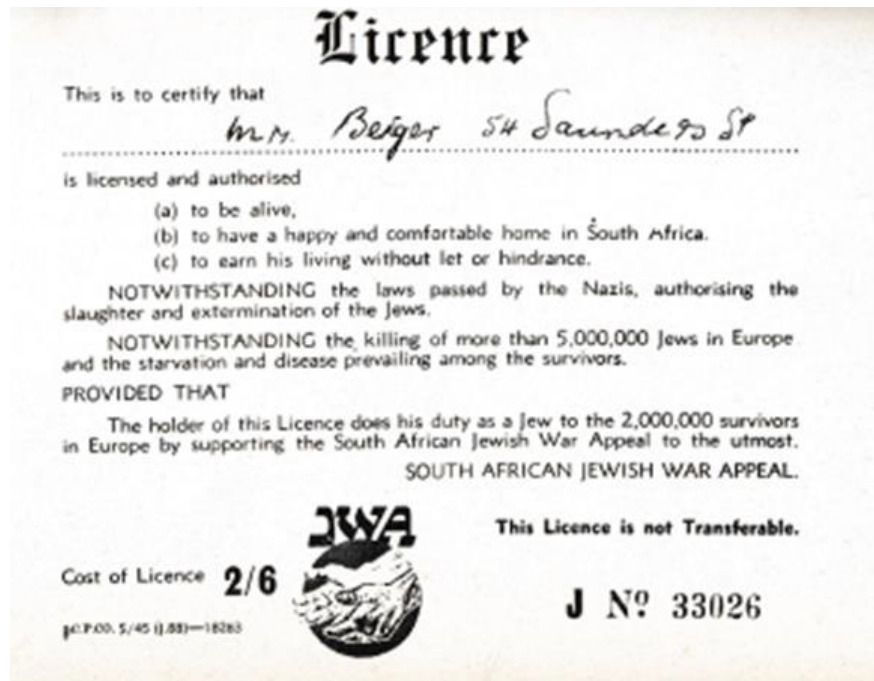
**A CITIZENS'
MASS
MEETING**

To express sympathy with the millions of
victims of Nazi barbarism

SA Jewish Chronicle, 24 December 1942.
Illustration by JH Amszewitz

Imaginative appeals playing on guilt were sent out. One, issued in December 1945, was a summons to the Highest Court of Charitable Appeal on the grounds that the person addressed had “fortunately lived in South Africa during the last six years, thereby escaping the indescribable horrors of the Nazi aggression and war, and (has) consequently become obliged to assist in the rescue and relief of your less fortunate brethren in Europe.”^[6] Another took the form of buying a license certifying that the bearer was “authorised to be alive, to have a comfortable and happy home in South Africa and earn his living without let or hindrance NOTWITHSTANDING (sic) the laws passed by the Nazis authorising the slaughter and extermination of the Jews and NOTWITHSTANDING (sic) the killing of more than 5,000,000 Jews in Europe and the starvation and disease prevailing among the survivor PROVIDED THAT (sic) the holder of this license does his duty as a Jew to the 2,000,000 survivors in Europe by supporting the SA Jewish War Appeal to the utmost.”

The SAJBD also established a Relatives Information Service in co-operation with the Red Cross, the American Joint Distribution Committee and the Russian consul ^[7] to trace people and published lists of displaced people who wanted to locate South African relatives. The office was inundated with enquiries, but visas were only given for family reunification or to rabbis and cantors for whom there was a shortage. There were very few cases of family



Max Spitz, Chairman of the SA Jewish War Appeal, visiting a Children's Home established by the Joint Distribution Committee, Poland, 1948

reunification because most of the Jewish community had roots in Lithuania, where 96% of the population were killed, or in Latvia, where the figure was 80%. The community was thus especially badly impacted by the Holocaust. As many had arrived in the late 1920s, before the 1930 Quota Act had clamped down on further Jewish immigration from that part of the world, their ties with their

families in Eastern Europe were still strong. With the war, all contact was lost and the news of their murders, most having been shot into pits in the summer of 1941, was traumatic.

Barney Simon remembered a little Yiddish-speaking rebbe telling the Jeppe shul about the slaughter in the Vilna ghetto. The whole synagogue began to rock and wail, and he noticed his mother beating herself. That experience, he said, made him a Jew. [8]

In his novel *Home* [9] Cape Town-born writer Ronald Harwood described the first exposure to films of the death camps. “Year’s end 1946... in blazing heat the Jewish community of Cape Town show newsreels of the Nazi death camps... They sit beside each other... in the darkened hall adjacent to the Sea Point Synagogue. To the whirring of the sixteen-millimeter projector they watch the ghastly evidence of unimaginable barbarism. Men and women weep; there is the constant flickering of handkerchiefs.”

Added to their pain was an element of guilt at not having been able to persuade their families to join them here, and of anger with the government for refusing visas that might have saved some.

After the war the few survivors who arrived in South Africa came with no English, no assets, few marketable qualifications or contacts and with often undiagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. They were welcomed by a warm supportive Jewish community, whose communal organisations sprang into action. An employment agency set up by the SAJBD to help ex-servicemen stepped in and Jewish welfare organisations provided temporary accommodation, food and money. The SAJBD also established aid programmes and a restitution office in 1946 to assist former Jewish residents of the Nazi-occupied territories with claims against the West German government for restitution, compensation or damages as a result of Nazi depredations.

Two momentous things happened in May 1948. On the 14th the State of Israel was established. The news was greeted ecstatically, both by the survivors, many of whom had wanted to settle there, and by the strongly Zionist local Jews. Twelve days later, on the 26th, the National Party came to power. That news was greeted with horror. Before the war it had been openly antisemitic. It included people who had met and admired Hitler and wanted a Nazi government here. Little sympathy had been expressed for the plight of the Jews. Dr Karl Bremer (MP, Stellenbosch) stated that in fifty or one hundred years historians would not be writing of alleged atrocities against the Jews committed by the Nazis but would be relating the story of the cruel treatment meted out to the German nation by the Allies after the end of the war. [10]

With the defeat of Nazi Germany, the annihilation of the Jews and the establishment of the State of Israel, however, the triumphant National Party abandoned its antisemitism. DF Malan [11], now Prime Minister, issued a

statement saying that “both he and the Government stood for a policy of non-discrimination against any section of the European population in South Africa” (note, the “European population”) and that he looked forward to the time when there would be no more talk of the so-called “Jewish Question” in the life and politics of the country. After all the Jews were no longer a threat and more importantly they were white. Malan even visited Israel, in 1951.

But a series of racist apartheid laws were instituted, many modelled on Nazi race laws, passed in the 1930s. These were based not on faith but on skin colour. Germany had wanted to remove the Jewish minority from its economy and country; the apartheid government could not, however, remove the black majority, whose underpaid manual labour supported the South African economy.

On 30 January 1950, South African Jewry observed the international day of mourning for the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Services were held in synagogues, with mass meetings, shuttered shops and few dry eyes. In April 1951 the Israeli Knesset declared the 27 Nissan, *Yom HaZikaron l'Shoah vehag'vurah*: Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and Heroism. It became an annual community event attended by thousands with survivors lighting memorial candles, reading poetry or speaking. From its inception the survivors decided that rather than go home after the memorial service with their own pain, they would gather together afterwards. Later that year survivor Levi Shalit was given a visa and addressed audiences throughout South Africa to raise War Appeal funds.

Cape Town is a popular place for summer holidays. People from all over South Africa, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, as far as the Congo, would visit. They flocked to the beaches of Muizenberg – nicknamed Jewsenberg – with its many kosher hotels and boarding houses. In the summer of 1952, some Johannesburg survivors came too. An Auschwitz tattoo was clearly visible while its bathing costume-clad owner strolled along the beautiful beach and Nachum Zolin introduced himself and offered to arrange a meeting with fellow Cape Town survivors [\[12\]](#).

This was the beginning of the She'erith Hapletah, the Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors with Zolin as organizing secretary. They advertised in the Jewish press for survivors to join them. Its aim was to promote social and cultural ties amongst the survivors, to involve them in the affairs of the community, to render assistance to members when required and to participate in all aspects of historical research and testimony on the Holocaust. They would meet monthly in private homes, with private socials and holidays with each other.[\[13\]](#)

To survivors whose family had been killed, the She'erith Hapletah members became surrogate family. They felt at home with each other. Mourning and memory was something they shared when they were together in an environment

of total understanding. They could celebrate together at *chagim* and Shabbat meals in their old ways.

A second-generation daughter wrote, “Our family did not talk. Emotions were not allowed. My parents belonged to She’erith Hapletah and felt comfortable with fellow survivors who would come to tea, speak Yiddish and roar with laughter at events that happened on the run in Russia. I felt safe with them. They felt like family. In summer we would go to Muizenberg to meet with holidaying survivors, and they all had stories to tell. [14]”

For the survivors it was a decade of new beginnings, of establishing new lives, of starting new families. Professions were changed, businesses established, babies born. They were busy settling down but were still more comfortable speaking Yiddish and survivors in Johannesburg became prominent in the Yiddish press. Levi Shalit was brought back, this time to edit the weekly *Di Afrikaner idishe tsaytung* newspaper that he did for 30 years (he also published books and articles). The monthly *Dorem Afrike* was initiated (and edited) by Meylekh Bakaltshuk-Felin who had been the director of the Johannesburg Jewish Public School [15]. He also edited two important Yiddish *Yizkor bikher* (memorial volumes), for the *landsmanschafts* of Rakishok, Lithuania (1952), and Chelm, Poland (1954), the only two published in South Africa [16]. Later, survivor and poet David Wolpe became the editor of *Dorem Afrike*.

For the survivors sharing their own stories was not a priority. As Simon Wiesenthal wrote: “They wanted to forget so they would be able to live again. They surrounded themselves with a protective shell, trying hard not to think of what happened.[17]” As for the local community, who had lost so many relatives, the subject was too uncomfortable. The survivors were told to forget the past, concentrate on the present. As one survivor said, “People didn’t ask and we didn’t talk about it. Who could believe such a story? One reads books about such things, but they are impossible to believe”.[18]

Also there was ignorance. When Cantor Lichterman wrote about his Auschwitz Birkenau experiences in a Yiddish newspaper he was accused of lying. No Jews would be so hungry that they would support a recently deceased man in an upright position just for an extra bit of bread.[19] He refused to provide any more testimony. A German refugee invited to share her experiences with a WIZO group in Muizenberg, stormed out when asked why didn’t she just go to the police. She refused to talk about her past again[20].



One Cape Town survivor expressed this in a poem:

*My children never asked me:
 "Mother, the holocaust,
 what was it really like?"
 My husband never asked me:
 "Darling, the holocaust,
 what was it really like?"
 My friends never asked me"
 "Dear, the holocaust,
 what was it really like?"
 The holocaust
 what was it really like?
 A massacre on such a scale,
 that after forty years,
 I am unable to discuss it,
 whilst eating Lasagna [21].*

The Holocaust received some public attention when the American Army as part of the “Jewish Reconstruction” programme of the Jewish Restitution Successor Organisation decided to distribute religious items looted by the Nazis to Jewish communities around the world [22]. Dr Abt who cleared the items from Customs on behalf of the Board of Deputies in 1951 stated that “future visitors (to the proposed museum) will become conscious of the immense tragedy hidden behind every single item which tells of the biggest robbery ever committed in history. Visitors will see the blood dripping from silver candelabra. They will see eyes opened widely with horror; they will hear the cries of agony of death with which the silver will be connected for them. [23]” An “Exhibition of Jewish Religious Art” including the looted items was shown by the Board in 1954 in Johannesburg and Cape Town, attracting thousands, Jews and non-Jews, and resulted in Jewish museums being established in both cities. The Johannesburg Board wanted to keep all the looted artefacts but after considerable acrimonious correspondence dating from 1949, Cape Town and Durban eventually obtained a fair distribution [24]. Just as well, because when the Johannesburg Jewish Museum opened after a long weekend in 1991, it was discovered that the collection and a Russian security guard had vanished! Interpol was alerted but the objects have never come to light [25]. The Cape Town Jewish Museum hastily increased its insurance and security.



Part of the former Harry & Friedl Abt Museum, SAJBD

The first Holocaust memorial was mooted in Johannesburg in 1955, and the Board agreed to erect a “Monument to the Six Million” in the West Park cemetery. It commissioned Hungarian sculptor Herman Wald [26], who had lost almost his entire family. His brother, a rabbi in Kimberley, had managed to bring him out just before the 1937 Aliens Act had slammed the door on Jewish immigration. His design depicted three hands emerging from the earth holding shofars with the Hebrew words spelling “*Thou shalt not kill*”. On the base of the memorial in Hebrew, Yiddish, Afrikaans and English are the words “*Thou shalt not forget*”.



The *Rand Daily Mail* newspaper reported on the opening in 1959. “*Hundreds wept when more than 4,000 Jews from all over the Reef attended the consecration* [\[27\]](#)”. The reaction showed that the Holocaust was perceived as a tragedy not only for the loss of European Jewry, but also for the Jewish community. By having Holocaust survivors play a significant part in the public proceedings, the organisers encouraged the turning of the private grief of the survivor into the public grief of the community.

In the early 1960s, many survivors from Rhodes Island arrived in Cape Town. In 1944, the Germans had deported to Auschwitz 1767 Jews from the islands of Rhodes and Coss. Only 163 survived. Returning to a Judenrein Rhodes island, many decided to go to the Belgian Congo to join their families who had moved there in the 1930s. They settled, married and had their own families. The Congo gained independence in 1960, accompanied by violence. Stories of atrocities against whites surfaced in newspapers around the globe. Thousands fled. At first the Jewish community, hoping the violence would soon end, just sent out their frightened children by train to Cape Town, where they were housed in the Jewish Orphanage and Herzlia School’s boarding house, provided with clothes and other essentials [\[28\]](#). Later the rest of the community, escorted by Belgian troops, fled in convoys, refugees once again, often fleeing with only the clothes they wore, abandoning their houses, shops and possessions.

The Rhodesian Jewish Board of Deputies flew to Northern Rhodesia to arrange assistance to Jewish refugees who had made their way there. The South African government sent representatives to neighbouring countries to assist and convince refugees to immigrate to South Africa. It is probable that the willingness of the apartheid government to help was because, in its eyes, this was an object lesson to the correctness of their policy, showing the dangers of black rule and one man one vote elections. If it could happen in the Congo, it could happen in South Africa. Most refugees, knowing about the Sharpeville massacre, preferred Belgium to apartheid South Africa. However, the Rhodes Jews came to Cape Town, which they knew from holidays in Muizenberg and where there was already a Rhodes Island community with its Sephardi synagogue. They had lost everything when they were deported to Auschwitz. Now they had to start their lives all over again. Soon, there were more Rhodes Auschwitz survivors in Cape Town than anywhere else in the world.



Refugees from the Congo arrive in Bulawayo

Initially, there was little contact between these French and Ladino-speaking Sephardi survivors and the now English and Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi survivors, even separate survivor support groups. The Ashkenazim felt superior – some believed they had suffered more as the Rhodes Islanders, who had only been deported in 1944 – this despite only 10% of the Rhodes Jews having survived! After some years, when it was realised that there were more Sephardi Auschwitz survivors than there were Ashkenazi ones, common sense defeated prejudice. The Sephardi and Ashkenazi survivors thus combined into one She'erith Hapletah, with a Rhodes Island chairperson and an Ashkenazi vice-chairperson.

Although the media coverage of the 1961 Eichmann trial broke down the reluctance of survivors to discuss the Holocaust, She'erith Hapletah was not very vibrant during that decade nor in the following one. However, contacts were established with the Israel Remembrance Authority, Yad Vashem and the Claims Conference regarding compensation. Members of Cape Town She'erith Hapletah would take part in the annual Yom Hashoah events followed by a

lunch at the Sephardi synagogue. One of its projects in 1967 was to place a commemorative six-branched menorah made by Nachum Zolin at the Pinelands No 1 cemetery as a Holocaust memorial.[\[29\]](#) Smaller replicas were installed in synagogues, to be lit every Shabbat and *chag* as a permanent memorial. The money paid for these by the congregations, plus subscriptions and donations, were used for a fund to provide financial assistance for emergencies.[\[30\]](#)



Holocaust Memorial, Pinelands No. 1 Cemetery, Cape Town

There was also a community recognition of the increasing ignorance about, and lack of awareness of, the Holocaust in the public as well as the knowledge that a younger generation was growing up to whom it was something that happened long ago. Education was needed.

In Johannesburg, German Jewish refugees had established their own synagogue, Etz Chayim, in 1937. In 1969, the congregation established its South African Yad Vashem Memorial Hall [\[31\]](#). The initiator was its Rabbi Joseph Fogel, a survivor, who raised the funds and commissioned Ernest Ullmann to decorate it. Ullmann, whose father, a rabbi, had been killed in a pogrom, regarded it as a labour of love. His designs incorporated illuminated glass slabs, carved wood panels showing Jewish suffering, a cut down tree trunk, an Ark with two Torah scrolls rescued from the Holocaust and a *yizkor* book containing the names of the murdered family of South African Jews – including those of Rabbi Fogel.



One of the carved wood panels, Yad Vashem Memorial Hall

The South African National Yad Vashem Memorial Foundation, based at the Etz Chayim synagogue, opened the next year. It organised adult education programmes on the Holocaust and, with the SAJBD, organised the Yom Hashoah ceremonies, with survivor participation. During the same period, Cape Town's Jacob Gitlin Library was involved in adult education, at first with a Holocaust week, with sad music, lectures, films and a book display, later it became a Holocaust Exhibition Day, and Holocaust Outreach programmes were arranged during school lunch breaks.

By the 1970s the survivors had become integrated into their new homeland and community and were less isolated from survivors elsewhere. She'erith Hapletah had joined the American Federation of Jewish Fighters, Camp Inmates and Nazi Victims, and received its bi-monthly publication "*Martyrdom and Resistance*" and newsletters and was busy collecting names for Yad Vashem's 1977 "Pages of Testimony" project to record the names of all the Jews who had perished during the Holocaust. [32]. In 2025 it was announced by Dr. Alexander Avram, Director of the Hall of Names and the Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names, who has led the programme for 37 years that it had managed to identify five million names. "We are restoring their human identities and ensuring that their memory endures. Most of the victims of the Holocaust were left without graves, without traces — remembered now only through the Pages of Testimony that bear their names".

By the mid 1980s, the Holocaust was no longer a subject kept under wraps and, as the perpetrators as well as the survivors were ageing, the subject was no longer so threatening to the outside world. As their children and grandchildren grew up, many wanting to know their family history from the safety of a comfortable space detached from the horrors, survivors world wide found that people were now willing to listen to the story they needed to tell. Jewish students at South African universities embarked on the Student Holocaust Interviewing Project in 1983 to record testimonies from the survivors on cassettes. The problems with students however is that they graduate and move on and when some years later the survivors started to ask for the promised transcripts, no one remembered what had happened to them. They were only unearthed in 2025 in the bowels of the Cape Town University's archives.

The passing years had put a thin scab and a safe distance over the past. The Shoah was no longer the private pain of the survivors or an annual mourning ceremony by the Jewish community but had moved into the realm of public interest, as shown by books and films. The destruction of the Jews was conducted and planned by non-Jews and people wanted to understand how the previous generation could have perpetrated such deeds or allowed it to happen. When the 40th anniversary of the liberation of the camps and defeat of Nazi Germany was due to be commemorated, Myra Osrin, chairman of the education committee of the Cape Town Zionist Council, approached the Cultural History Museum to host an exhibition, thinking it a good opportunity to address a wider audience. The director agreed provided it only focused on the liberation of Cape Town's Jews. She'erith Hapletah was approached and a major exhibition was mounted from 14 April to 15 May 1985 together with an accompanying series of lectures and workshops in co-operation with the other major Jewish communal bodies and the Jewish Museum.

This was the first time the Jewish community acknowledged the She'erith Hapletah as a group with stories to be told. Until then few people were aware of its existence. Its members were still insecure and reluctant to be identified as survivors and were named in the exhibition either by initials or with vague details like "Leon of Sea Point". The exhibition brochure stated that the display *"was envisaged as a personal statement and witness by those survivors who found refuge in Cape Town and the memorabilia on exhibition were but a modest testament to the inhumanity of the Nazi genocidal programme"*. The exhibition was a great success, and for the survivors it represented public recognition and an affirmation of self-worth.



Rhodes Island survivors with 'Leon of Sea Point'

The fortieth anniversary was commemorated by a World Assembly of Survivors in Israel, attended by Cape Town and Johannesburg survivors. Miriam Lichterman was impressed by an address by Simon Wiesenthal. He told them that they, the last survivors and the last witnesses, were all getting older and had to put their memories down on paper for the next generation. It was important to document them, particularly as Holocaust deniers were casting doubt on the truth of their experiences. On her return to Cape Town, she told

She'erith Hapletah what Wiesel had said: "Until this time we didn't talk much. After that we started to talk."

Among the meetings to commemorate the fortieth anniversary was a B'nei Brith seminar. Three survivors appeared on a panel, the first time that survivors had spoken on a public platform in Cape Town. The hall was crowded. Soon after Herzlia School asked them to address an audience of teachers, parents and the older students in the presence of the visiting Israeli ambassador. Then more invitations started to stream in. People were keen to listen to their experiences. Audiences were moved at their presentations. Survivors found the meetings emotional and meaningful and went to speak at schools, churches and gatherings. They discovered that it was okay to talk about the past. That it was okay to have suffered and be different. That it was okay to have survivor guilt. Observed survivor Violette Fintz, "I often speak to people about my experiences. Some cry with me, some don't want to hear. If G-d made a miracle which enabled me to survive then I must give testimony. I must never forget, and I can never forgive [\[33\]](#)."

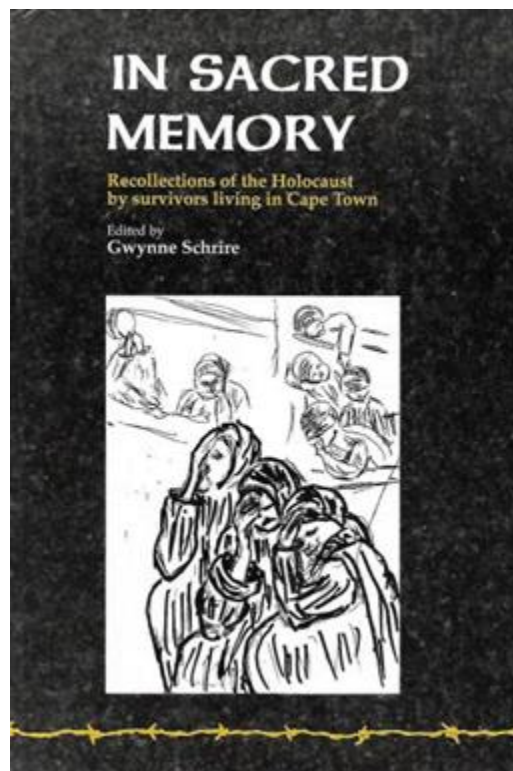
A Cape Town Holocaust Memorial Council, with two She'erith Hapletah representatives (Ashkenazi and Sephardi), was set up the following year as a coordinating council to promote awareness and knowledge of the Holocaust among the Jewish and general community. It organised regular public lectures, film screenings, commemorative events and exhibitions and the Council with the Board was involved in arranging Yom Hashoah commemoration ceremonies.

By this time Cape Town's Pinelands Cemetery was full and a new cemetery was opened. Once again, the She'erith Hapletah arranged for a Holocaust memorial to be erected. This one, designed by architect Hillel Turok, was erected in 1990.



Holocaust Memorial, Pinelands No. 2 Cemetery, Cape Town

The She'erith Hapletah would meet and reminisce and decided to put their reminiscences in a book. An additional incentive was the news that the white supremacist Neo-Nazi AWB wanted to bring Holocaust denier David Irving to SA. The members were outraged and in 1988 a plan of action was submitted to the Holocaust Memorial Council and the SAJBD. The book was finally published in 1995, in time for the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation from the camps and the defeat of Nazi Germany, the year after South Africa had its first multiracial democratic elections, and its first Black president. Edited by this writer and called *In Sacred Memory: Recollections of the Holocaust by survivors living in Cape Town*, it contained the stories of 50 Cape Town survivors. It was reprinted twice [34].



It was the first time that many of their relatives learnt what had happened to them. One had thought her aunt just an emotional Lithuanian immigrant. She didn't know her aunt and uncle had spent two years buried in a cellar under the fodder box for the cows and pigs.

One Rhodes survivor asked for her contribution to be withdrawn because her daughter did not want people to know she had been in Auschwitz. After much discussion she agreed for it to appear under the initials of her sister who had died in Auschwitz. When the book came out, her daughter approached me, having read her mother's story and said, "I realise now that I did not have to be ashamed of my mother." ASHAMED? It is terrible what harm ignorance can create. She now felt pride in her mother and the whole family dynamics changed – the shameful secret was now out in the open and was not shameful at all, but

a sign of resilience. When subsequently I interviewed that survivor for Spielberg's *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Project*, the daughter asked if it could be filmed in her home as her family wanted to be part of it.

In 1996, while visiting Israel, Capetonian Myra Osrin read about a centre, called Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre, that had opened the previous year in England in the Sherwood Forest. Myra went to visit it and was very impressed. It was small, simple, comprehensive and moving. She was fortunate that its remarkable young founder, Stephen Smith, a theologian, was there [35]. He told her that five years before, he and his brother James, a medical student, had visited the Holy Land. They went to Yad Vashem and started to ask themselves questions [36]. Why the Jews? How could the destruction of European Jewry become an integral aim of educated, civilised, cultured people? What about the mentality of evil that reduced the destruction of entire communities to a bureaucratic order? How could they have gone through school and university without learning about it in their formal education? "As we left Yad Vashem that day, we decided we would dedicate some of our time, energy and resources to assisting the British public in confronting the Holocaust" he wrote.

When they returned home, the brothers told their parents it was not a Jewish problem but a Christian one. His father was a Methodist minister who ran a Christian retreat with his wife in their 19th Century farmhouse. They decided it was their moral mission to do something and turned their retreat into an educational centre to educate Christians, using only Christian funding. After extensive research, visiting death camps and Holocaust centres, Stephen designed the exhibitions, renovated the farmhouse and laid out the centre with the help of his family and volunteers. He very generously told Myra he would help to design something similar in Cape Town including copying some of his exhibits. He thought it a valuable contribution to the "New South Africa" where citizens were seeking ways to build a more tolerant post-Apartheid society [37].

Soon after her return, Myra called a special meeting of the Cape Town Holocaust Memorial Council and informed them of the proposed centre to be built on a floor to be added above the Gitlin Library. Stephen came out to help and in August 1999 the Cape Town Holocaust Centre was opened to wide acclaim. To make it relevant to South Africa's own history, comparisons were drawn to racist Nazi laws and racist apartheid laws – like photos of a park bench marked NOT FOR JEWS and another marked WHITES ONLY, or bunk beds in the concentration camps and the bunk beds in the overcrowded hostels for black mine workers.



Stephen Smith and Myra Osrin



Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre



Soon schools, colleges and companies were booking tours. Survivor testimony played an important part of the experience, followed by debriefing workshops which became the focal point of the visit as the group was made aware of how the issues raised by the Holocaust impacted on their own lives and what problems can arise from prejudices. The workshop encouraged the groups to reflect on how they would have responded under similar circumstances, and how they did respond when faced with examples of bullying, racism, prejudice and discrimination. Would they be a victim, a perpetrator or a bystander? One black teacher thanked Myra Osrin, telling her, “You have no idea how important this experience has been for my pupil’s self-esteem. For the first time they understand that people can be discriminated against even if they do not have a black skin.”

Soon the police and prison services were booking tours to handle racism and bullying among their staff. They had noticed that during the debriefing workshop, having learnt of the brutality of the Nazi era, the staff were able to admit to their own racism and brutality towards their prisoners because nothing they had done could compare to the Nazi behaviour. The police even brought heavily tattooed rival gangsters. Admittedly the Holocaust volunteers felt anxious, especially during the workshop when the gangs were mixed together but it went off without incident and the police later reported that for the following three months there was no gang violence in the township.

Experiences during the Holocaust inspired some Jews to actively oppose apartheid racism and discrimination. Roman Eisenstein of the African Resistance Movement had escaped through the Warsaw Ghetto sewers [38]. Pauline Podbrey lost all her relatives in Lithuania. She said she had never got over it nor did she think that any Jew who had lived through that period had [39]. Twelve members of Conscientious objector David Bruce’s mother’s family were murdered. Andrew Feinstein’s mother was hidden in a cellar wrapped in a carpet; 20 members of her family were killed [40]. Ronnie Kasrils heard about it from relatives, and it affected him strongly [41]. When Benjamin Pogrund saw his father cry on learning of the murder of his family, “that imprinted something on my psyche which is there to this day.” [42]

Other activists were influenced by the knowledge of the Holocaust. Albie Sachs “cried and cried and cried” when he visited Prague sites commemorating the Holocaust. He explained to his wife that not only did he lose a large section of his family, but he was also part of those destined for permanent extinction [43]. Laurence Nathan said the turning point in his activism was a visit to the camps. He realised that the Jewish community kept the memory of the Holocaust alive so that it should never happen again, but that the ‘it’ could also be extended to that level of barbarity which was happening in South Africa [44].

In May 2000, Andrew Feinstein introduced a motion on Holocaust Remembrance in Parliament to mark International Holocaust Remembrance

Month with the support of ANC Chief Whip Tony Yengeni. He began by reading the last letter his grandfather had written as he was being deported to Theresienstadt and mentioned the importance of encouraging the study of and education about the historical and moral dimensions of the Holocaust [45].

In 2007 the government decided to make the Holocaust a compulsory part of the curriculum in all schools. It would help address issues of human rights and social cohesion, particularly in view of the country's own history. Given the levels of ignorance about the Holocaust, particularly among the black teachers, the Centre wanted to be sure that the subject would be taught correctly, and embarked on tours to the provinces to run workshops for teachers. As it could not afford staff to run around the country teaching teachers, it produced well received handbooks, resource books, workbooks, posters and DVDs.



**Educational materials prepared by the Cape
Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre**

With its inclusion in the school curriculum, more Holocaust centres were required, and one was opened in Durban in 2008 and in Johannesburg in 2019.



Memorial Garden at the Durban Holocaust & Genocide Centre

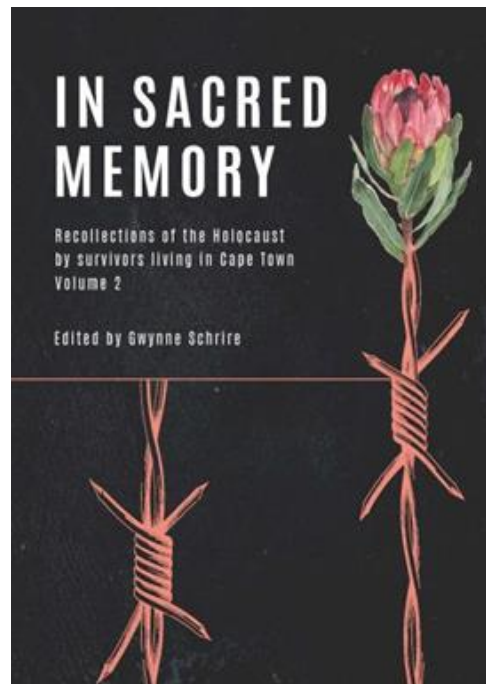


Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre

To move to the present: Beth Shalom is now called the National Holocaust Centre and Museum. Stephen has returned to Cape Town several times and one year addressed Yom Hashoah. He has gained his doctorate as well as several honorary doctorates – James and his mother also receiving one. Stephen was awarded an MBE from the queen, was co-founder of Britain's National Holocaust Centre, was the project director to the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda, the Executive Director of the USC Shoah Foundation Institute, and holds the UNESCO Chair on Genocide Education. His wife is Jewish and in 2023 Stephen converted to Judaism.

Unfortunately, the Etz Chayim Synagogue and its Yad Vashem Memorial Hall are no longer in existence, the glass slabs broken and the wooden panels now housed at the Beyachad Jewish community Centre – victims of the inevitable migration of the congregation to safer suburbs.

In 2024 the daughter of Xavier Piat, the survivor who initiated the book of their memories, suggested that for the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the camps a further volume be issued containing the memoirs of survivors who had moved to Cape Town after 1988, the discriminatory laws of the 1930s no longer being in force. The book was published in June 2025 by the Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre [Ed. See [Book Preview: In Sacred Memory \(Volume Two\) – Jewish Affairs](#), Summer 2023].



The book revealed how universal our survivor's experiences were and although few in number, they had wide connections with Holocaust history. One had taught ballet to Anne Frank's sister Margot, Mrs Frank had said Anne was too hyperactive and on the wild side. Another had obtained 20 protection letters from Raoul Wallenberg and had stolen the stamp in order to forge more. The confiscated house of another's grandfather, 4 Tiergartenstrasse, became the headquarters of the Nazi T4 Euthanasia project responsible for murdering 200,000 so-called "useless eaters". Several survivors had arranged for their rescuers to be made Righteous Gentiles, others had seen *stolpersteins* laid at the houses of their families.

The stories in this book came from 24 Cape Town survivors who had come from Belgium, Belarus, Bosnia, Czechoslovakia, Holland, Hungary, France, Germany, Poland, Romania, Rhodes Island, Russia and Transnistria. The first volume had also included survivors from Austria, Lithuania and Greece. Wherever they had lived, they had not been safe. In all of these countries their families and friends had been hunted down and killed with industrial precision caught in a ruthless administrative network designed for the bureaucratic slaughter of millions. THAT WAS GENOCIDE!!!!

As for our survivors, they are an ageing and diminishing group. The She'erith Hapletah is no longer in existence, the post Yom Hashoah Cape Town She'erith Hapletah get together is no longer held in the Sephardi synagogue but is arranged by the Cape Town Holocaust Centre and the Board of Deputies and our three Holocaust Centres are now embracing second and third generation survivors. Many of our survivors have published books about their experiences and some have had their story filmed.

The Holocaust and the presence of survivors have left an indelible imprint on South Africa and has resulted in the erection of monuments and Holocaust centres and especially in the Holocaust becoming a compulsory part of the curriculum in all our schools, and a permanent reminder of what genocide really means, despite the ANC's denial for reasons of financial expedience.

- ***Gwynne Schrire, a veteran contributor to Jewish Affairs, is a former 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.***

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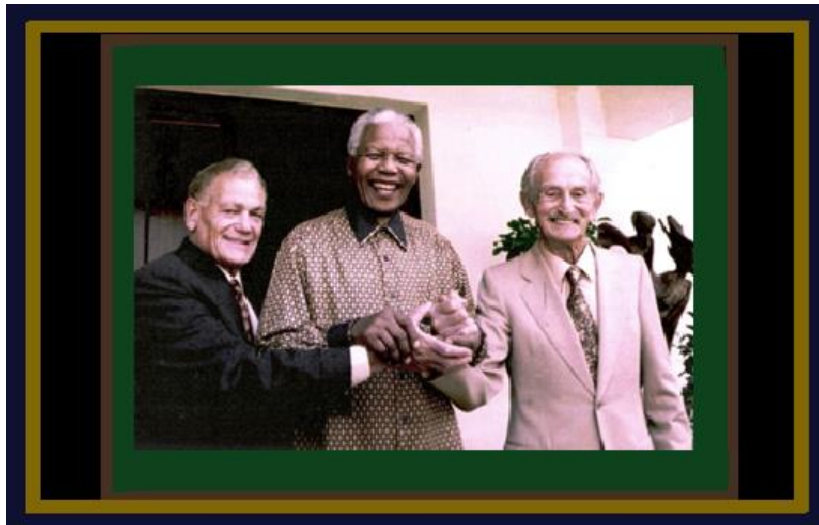
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THE MANDELA LEGACY AND THE JEWISH CONNECTION REVISITED

David Saks

South Africa's post-apartheid honeymoon, that halcyon period of renewed hope and unity of purpose characterising the national mood in the wake of the transition to democracy in 1994, has long been a distant memory. The disillusionment that so many of us who lived through those years now feel over the myriad betrayed hopes and disappointments of our present troubled times is considerable, and understandably so. It should not, however, be allowed to eclipse altogether our memories of how remarkable an achievement the democratic transition undoubtedly was, nor how for a time at least it made South Africa a genuinely powerful moral presence on the international stage.

It is rather striking that this country can claim the distinction of having nurtured perhaps the two foremost humanitarian and political liberation icons of the last century. One, of course, was Nelson Mandela who first became the globally recognised symbol of the struggle against Apartheid and thereafter of the process of reconciliation and nation building that followed. The other was Mohandas K Gandhi, whose activities in South Africa preceded by a decade or so Mandela's birth in 1918. While he is primarily known as the architect of Indian independence, it was during his twenty years as a campaigner for Indian rights in South Africa that the foundations for Gandhi's later development into the revered statesman that he became were laid.

What is not generally known is the remarkable extent to which Jews were involved in the respective careers of both these iconic leaders. During his years in South Africa, Gandhi was befriended and assisted by a significant number of

Jewish community members, who in addition to providing his cause with crucial material support were actively involved in his political campaigns. Regarding Mandela, the disproportionate extent to which Jews played a part in his life and career is even more striking. While most South African Jews were not, of course, anti-apartheid activists, of all the various ethnicities making up the white population, none came even close to producing so high a number of those that were. This was notwithstanding the fact that as part of the privileged white caste, Jews might have been expected to look to safeguarding their own interests rather than jeopardising their privileged status by promoting the cause of the disempowered majority. It is also true that as a vulnerable minority that had itself been exposed to a great deal of prejudice and discrimination the Jewish community might reasonably have been expected to keep a lower profile than other sectors of the population, but the opposite was the case.

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was born in 1918 in Qunu, Eastern Cape province. Very few Jews lived in this part of the country, and there is no evidence of his having engaged with any members of the community during his youth and early adulthood. This changed, however, following his arrival in Johannesburg in 1941. From that time onwards, right up until his death in December 2013, Jews would consistently play a part in his life.

The first meaningful connection between Mandela and SA Jewry was when he was taken on as an articled clerk at the law firm, Witkin, Sidelsky and Edelman. Of this, Mandela writes in his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, “It was a Jewish firm, and in my experience, I have found Jews to be more broad-minded than most whites on issues of race and politics, perhaps because they themselves have historically been victims of prejudice. The fact that Lazar Sidelsky, one of the firm’s partners, would take on a young African as an articled clerk – something almost unheard-of in those days – was evidence of that liberalism”. Even after becoming President, Mandela would good-humouredly refer to Lazar Sidelsky as his ‘boss’ and frequently pay him tribute for the many acts of support he received from him.

During his time at the firm Mandela’s fellow law clerk, Nat Bregman, became his first white friend in Johannesburg and, as a member of the Communist Party at the time, also played a part in his early political education. He later became a popular speaker at local Jewish communal events.



Reunion between Mandela, Nat Bregman (left) and Lazar Sidelsky, circa. 1995

Mandela went on to study law at the University of the Witwatersrand, where he established enduring friendships with such future anti-apartheid campaigners as Joe Slovo, Ruth First, Jules and Selma Browde and Harry Schwarz. Jules Browde, who became one of South Africa's leading senior counsels, was the first of many Jewish lawyers to represent him in politically related trials. The case concerned an attempt to force the law firm established by Mandela and fellow activist Oliver Tambo to vacate its Johannesburg premises under the then Group Areas Act, which placed severe restrictions on where black people could live and work in the city. Appearing before the Land Tenure Advisory Board in Pretoria, Browde was able to obtain permission for them to stay where they were.



Jules and Selma Browde

During the 1950s, in response to the barrage of racially discriminatory legislation introduced under the National Party's Apartheid policy, Mandela became increasingly drawn into political activism. As a result, he found himself continually harassed by the security police and hauled before one court or another on charges of subversive activities. Jewish lawyers were prominently involved in defending him in these politically driven trials, among them Isie Maisels, Arthur Chaskalson, Joel Joffe and Sidney Kentridge. Maisels headed up the defense team during the so-called Treason Trial, which culminated in all charges against Mandela and thirty other accused being dismissed. A devoted Jew and passionate Zionist he was prominently involved in Jewish communal affairs, inter alia serving as president of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies, SA Zionist Federation and Federation of Synagogues. Chaskalson and Joffe were prominent members of the defence team during the subsequent 'Rivonia Trial' of 1963-4, where Mandela and various others were sentenced to life imprisonment. It was Chaskalson who Mandela later appointed as the country's first Chief Justice following the transition to democracy.



Advocate Israel Aaron (Isie) Maisels

Ironically, the notoriously over-zealous State Prosecutor in that trial, Percy Yutar, was also Jewish and like Maisels had held important communal leadership positions. As could have been predicted, his Jewish identity has since consistently been highlighted by those seeking to cast aspersions on the mainstream Jewish community for its political behaviour under apartheid – and latterly, for its support for Israel – whereas that of the many other lawyers who defended Mandela over the years has been all but ignored.

It was in his career as a political activist that Mandela's close association with Jewish South Africans was most pronounced. Most of these were on the far-left of the political spectrum and members of the by then banned South African Communist Party. To illustrate the disproportionate involvement of Jews on the left, a good example is the above-mentioned Treason Trial, where fourteen of the 23 white defendants on trial (out of an initial total of 156) were of Jewish origin. They included such stalwarts as Lionel Bernstein, Ben Turok, Joe Slovo, Leon Levy and Ruth First, all of whom played a key part in the liberation struggle. Another revealing instance is how the founders of the underground military wing of the by then banned African National Congress (ANC), Umkhonto we Sizwe were Jewish. Among them were Denis Goldberg, Harold Wolpe and Arthur Goldreich. The latter is noteworthy for having served as a volunteer in the Israeli War of Independence, a rarity for someone on the generally anti-Zionist 'Left' (albeit that Goldreich himself was more of a radical liberal than a doctrinaire communist). Following a spectacular escape from police custody in 1963, he settled in Israel.



Arthur Goldreich and Mandela on a visit to Liliesleaf Farm, famed underground headquarters of UmKhonto we Sizwe

Jewish-born activists further played a critical part in organising the 1955 Congress of the People and subsequent drafting of the famous Freedom Charter, a declaration of aims and principles that henceforth provided the ideological bedrock of the liberation movements and ultimately form the basis of South Africa's new constitution post-liberation. Lionel Bernstein was tasked with the actual drafting of the Charter, thereby making himself a kind of South African

version of US Declaration of Independence drafter Thomas Jefferson, although he never took particular credit for it.

Mandela's Jewish associates included classic liberals in addition to doctrinaire communists. Maisels, Harry Schwartz and the Browdes would fall into that category. Another was journalist Benjamin Pogrund, whose hard-hitting exposés of the injustices of apartheid made him the target for continual police harassment. Pogrund later also settled in Israel, becoming an influential voice in combating the notorious analogy between apartheid-era South Africa and modern-day Israel that those bent on delegitimizing the Jewish state have long been aggressively pushing. Post-7 October, the analogy most commonly being made is of course with Nazi Germany, a much more extreme calumny that may by now have rendered the apartheid analogy largely obsolete.



Mandela with Benjamin Pogrund at Wits University, July 1997

From 1962 until his release in February 1990, Mandela was a political prisoner. For the greater part of this time, he was cut off from the outside world, a banned person representing an illegal organisation prohibited from communicating with anyone beyond the prison walls. Even under these circumstances, however, a Jewish connection remained. One of those able to engage with him was Helen Suzman, the sole representative of the liberal Progressive Party in parliament. World renowned for her energetic and eloquent denunciation of the apartheid system, Suzman obtained permission to visit Robben Island, where Mandela and other political prisoners were incarcerated, in light of disturbing newspaper reports about the conditions under which the inmates were being held. She met with Mandela, who briefed her on the prisoners' grievances – inadequate food and clothing, limited visits, having to sleep on bed rolls on the floor and the like. Suzman took up these issues with the authorities, resulting conditions on the Island improving considerably. She would meet with Mandela in prison on a further five occasions and was also part of a Jewish leadership delegation that met with him shortly after his release.



Legendary parliamentarian Helen Suzman addressing a Jewish women's gathering, Johannesburg, 1960s

During his long incarceration, Mandela's international stature increased exponentially. Once no more than a local resistance leader unknown outside his native land, he became the world's most famous political prisoner and a global icon of the struggle against racism and colonialism. It can be mentioned here that many of those Jewish activists who had fought alongside him in the anti-apartheid struggle and since been forced to go into exile were at the forefront of the "Free Mandela" campaigns that took place the world over during the dying years of white rule.

Up until Mandela's release, interactions between him and the Jewish community had been on the individual rather than the collective level. For the greater part of the Apartheid era, the mainstream Jewish community pursued an uneasy, and controversial, policy of neutrality regarding issues of a political nature. Only during the final years of apartheid did its leadership begin taking a more forthright public position against the system. In contrast to its previous apolitical stance, following Mandela's release and the unbanning of the ANC and other anti-apartheid movements, Jewish leaders welcomed the country's transformation and encouraged the Jewish community at large to likewise embrace and be a part of it. As a result, after 1990 Mandela regularly engaged with SA Jewry on a group as well as an individual basis and he and the mainstream Jewish leadership forged a cordial relationship.

As the Jewish community's elected representative voice, the SAJBD met regularly with Mandela, both to bring to his notice the community's own concerns and to explore ways in which SA Jewry could work with his government in furthering the post-apartheid nation building process. In his first address to SA Jewry, delivered at the SAJBD's biennial national conference in 1993, Mandela called on Jews to do their part in making good the enormous socio-economic inequalities caused by Apartheid: "Yours is a community that has

a deserved reputation for being well educated and for the skills it possesses – professional, commercial and industrial. I believe those skills can and should be used both to help the development of the country and to mount programmes, using your own knowledge and skills, to contribute to the development of those who have been denied fair opportunities” he said. Among those who responded were Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris and the eminent businessman and Jewish communal leader Bertram Lubner. Together, they founded Tikkun (now Afrika Tikkun), a Jewish social upliftment organization dedicated to assisting those previously disadvantaged by Apartheid.



SAJBD National Conference, 1993: (l-r), Gerald Leissner (President), Mandela, Mervyn Smith (Chairman), Israeli Ambassador Alon Liel.

“Of all the friendships I have been fortunate to enjoy, the most special is with Nelson Mandela” Chief Rabbi Harris wrote in his 2000 autobiography *For Heaven’s Sake: The Chief Rabbi’s Diary*. Together with his wife Ann, a lawyer and civil rights activist in her own right, Rabbi Harris was among those at the forefront of leading the Jewish community into the new era. Mandela would affectionately refer to Rabbi Harris as “my rabbi”.



Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris with Mandela

Many other leading Jewish businessmen and philanthropists were prominently involved in social upliftment initiatives at Mandela's behest. They included, inter alia, steel tycoon Eric Samson, pioneering retailer Raymond Ackerman, commercial radio pioneer Issie Kirsh and SA Breweries CEO Meyer Kahn. Samson and Mandela in particular collaborated on a range of significant philanthropic projects. The two first met in 1992, when Mandela was seeking donors to fund the purchase of houses needed for returning political exiles. As Samson described it, "By the time he was released, Mandela was already a legendary figure both at home and abroad, and I was intrigued to meet him – he was the future. At his home in Soweto I was immediately struck by his stature, the warmth that emanated from him, his friendliness and openness. We quickly got down to business. He told me how much the houses were and I said that's fine, but suggested he let me do the negotiating. He was so excited and the next minute I was invited to accompany him to view the houses. Months later he remarked to my son Jeffrey, "If I ever need to do negotiations in the future, I know who to go to."



Eric Samson with Mandela and US President Bill Clinton

The Israeli-Palestinian question was the one issue where South African Jewry and Mandela were often, and inevitably, at variance. During its first two decades, the State of Israel was a forthright opponent of apartheid on the international stage, one result of this being that the South African Jewish community come under much pressure from the Nationalist government to the point that subventions to Israel were for a time suspended. By the time of Mandela's release, however, the situation had changed. Largely because of the drive by the Soviet Union and Arab states to isolate Israel in the international arena following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israel-South Africa ties had deepened while during the latter stages of the Cold War the ANC had very much planted its standard in the pro-Soviet and therefore virulently anti-Israel camp. It had also forged close ties with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. The issue was thus always going to be a point of contention, and indeed, it dominated the agenda of the early meetings between Mandela and the Jewish leadership.

As it transpired, the gap between where the respective parties stood on the issue, at least so far as Mandela was concerned turned out to be narrower than

originally feared. On the Israel-Palestine question, Mandela was deeply committed to the attainment of Palestinian statehood, but at the same time he recognized that this had to be accomplished through peaceful negotiations and was always steadfast in affirming Israel's right to exist within secure borders. As he saw it, there was no reason why Israelis and Palestinians could not follow the South African route of negotiating a peaceful settlement; that this never happened was a source of much disappointment to him.

The contrast between Mandela's essentially even-handed approach and the radically pro-Islamist position adopted by the South African government in the wake of the 7 October atrocities is a striking one. It is difficult to imagine Mandela donning a *kefir* and leading his supporters in chants of "From the River to the Sea", an unambiguous call for the Jewish state to be eradicated, as did the current SA President Cyril Ramaphosa in the lead-up to the general elections held in May this year. Nor can one imagine a Mandela-headed government instituting charges of genocide, of all things, against Israel at the International Court of Justice. It is some comfort that the ANC subsequently performed disastrously in the elections, declining from 58% of the vote to under 40% and being forced to govern in coalition with opposition parties that oppose its virulent anti-Israel policies.

When Mandela was inaugurated as South Africa's first post-Apartheid president in May 1994, both Israeli President Ezer Weizmann and PLO leader Yasser Arafat attended. Afterwards, at the request of then Israeli Ambassador Alon Liel, Mandela hosted the first ever meeting between the two leaders. According to Liel, "Mandela was hogged by both leaders, spent half an hour with them, then told both: 'Take the nearby office and use the opportunity to settle your differences – good luck!!' The two sat for three hours, but as you all know, we still need a Mandela to complete the mission". That Mandela failed to appreciate the implacable and uncompromising nature of Palestinian rejectionism and the extent to which this was the antithesis of his own approach helps explain why his attempts to influence the situation came to nothing. It is undeniable, though that his attempts were sincere and well meant.



After stepping down as president in October 1999 Mandela became the first and so far only South African former head of state to visit Israel: (l-r), Rabbi Cyril Harris, Mandela, SAJBD President Marlene Bethlehem, President Ezer Weizmann, Ambassador Uri Oren and SAJBD Chairman Russell Gaddin.

“The true measure of a man is how he treats someone who can do him absolutely no good” the 18th Century English intellectual Samuel Johnson once observed. J. K. Rowling said something similar: “If you want to see the true measure of a man, watch how he treats his inferiors, not his equals”. Both are applicable when considering the kind of person Nelson Mandela was, beyond the public figure and global statesman. In 2011 a book entitled *Jewish Memories of Mandela* (authored by this writer) was published under the auspices of the SAJBD. In large part, it was based on the personal reminiscences of Jewish community members who had interacted with Mandela over the decades, not only prominent personalities but ordinary members of the public. It was from the latter recollections that one often obtained the most striking insights into Mandela the man. In particular they showed how for all the phenomenal stature he achieved his sincere, unaffected respect for and concern about every person he met, regardless of colour, creed or status remained a core feature of his personality. Space allows for just one such anecdote, but it is reflective of many of the other stories that feature. It concerns Ilan Elkaim, a Jewish businessman then living in Bulawayo in the neighbouring state of Zimbabwe. Shortly after his release, Mandela was in the Zimbabwean capital of Harare to attend a conference and during a session break Elkaim was introduced to him. On being told asked if he spoke any indigenous languages, Elkaim answered in *SiNdebele*, and a brief conversation then ensued in his *SiNdebele* and Mandela’s Zulu, the two languages being very similar. “I was very proud to have engaged with such a wonderful and famous man” was how Elkaim saw it at the time. Naturally, he thought that that was the end of it, but it was not, as he relates: “About three

years later, my wife and I went to the movies at the Carlton Hotel complex in Johannesburg. Afterwards, while returning to our car, we saw Mr. Mandela and his entourage descending from the escalator. My eyes met with Mandela's and he nodded. I certainly did not think anything of this, but on getting off the escalator, he walked right up to me, greeted me in Zulu and asked how I was doing and how things were going in Bulawayo! I answered him, dumbfounded and incredulous at his recognition of me after years had passed and after having only engaged with him for a few minutes".

Perhaps it is most fitting that the last word goes to Benjamin Pogrund, Mandela's journalist friend and loyal ally in the battle to reveal to the world the injustices of apartheid. In his tribute, which appeared in the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, following Mandela's passing, Pogrund reflected on the qualities that had made Mandela, both as a statesman and a human being, so very extraordinary:

He made possible South Africa's relatively peaceful transition from apartheid to non-racism and democracy. He led the majority black population away from anger and hatred about the oppression and degradation to which white rule had subjected them and instead to acceptance of a shared society, a "rainbow nation," as it is called.

That Nelson Mandela endured so much suffering in his life and yet emerged so totally a believer in humanity, putting out his hand to the enemy, is why he is the most admired man of our age. Amid the tributes to his greatness, I retain my own memories of his generosity.



Memorial service for Nelson Mandela, Oxford Synagogue, Johannesburg. The speaker is former SA President Thabo Mbeki

- ***David Saks is a former Deputy Director of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies. He has been editor of Jewish Affairs since 1999.***



“DISEASE NO. 9” – AN ANTISEMITIC ‘FAKE NEWS’ ITEM IN POST-WORLD WAR FRANCE

Michel Levine

During World War I, antisemitic nationalist movements largely suspended their usual rhetoric in the name of the “Sacred Union” declared at the war’s outset. Following Action Française’s example, they redirected their hostility from Jews to Germans—shifting from denigrating the “Yid” to denouncing the “boche.” Even Maurice Barrès, Action Française’s champion whom Georges Bernanos aptly nicknamed “the nightingale of carnage”, began honoring Jewish soldiers who died for France [\[1\]](#). This wartime truce, which extended to the frontline trenches, found its most poignant embodiment in an image that graced countless French homes: Rabbi-Chaplain Abraham Bloch offering a crucifix to a dying Christian soldier shortly before being mortally wounded himself [\[2\]](#).



Revival of Hatred

After the war, the November 1919 legislative elections ushered in a wave of political newcomers, many fresh from military service – earning this assembly the nickname “Horizon Blue” Chamber after the color of French military uniforms. These political novices, allied with deeply conservative forces and wavering radicals, formed the National Bloc – a disparate coalition manipulated by Georges Clemenceau and Action Française.

For the first time in its history Charles Maurras’ movement, inspired by Mussolini’s electoral victory whose doctrine Maurras considered “twin” to his own, overcame its contempt for the Republic’s electoral process. Action Française successfully promoted candidates steeped in its inherent antisemitism, now enhanced with racist theory. The architects of this doctrine, Georges Vacher de Lapouge and Gustave le Bon – worthy successors to Arthur de Gobineau – claimed humanity was divided into races, classified according to physical determinism such as skull shape. At the hierarchy’s pinnacle stood the blond, blue-eyed Aryan, while at its base languished the supposed inferiors: “Asiatics,” “Negroids,” and Jews, all accused of corrupting Aryan racial purity and strength.



“France under the Jew”, from L’Action française, whose ideology was dominated by the precepts of Charles Maurras, 5 June 5, 1936

Who were these maligned people who had arrived in waves since the previous century? Their common thread was flight from misery and persecution to reach idealized France – the homeland of human rights that had emancipated Jews and promised life as free citizens, “happy as God in France”^[3]. This population, which its enemies viewed as an undifferentiated mass, actually encompassed diverse, sometimes opposing intellectual movements – as the Yiddish proverb notes, “two Jews, three synagogues.”

The “Judeo-Bolsheviks”

From the 1920s onward, these immigrants fell victim to a new strain of antisemitism ^[4]. At the war’s outset, French public opinion had confidently anticipated the “Russian steamroller” crushing German forces. The sudden Brest-Litovsk peace treaty between these nations was therefore experienced as betrayal, while the atheist Soviets’ rise to power alarmed Catholic and conservative circles. The “reds” further damaged their standing by repudiating the Tsarist loan, financially devastating 1 600 000 small French investors.

The National Bloc exploited this climate to launch an anti-Bolshevik crusade, during which the l’Union des intérêts économiques (Union of Economic Interests) – a powerful business lobby – plastered walls with posters depicting a menacing supposed muzhik with a bloody knife clenched between his teeth. This new antisemitism essentially recycled 19th Century tropes that had blamed Jews and Freemasons for instigating the 1789 Revolution.

As Moscow's agitators became the suspected orchestrators behind all social movements and strikes, the trials of the Black Sea mutineers – soldiers Clemenceau had sent to support Denikin's White armies—provoked outrage when socialist factions celebrated their leader André Marty and his compatriots as heroes. Action Française asserted that all Russian revolutionary leaders were Jewish—when in reality Trotsky stood virtually alone—and denounced a new enemy of eternal France: the “Judeo-Bolshevik” or “Judeo-Marxist.”

The glaring contradiction of simultaneously casting Jews as capitalist “plutocrats” and “Bolshevik hydras” dedicated to capitalism's destruction somehow escaped the Maurrassian movement, despite its self-proclaimed title as the “party of intelligence.” Under the Vichy regime, the Judeo-Bolshevik concept would flourish with the creation of the LVF or Légion des volontaires français contre le bolchevisme (Legion of French Volunteers Against Bolshevism). By 1944, the infamous “red poster” condemning a group of FTP-MOI^[5] resistance fighters would deliberately highlight the Jewish origins of seven executed members.



The Protocols

The 1920 publication of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion provided pseudo-historical validation for anti-Jewish campaigns. This fabricated compendium, detailing an alleged international Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world, was crafted in 1901 by the Russian secret police (Okhrana) as a weapon against revolutionary forces while simultaneously giving the masses a pretext for organizing pogroms [6].

“White” Russians deployed the Protocols to justify their numerous massacres of Jewish populations and to claim that the imperial family’s execution in Yekaterinburg on July 17, 1918, constituted a “Jewish ritual.” After their defeat, these White Russian émigrés in France continued circulating the original version until Bishop Ernest Jouin – a fervent admirer of Italian fascism and highly regarded by the Vatican, which appointed him apostolic protonotary – published a French translation in his *Revue internationale des sociétés secrètes*. The prominent antisemitic pamphleteer Urbain Gohier quickly followed suit, publishing it as *Protocole des Sages d’Israël* (Protocols of the Elders of Israel). A modified edition then appeared from publisher Bernard Grasset, who would later become a major purveyor of collaborationist literature under the Vichy regime.

Distributed worldwide in millions of copies and numerous translations, the Protocols were frequently weaponized by leaders who fully recognized their fraudulent nature. Joseph Goebbels confessed in his diary: “I think that The Protocols of the Elders of Zion are a fraud . . . I believe in the intrinsic truth, but not in the factual truth of the Protocols.” In 1925, Adolf Hitler devoted eighteen lines to this text in *Mein Kampf*, the bible of Nazism and antisemitism. After his 1933 rise to power, the Protocols became required indoctrination material in German schools.

As denunciations of the “Judeo-Bolshevik” threat reached fever pitch, 1920 also witnessed the emergence of yet another strain of antisemitism.

The Jewish Plague

In Spring 1920, plague cases emerged in the sprawling “zone” encircling Paris. The epidemic spread among fifty thousand social outcasts, including eight thousand recent immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe and the Maghreb, who existed in squalid conditions – packed into shacks, trailers, and slums. Parisian health authorities quickly identified the epidemic’s source: rats carrying plague-infected fleas had escaped from a barge delivering British coal

near Paris, initially infecting nearby rag-picker communities whose cases went unreported.



Children in the “Zone”, Paris, 1913

To prevent public panic, authorities designated the outbreak “disease No. 9” – plague’s designation in the national registry of contagious diseases – while the public soon dubbed it the “rag-pickers’ plague.” Containment efforts included the Paris Prefecture reorganizing waste collection while mobile health teams worked throughout the capital and surrounding communities of Pantin, Saint-Ouen, Bagnolet, and Clichy to identify infection clusters and perform disinfections.

Treatment relied on serotherapy, developed in 1896 by Dr. Alexandre Yersin, who had discovered the plague bacterium, later supplemented by phage therapy pioneered by his Pasteur Institute colleague, Dr. Félix d’Hérelle. Medical authorities soon confirmed this was bubonic plague – which, though serious, was significantly less lethal than pulmonary plague and far less devastating than the “Spanish Flu” that had claimed fifty million lives during the war and continued to produce occasional “aftershocks”^[7]. This “rag-pickers’ plague,” the last such infection to strike the capital, caused only 34 deaths before subsiding, only to resurface in Corsica in 1945.

The Rumor

Initially, public opinion remained largely indifferent to a disease affecting society's "invisible" members: the destitute, foreigners, outcasts, and other marginalized people crowded into unsanitary dwellings—as if they were somehow responsible for their misfortune. But soon, newspapers began amplifying alarming rumors circulating throughout the capital.

Le Petit Bleu de Paris, financially backed by the Comité des Forges [8], explicitly identified the culprits in its 3 November 1920 edition: "The epidemics that have devastated, over time, certain regions of Europe were due to the introduction, by Orientals, of Yersin's bacillus. The danger that threatens us today acknowledges the same origin." These mysterious Asian disease carriers were allegedly spreading an even more contemporary evil: "These undesirables do not only spread microbes, but spread, among the lower classes with whom they come into contact, the doctrines of defeatist Bolshevism."

In the October 9 issue of Le Rappel, a vehemently anti-government daily, antisemitic columnist Octave du Mesnil condemned the supposed "laxity" of public authorities: "While waiting for Mr. Rothschild or Mr. Reinach to open their mansions to them, these miserable wretches crowd into lodgings that they transform into permanent sources of infection. How were they allowed to enter France? Why are they tolerated in Paris? . . . Everywhere, it's a system of indifference under a regime of irresponsibility. When the epidemic breaks out, they will put up white posters, give speeches in Parliament, present reports to the Academies; the profiteers and the newly rich will flee to the French Riviera, and the good fellows to the turnip field [9].

The tarnished gold of the Republic

On 2 December 1920, French Senate convened its second extraordinary session of the year addressing the plague affecting Paris and its environs. This session proved equally extraordinary for the torrent of hatred, prejudice, and profound ignorance unleashed by these supposed "wise men" of the Republic. The January election had seen right-wing representation nearly double while left-wing parties significantly declined, mirroring the rightward shift that had formed the "Bleu Horizon" chamber.

Jules-Louis Breton, appointed in January to head France's first Ministry of Hygiene, Assistance and Social Welfare, faced the unenviable task of

responding to the senators' interpellations. This young minister—a former Dreyfusard classified as a “reformist socialist” and science enthusiast—struggled vainly to present factual information to an assembly inflamed by phantasms.

Adrien Gaudin de Villaine launched the attack. This political baron from La Manche department, known for his anti-republican positions and regular contributions to Drumont's antisemitic *La Libre Parole*, challenged the minister: “I come to signal to the Government, which seems to ignore it or be disinterested, the danger resulting for the health of Paris from the invasion of certain districts of the capital by thousands of undesirables from the East . . . Paris and its suburbs are threatened, at this moment, with a contagion that doctors, by an elegant euphemism, call disease No. 9, undoubtedly because this disease was treated in pavilion No. 9 of a hospital in the suburbs of Paris”.

The distinguished senator, curiously ignorant of the designation No. 9's actual meaning despite the raging epidemic, then recounts an “investigation” allegedly conducted by an associate in Paris's 4th arrondissement, summarizing: “Everywhere people with strange appearances, in heterogeneous rags, speaking incomprehensible language, wandering the streets without apparent occupation, or crammed into sordid dwellings in shameful promiscuity, claiming to be Romanian, Hungarian, Russian, Polish, but in reality all Jews and all speaking ‘Yiddish,’ this Hebrew patois understood by all Jews in the universe . . . I add that the infant mortality that prevails in Paris is also a consequence in certain districts of this invasion of exotic people: they indeed monopolize the precious food supplies almost everywhere”.



Front page of Edouard Drumont's *La Libre Parole*, 1893

This outrageous claim blaming Jews for Parisian infant mortality received enthusiastic support from much of the High Assembly, as the session minutes indicate (“Very good! very good! on the right”). The senator concluded with an explicit threat:

Many French people have had enough of being treated as outlaws in their own homeland and—I charitably warn them—the Jews are doing too much! They probably believe the hour predicted forty years ago by Dostoevsky has arrived; they might well, here as elsewhere, bring terrible reprisals upon themselves. Minister, in coming to this platform today to denounce the danger threatening Paris, I have, once again, done my duty; it’s up to you to do yours.

The minutes note: “Very good! and applause on the right—the speaker, returning to his seat, is congratulated by his friends.”

Louis Dausset, senator of the Seine and former secretary of the anti-Dreyfusard, antisemitic the Ligue de la patrie française (League of the French Homeland), subsequently voiced concerns about foreign Jews evading Republican laws: “Their civil status is extremely uncertain. Difficult to control! We have conducted investigation after investigation on this subject. Their papers are written in Greek, Hebrew, even Cyrillic characters, and the agents cannot, of course, decipher their identity (smiles). The minutes record: “Several senators: It’s all Hebrew to us! (laughter)”

The representative from Maine-et-Loire, Dominique Delahaye – a fervent crusader against Freemasonry – advocated for a “firm hand” policy: “Just now, the Minister of the Interior told me that he had expelled 11,523 foreigners. That’s good, but out of several hundred thousand, it’s not enough.” He then proposed what he clearly considered an innovative measure: “A first method of control would consist, since you cannot delouse them, of making them pay a certain sum upon entry; after which, they would be subjected to a continuous tribute.” The senator apparently failed to recognize he was proposing a return to a centuries-old discriminatory practice [\[10\]](#).

Confronted with this disturbing surge of “liberated speech,” Senator Fernand Merlin of the Loire region, classified as “democratic left,” attempted calmly and rationally to redirect the debate toward the actual issue—public health and disease prevention in the capital—carefully dissociating disease from the presence of foreigners. He responded to Gaudin de Villaine—with subtle irony regarding his “nuanced language”—noting that during the previous summer, plague had been reported not only in Paris but across Europe’s major capitals. He added diplomatically: “Mr. Gaudin de Villaine spoke of suspicious individuals. I believe, based on documents that do not always reflect reality, he exaggerated the role of contagion of these individuals.” Radical Senator François Albert similarly attempted to counter the toxic rumors: “I do not believe, I want to affirm this, that there has been any danger for Paris, given that the number of cases has been very limited and that fourteen deaths in such a large agglomeration is nothing to frighten us”.

When Health Minister Jean-Louis Breton proposed measures to protect the destitute from health hazards at the session’s end, Senator Gaudin de Villaine, still fixated on border closure, immediately retorted: “You always talk about curing. It would be better to prevent. You are considering ways to cure the disease that is at our doors. You should have closed the door, that’s the whole issue!”

A Respectful Press

The mainstream press largely reported the remarks exchanged during this exceptional session without featuring them as front-page headlines or provoking particular outrage. *Le Petit Parisien*, ostensibly apolitical but later a supporter of Mussolini's regime, emphasized the scope of Gaudin de Villaine's interpellation, claiming that foreigners lived without being subject to any meaningful surveillance. Conversely, the anti-parliamentary newspaper *Le Matin* chose the voice of reason on 7 December by quoting bacteriologist Émile Roux from the Pasteur Institute: "In my opinion [...] the explanation given [by Gaudin de Villaine] is completely false. Numerous proofs could be provided; notably the fact that the rare cases of bubonic plague observed did not occur among the immigrants accused in the Senate. According to investigations, it is highly probable that the disease, which I should emphasize is now almost contained, was brought to the northern suburbs of Paris by plague-infected rats arriving with barges delivering English coal."

British rats... this revelation could undermine the fabricated image of a savage horde of wandering Jews emerging from dark Asian regions to spread the virus... yet the press generally overlooked this particular detail—only *La Tribune juive* on December 24 ventured to observe: "We are convinced that anti-Semites will lack the courage to admit their error and cease their campaign against allegedly plague-infected Jews. They face this dilemma: 1) Either declare that English rats are of Jewish origin, or 2) Announce that Professor Roux has Jewish associates. The microbe of anti-Semitism is unforgiving. The plague is more easily cured".

The Political Swamp

Political parties as a whole showed minimal reaction. The National Bloc enthusiastically applauded the inflammatory remarks expressed in the Senate, undoubtedly influenced by the position of its leader, the "Father of Victory." Since 1917, Clemenceau had indeed been consumed by an anti-Soviet fury that provoked his famous vitriolic outbursts. On 21 July 1917, following the Petrograd riots of 1917 suppressed by the Kerensky government, his newspaper *L'Homme enchaîné* denounced an alleged German-Leninist conspiracy orchestrated behind the scenes by Jews concealing their true surnames: "Here is how the principal Maximalists of the Petrograd Soviet are actually named: Zinoviev's real name is Apfelbaum; Trotsky, Bronstein; Kamenev, Rosenfeld . . ." Parts of this list were borrowed from Drumont's *La*

Libre Parole, with whom the Tiger had nonetheless crossed swords during the Dreyfus affair...

Only the Socialists mounted a genuine response to this venomous wave. Their publication, *Le Populaire*, denounced an “odious calumny” that used disease No. 9 as a weapon against a population of proletarians vilified simply for being foreigners. As for the extreme left, still entangled in its institutional anti-capitalism, it generally disregarded the fate of the supposed plutocratic Jewish victims targeted by the senatorial attacks. It was primarily individuals and associations such as the League of Human Rights or that of Education who stood in opposition.

Happiness as a Firebreak

If the malignant rumor generated by “disease No. 9” did not fundamentally alter how “native” French people viewed their Jewish fellow citizens, it was likely because the social climate was not particularly receptive. The “all united” spirit binding citizens of all faiths before and during the war still permeated many minds, and the country was primarily focused on healing its wounds. The war had exacted such a toll in human lives, destruction, and deprivation that the euphoria of victory was tinged with the bitterness of mourning. Consequently, this barely lethal disease No. 9 was perceived as insignificant compared to the combined devastation of war and the “Spanish” flu, besides the fact that collective hatred was still directed for some time toward the “Boche.” There was also a subtle resistance of minds serving as a barrier against racist rumors. It wasn’t an organized refusal, but rather an instinctive rejection of this minor conflict added to the greater one. This period also marked the so-called “Roaring Twenties,” when a generation raised amid death and mourning expressed a fierce desire to escape the empty pride of victory and suffocating nationalism. They manifested an urgent yearning to breathe, to live, to discover other worlds, to experience something different through pleasures and arts, far from the overheated internal hatreds stirred by this demanding homeland to which they were still expected to sacrifice themselves. Women whom the war had transformed into heroines, including the celebrated munitionnettes (female munitions workers), found peace relegating them back to their kitchens while the National Bloc criminalized their freedom to terminate pregnancies. Many subsequently emancipated themselves by liberating their corseted bodies, cutting their hair, and living their lives in the image of the “garçonne,” the famous and controversial heroine of Victor Margueritte’s novel [\[11\]](#).



In May 1924, the legislative elections witnessed the defeat of the National Bloc and the rise to power of the Cartel des gauches (Left-Wing Coalition). Yet this represented only a brief respite in the mounting anti-Jewish sentiment. The 1930s would witness dictatorships seizing power across Europe and the flourishing of unspeakable racial hatreds culminating in the Holocaust.

Present Questions

One can imagine that today, a new epidemic similar to “disease No. 9” would trigger a surge of fear and hatred, amplified exponentially by “social networks,” reaching the heights of wild hysteria experienced during epidemics caused by AIDS and later COVID-19. Léon Poliakov, during an interview in September 2005 with Roger Droit [\[11\]](#), offered a lucid assessment of the situation:

The only certainty I have today regarding antisemitism and racism, in Russia as elsewhere, is that all this will continue. We cannot predict exactly in what form, nor can we specify precisely with what intensity. But we can be convinced that it will not cease.

Nor will cease, one can hope, the determined struggle of men and women of goodwill against the poisoning of consciences.

- ***Michel Levine is a human rights historian and the author of a book devoted to the major cases of the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme (Affaires non classées. Archives inédites de la Ligue des Droits de l'Homme, Paris, Fayard, 1973). He has also published a historical investigation into the repression of Algerian demonstrations in Paris in October 1961 (Les Ratonnades d'octobre. Un meurtre collectif à Paris en 1961, Paris, Ramsay, 1985; republished by Jean-Claude Gawsewitch Éditeur, 2011). The above article originally appeared, in French, in the magazine "Témoigner" N°140 april 2025. published by the Auschwitz Foundation. Éditions du Centre d'études et de documentation de l'ASBL Mémoire d'Auschwitz.***

NOTES

1 Particularly in his book *Les Diverses Familles spirituelles de la France*, Paris, Émile-Paul Frères, 1917

2 An event comparable to the French 'sacred union' occurred in Germany through the *Burgfrieden* (civic peace) proclaimed by the Kaiser, though this national solidarity quickly dissolved once the first shots were fired.

3 The Yiddish expression "leben ist azoy wie Gott in Frankreich" (one lives like God in France) was widely used in Ashkenazi communities and its positive connotation remained untarnished even through the Dreyfus affair. As the father of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas remarked, "A country where people tear each other apart over the fate of a little Jewish captain is a country where one must hurry to settle," highlighting how even this controversial case paradoxically reinforced France's reputation as a relatively hospitable place for Jews.

4 The term 'antisemitism' (*Antisemitismus*) was coined in 1879 in Germany by journalist Wilhelm Marr to cloak his racist hatred in a veneer of scientific legitimacy. He originally presented it as opposition to Semites broadly—encompassing Akkadians, Canaanites, Phoenicians, Arameans, Arabs, and Hebrews. However, the term rapidly evolved to target Jews exclusively, shedding its purported broader application while maintaining its pseudo-scientific pretense.

5 FTP-MOI: Abbreviation for 'Francs-tireurs et partisans – main d'œuvre immigrée' (Sharpshooters and Partisans – Immigrant Labor).

6 This term 'pogrom' was still unknown in France. Journalist Bernard Abraham Lecache would make it known to the general public through his book 'When

Israel Dies. In the Land of Pogroms,' Paris, Éditions du progrès civique 1927. The following year, he would found the International League Against Pogroms, which would become in 1929 the International League Against Antisemitism (LICA).

7 The “Spanish” flu was actually first documented in the United States before being transported to Europe by the thousands of “Sammies” (American soldiers) who disembarked in France during World War I. Spain received this misleading geographical attribution simply because it provided more transparent and comprehensive reporting about the epidemic.

8 Organization of leaders of the French iron and steel industry from 1864 to 1940.

9 The French phrase Champ de Navets (Turnip Field) was used at the time to designate the cemetery.

10 Considered “serfs of the Empire”, Jews had to pay a special tax as early as 1234.

11 For writing this novel, published in 1922 by Ernest Flammarion, the author was stripped of his Légion d'honneur the following year.



**ELIJAH [ELLIE] HOTZ: A BIOGRAPHICAL
NOTE RECORDING HIS MILITARY SERVICE,
1939-1945**

Ivan Kapelus



Ellie Hotz (1921-2014)

A new museum, the Chaim Herzog Museum of the Jewish Soldier in World War II, has been established in Latrun, Israel.[\[1\]](#) Herzog was President of Israel from

1983 – 1993 and during World War II served in the British forces as a combat intelligence officer. A talking time elevator in the museum plays a film stating, “From the start of the war till its end, the Germans and their allies made a methodical effort to eliminate Jews from the face of the earth. But the Jewish people did not surrender – they fought back against those who persecuted them (and) joined the armed forces en masse.”

The museum is devoted to honoring the heroism, volunteering, and contribution of about one and a half million Jews from around the world who participated in the fight against the Nazis and their allies, a quarter of a million of whom paid with their lives. Amongst them were 357 South Africans. This article is about two South African Jews who were among those Jewish soldiers who enlisted to fight Hitler, Ellie and Cecil Hotz.

The writer first met Ellie in 1964. He was the youngest of five children of David and Leah Hotz (nee Abramson), both immigrants from Lithuania, who were married in the Paarl synagogue in 1910. Sister Jessie, the eldest, was born on 27 July 1911, followed by Abraham (Abe) on 21 August 1912 and Cecil on 31 July 1914. After a gap of three years, on 14 November 1917, Isidore (Issy) made it four, to be joined by number five, Ellijah (Ellie) on 19 February 1921.



David and Leah Hotz

All five Hotz children were born in Paarl. In 1922, the family moved to Villiersdorp, a picturesque village in the heart of the Drakenstein Mountains, where David and Leah opened a general dealers store. There was no Jewish

community, so the Hotz family became members of the Somerset West Hebrew Congregation, which had been established in 1903. Abe and Cecil had their bar mitzvahs in 1925 and 1927 respectively in the Somerset West synagogue, built in 1923.



The Hotz siblings: (l-r), Issy, Cecil, Jessie, Abe and Ellie

In 1928, the family moved to Cape Town, settling in the midst of the Jewish community in Constitution Street before moving, in the mid 1930s, to the Tamboerskloof area, where David was co-owner and manager of a dairy. They were members of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation [the 'Mother Congregation' of South African Jewry, originally called Tikvath Israel – Ed.] and attended the Gardens synagogue. There Issy and Ellie (who sang in the shul choir) celebrated their Bar Mitzvahs. All the boys matriculated from the Cape Town High School, with Ellie doing so in 1938, just as the clouds of war were gathering.

Whether South Africa would remain neutral (as desired by Prime Minister JBM Hertzog and most Afrikaner politicians) or whether it would declare war on Germany as an ally of the United Kingdom (as Jan Smuts and the United Party proposed) was a highly emotional and divisive issue. It all came to head in a debate in the recalled parliament, where Hertzog's motion for South Africa to remain neutral and Smuts' proposed amendment that it instead declare war on Germany and join the Allies was discussed. Hertzog's motion was defeated and Smut's amendment passed by a majority of thirteen votes. Hertzog resigned as Prime Minister and called on Governor General Sir Patrick Duncan to call a general election.

As Richard Steyn comments in his book *Seven Votes: How World War II changed South Africa forever* (Jonathan Ball Publisher, 2020): “Unbeknown to anyone, the prime minister had already been privately informed in writing by the Governor General that permission would not be granted for the dissolution of Parliament and the calling of an election. Duncan’s reasoning for denying Hertzog’s request was primarily that an election would lead to great bitterness and quite possibly violence, but also that neutrality had been an issue in the election of 1938, only 16 months earlier, when the prime minister had repeatedly declared that Parliament should make the final decision. The House had now delivered its judgement and come down in favour of Smuts’s pro-war motion, and if the Deputy Prime Minister was able to form a government, he (Duncan) would not feel justified in dissolving Parliament”.

As a result of the bitter divide between those who opposed entering the war and those who supported Smuts, the government could not enforce conscription, hence the Union Defence Force became a volunteer force. Notwithstanding the, at times violent, objections of the anti-war Afrikaner Nationalists, 137000 whites volunteered in a short time.

The Jewish community seems to have followed a special approach to volunteering for the armed forces. If there were only two sons, one would volunteer while the other remained to look after the parents. If, as was the case with the Hotz family, there were four sons, two would volunteer and two remain in South Africa. The two Hotz brothers who volunteered were Ellie and Cecil. Cecil was 25 years old and Ellie only 18 when they joined up and commenced their training, in Ellie’s case with the Royal Natal Carbineers, a local regiment formed in January 1855.



Ellie Hotz in training

At that time Libya was an Italian colony while Britain maintained troops in Egypt to defend the Suez Canal. When Italy declared war in June 1940 and attacked the British forces in Egypt, the British crossed into Libya, all but destroying the Italian army. As control of the Suez Canal and access to Middle Eastern oil and raw materials from Asia was of vital importance to both Germany and the Allies, Germany then invaded North Africa in February 1941 to reinforce the Italians and prevent an Axis defeat. It made sense to send the South African forces up to North Africa to join the Allied armies there and her forces played a significant role in halting the Axis advance, including at the Battle of El Alamein.

The North African Campaign lasted from 10 June 1940 to 13 May 1943. Ellie served in it from 1941 onwards.



Ellie (right) with two colleagues, July 1942. From the painted backdrop, they must have gone to a professional photographer.

On 21 June 1942, 10 722 South Africans soldiers who were part of the 2nd South African Infantry Division were captured at Tobruk. Fortunately, Ellie was not fighting in that division. The Royal Natal Carbineers played a small but eventful part in the huge and decisive Second Battle of El Alamein in October–November 1942. Ellie had by then been promoted to corporal. It was a difficult campaign, with the thirsty men often fighting in the desert heat among minefields and blinding sandstorms. The 1st Infantry Division was then reorganized to form

the 6th South African Armoured Division, a strongly reinforced division incorporating the 1st Royal Natal Carabineers, that was sent to Italy.



**Alexandria, Egypt, May 1944,
Ellie, standing, middle.**



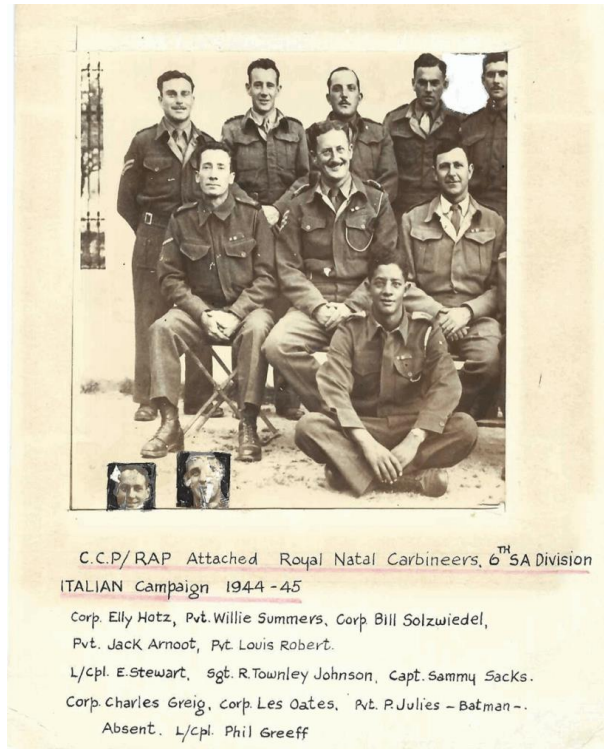
Cecil Hotz, North Africa

The Italian Campaign (July 1943 – May 1945) was a major Allied military effort to liberate Italy from Axis control. The 6th South African Division, which included Ellie, fought in it from 1944. The 1st Royal Natal Carbineers landed at Taranto and took part in the battle of Cassino, one of the bloodiest battles of the

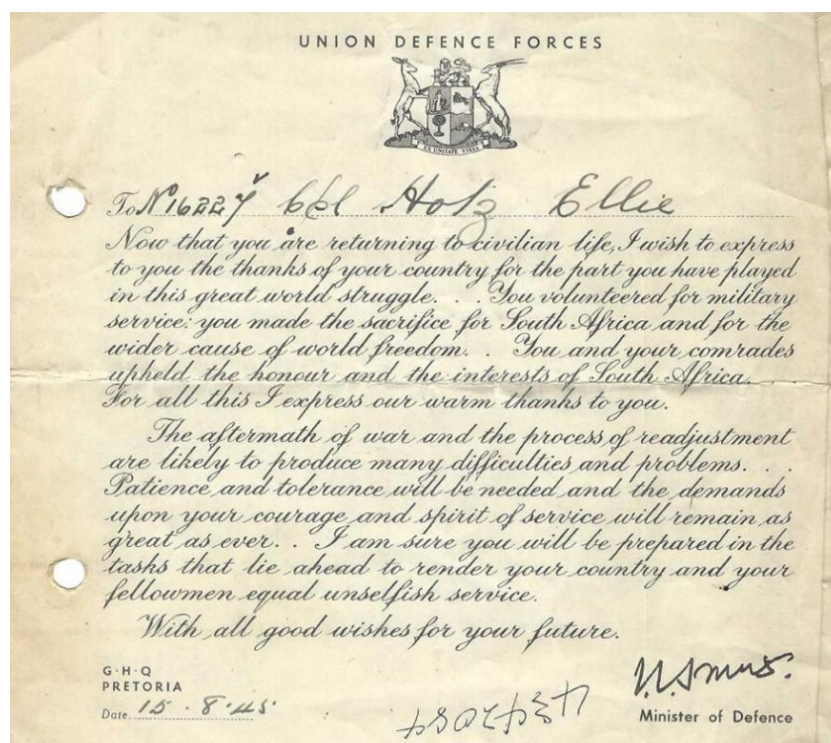
war. From there they fought their way up the Italian boot through to Rome. After the fall of Rome on 5 June 1944, German resistance stiffened. The 6th South African Division was a major fighting force as the Allied armies moved northwards to push the Germans out of Italy. The Royal Natal Carbineers took part in several engagements, including the attempt to break Germany's defensive Gothic Line in 1944. They fought at the Greve river north of Rome, at Monte Vigese, Monte Stanco and Monte Pessa until their final victory in May 1945.



Ellie and fellow soldier in Rome, 1944



Ellie's gallant conduct during the Italian campaign saw his being mentioned in despatches. As a result, his service medal was awarded with silver leaves, signifying "Mention in Despatches," which marks a formal recognition of bravery with the King's commendation. Luckily both he and Cecil returned home unscathed. Ellie received his formal discharge certificate from the South African Minister of Defence on 15 August 1945.



And so home, to South Africa and civilian life. In the photograph below Ellie can be seen fourth from the front, seemingly dancing his way past the City Hall, Cape Town!



After his discharge, Ellie and a fellow serviceman worked together as commercial travelers for specific wholesalers. Happiness soon followed as Ellie met the love of his life Bella Muller, whom he married in the Gardens Shul in 1949. Sadly, they had no children. He later worked as a junior partner in a business selling crockery imported from Japan. In 1967, Ellie joined his brothers Cecil and Issy in a clothing store in Wynberg, M Siegel and Co, which specialised in school uniforms. They sold the business on reaching retirement age. Ellie passed away on 16 November 2014, while Bella died the following year on 26 July.



- *Ivan Kapelus holds a BA, LLB from Stellenbosch University and an LLM (Tax) from Kings College, University of London. He has an extensive legal and international tax planning background. His books include Reflections on a Visit to Lithuania (2009) and From the Baltic to the Cape – the journey of three families (2013). Part 1 of this article appeared in the Vol. 76, #3, Autumn-Winter 2021 issue of Jewish Affairs.*

NOTES

[1] See *Jewish Affairs*, Vol. 79 * No. 1 * Winter 2024, Naomi Schamroth's Appendix to article by Alon Shapira, ["WHAT ON EARTH IS THERE TO TALK ABOUT?" – AN ACT OF WARTIME HEROISM FORGOTTEN, AND REMEMBERED – Jewish Affairs](#)



THE SHOP

Zita Nurok

My father moved his bicycle shop from Gustav Street on the outskirts of Roodepoort, to Croft Street which was closer to town. It was the last building in the White section of the town. Next to it was the Indian tailor's shop – the first building of the businesses in the Non-White section of town.



Still there: The adjoining Indian tailor shop

After Cheder during the week, instead of going home as did my friends, I would often walk from the shul to the shop which was close by. I never knew what to

expect. Would my father be helping customers? Would anyone be buying a bike? Would my mother be there?

When Dad arrived in South Africa from Kurshan, Lithuania, his older brothers had already emigrated to South Africa. They knew of the shop in Roodepoort. They impressed upon him that if he married and had a family, the shop would be a good way for him to support the family, and this indeed came to pass. However, in order not to lose his knowledge of Hebrew and Yiddish that he'd learned as a boy and as a student in Kurshan, Lithuania, he became an active member of the Roodepoort shul, speaking Yiddish to a number of members who also spoke the language, conducting services and reading the Hebrew if the Reverend wasn't available, and attending meetings relating to shul matters.

Most customers came from the gold mine in Durban Deep that was a short distance from our shop. The mining industry employed Black migrant workers who could have come from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho. Their common language was Fanagalo spoken by those people from different linguistic back grounds. Many of them lived in close mining communities, or places where they could afford available housing. If they needed parts for their bikes they knew that my father's shop was where they could get whatever they needed. Dad interacted with his customers in a friendly, firm manner. He spoke to them, often using African words he'd learned over the years. They warmly referred to him as 'die Oubaas' He was always busy helping customers, organizing the goods, deciding what he would need to buy from the wholesaler in Johannesburg, deciding what he didn't need if items had been on the shelves for many months.

I had a favorite glass cabinet in the front of the shop. I liked to rearrange the variety of items for sale, the inexpensive colorful bangles on the shelves, the plastic colored combs, hairbrushes, small round mirrors, and bigger ones with handles, colorful dishtowels and dish cloths. African women looked at this cabinet. They enjoyed hearing me use African words that I had learned from them, and they always enthusiastically suggested new words.

Mother sometimes came to help with the running of the business. She dealt with African music that blared from records she put on the record player and into the speakers attached to the front windows. Africans sang and danced rhythmically in the street or on the pavement, to the beat of the music. Women clapped and sang. All these rhythmic movements intrigued me. After their singing, dancing, and clapping, customers often came into the shop to browse, and sometimes to buy things they could afford.

When she wasn't organizing the music, Mother usually sat in the back of the shop knitting sweaters, gloves, socks for our family, only stopping to help perspective customers. If business was really quiet she enjoyed going to talk to the butcher and his wife in the butchery across the street. They spoke Yiddish to one another. Whenever I decided to accompany her, it seemed as though the butchery was always loud and busy with a variety of customers. They sold kosher meat on one side of the shop, and non-kosher meat on the other side. The smell of raw meat hanging on hooks or in the counters pervaded the air, and sawdust on the floor kept it clean.

Gibson, who was African, worked for my father. He repaired bicycles, and he understood how each part of the bicycle worked– the spokes, the wheels, the tyres, the bicycle seat, the brakes, the handlebars, the bell. Sadly, he only had one functional eye but it didn't interfere with his disposition. He never told us how that happened, and he just seemed to accept the situation. If he wasn't repairing bikes for specific customers, he'd be cleaning and polishing those that he'd place in the front windows, to make them attractive for buyers. He and Dad had a respectful relationship.

Towards the end of the day Dad would count the takings for the day, before closing up to return home. He'd lock the door and close the iron gate that was the burglar proofing. If I had not yet left to go home as Mother did earlier, we would walk home together, talking about the day. He was always interested in what we were learning in Cheder.



The shop has different owners now, and while the building still stands there it's no longer a bicycle shop. No-one knew of Gibson's whereabouts. When the shop was sold my father paid him his salary for several more months after it was closed. My parents moved out of Roodepoort as did the other people in the Jewish community during that time and in years later, resulting in closure of the shul, the community hall, and the gradual dismantling of the small Jewish congregation.

- ***Zita Nurok***, a regular contributor to Jewish Affairs, is a former elementary school teacher who grew up in South Africa. In 2019, she retired after 48 years of teaching, nine of which were at the then Jewish Government School in Doornfontein.



Jacaranda Jewry

David Saks

As the adage has it, “many hands make light work”, and that is true of many things. It is not always so, however, when it comes to writing community histories, where it can all too easily be a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth! But a new history of the Pretoria Jewish community recently brought out under the auspices of the SAJBD Pretoria Council has shown that even with multiple people on board, it is possible to come up with something of the very highest quality.

In 1987, more than a decade of research by a dedicated team of community members came to fruition with the appearance of *The story of the Pretoria Jewish Community up to 1930*, the first full history of Pretoria Jewry in its formative decades. A little short of four decades later, that story has been picked up upon and brought up to the present day, this time on a far more ambitious and comprehensive scale. *Jacaranda Jews – Voices from Pretoria 1865-2025*, some five years in production, was brought out earlier this year. It is an impressive achievement, monumental even, and can be ranked among those at the very forefront of the many community histories that South African Jewry has produced over the generations.

For the team tasked with researching, writing and producing the book (whose title, of course, derives from the purple-blossomed jacaranda trees for which Pretoria is famous), the project was very much a labour of love, and it shows. One sees it throughout in the meticulous attention to detail, in the extensive efforts that were made to source images to accompany the relevant text, in the unstintingly high production standards – aesthetically speaking, the final

product is a true gem, superbly laid out and beautifully illustrated – and in how much consultation was involved in bringing on board so wide and diverse a range of contributors. The amount of in-depth research that has gone into it all is also very apparent. I can attest at first hand to how much effort went into delving into the records to get even small details just right since I was frequently consulted on various topics. In addition to the Pretoria community's own comprehensive and excellently organised historical archives (Juan-Paul Burke, a regular past contributor to this journal and also listed among the books contributors having done a fine job in that regard), the SAJBD's archives were also an important resource. An especially useful source of information for the more modern period was the *Pretoria Jewish Chronicle*, first published in 1970. Here, special mention can be made of long-serving *PJC* editor Diane Wolfson, who in her role as executive secretary of the Pretoria Council SAJBD provided exceptional administrative support, including in contacting families and overseeing subscriptions for the family stories.



Wedding at Paul Kruger Street synagogue

It is rather striking that no single author, or even several authors, are credited with writing up the text of this book. Instead, the inside cover provides a comprehensive list of all noteworthy participants – over seventy names in all – including the members of the History Book & Editorial Committee themselves, many more individual contributors, research team members and the donors whose generous support ultimately made the fulfilment of the project possible. The closest one gets to actual authors being identified – a coherent, narrative

history doesn't miraculously emerge all by itself, after all – is in current SAJBD Pretoria Council chairman Gary Nowosenetz acknowledging in the Preface that “the compilation of information was undertaken by Carol Baron and Yvonne Eskell Klagsbrun”.

The book is thus presented as a team effort, or more accurately in Nowosenetz' words, a “community effort”. How considerable and achievement this is should not be underplayed, given how difficult it is to come up with a community history that is sufficiently inclusive and broadly acceptable to all. By way of illustration, this reviewer was once involved in helping write up, and eventually finalise, a history of the Jews of South West Africa/Namibia, a process drawn out over nearly a quarter of a century that over time necessitated multiple authors, was beset by internal controversies over content and direction and in all was a textbook instance of how not to write the history of a community. Especially, dare I say it, a Jewish one!

One thing that JJ and the Namibia Jewry book do have in common is that both are divided into two main sections, one devoted to the history of the community as a whole interwoven with that of the country in general and the other to individual family histories and reminiscences. In the latter case, the approach was to feature every single Jew who had ever lived in the country, an ambitious undertaking but doable as even at its height the Namibian Jewish community never much exceeded 600 or so. Charlotte Wiener's 2016 book *The Jewish Country Communities of Limpopo/Northern Transvaal* also adopts an all-inclusive approach, so that practically no-one is left out. In Pretoria's case, where the community was some seven times larger in its hey-day than that of Namibia's, that was never a realistic option, so instead individual families – 66 in all, with an appropriate donation being made to the project for the privilege – contributed their stories. There will inevitably be many with Pretoria roots who will be disappointed that their own families do not feature anywhere, but that is par for the course when it comes to more broad-ranging histories of this nature. What is remarkable is how large a proportion of the community, from its formative years to the present day, does feature in some way.

As the title indicates, a strong focus of *Jacaranda Jewry* is to provide a platform for Pretorians past and present to share their memories of community life while also telling their own personal and professional stories and those of their families. In the first section, these accounts are nevertheless carefully interwoven with the history of the community as a whole, always as reflected and impacted upon by events taking place in the greater society. It is a story of new beginnings followed by steady growth, vibrancy and impressive achievement and eventually by the onset of gradual but continual decline, at least in terms of bare numbers. Realistically speaking Pretoria Jewry, like most

if not all remaining centres of Jewish life in South Africa, is today in its twilight years, and this book is therefore a much-needed vehicle for properly recording its story while there is still time. Writes Nowosenetz in his preface, “with the ageing population of the Pretoria Jewish community steadily declining, preserving the community’s living memory became a priority”.

The narrative picks up from where the previous history of Pretoria Jewry left off, at the start of the 1930s. The formative years of the community, beginning with the arrival of the first trickle of permanent Jewish residents from the late 1860s onwards, is nevertheless well summarised in a preliminary chapter, enhanced by many attractive and interesting illustrations, including of important original documents from the Pretoria SAJBD archives. To digress a little here, it is striking to note the extent to which those early Jewish pioneers, despite being no more than a small handful, achieved prominence and success in a range of different fields. Aside from the illustrious Sammy Marks, who did more than probably anyone else to build up the economy of the then Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, they included State Prosecutor and Volksraad member M. de Vries, Chief Constable of the city J R Levy, Pretoria News founder Leo Weinthal, Justice of the Peace (among many more public offices held) D M Kisch and Town Councillor and Taxing Master I J Lithauer. Most of these early residents were of Dutch, English or German origin, Marks – one of the first to come out from Lithuania, well before the large influx of other Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe – being an exception in that regard. Marks himself lived a little outside Pretoria – his Zwartkoppies residence is now the very popular Sammy Marks House museum – but he contributed generously to both Jewish and general causes in the city and was ultimately buried in the Pretoria Jewish cemetery. If I may indulge myself a little here, I can mention that one of the graves alongside his grand, specially demarcated tomb is that of my own great-great grandfather Chaim Taback, who died around the same time. The story proper commences on rather a solemn note, since the 1930s was a time when South Africa was experiencing an unprecedented upsurge of antisemitism. It all inevitably played out in Pretoria as well, for a time at least souring to an extent the generally respectful and friendly relations that had previously existed between the Jewish community and the rest of the population. It is recounted how this affected Jews on the ground, particularly those living in poorer, working-class areas, and also how the local Jewish, reinforced at times by supporters from Johannesburg, fought back, on one occasion even violently breaking up a pro-Nazi demonstration. It is nevertheless interesting that the only Jew to serve as mayor of Pretoria, Ivan Solomon, was appointed to that position at the height of this antisemitic wave, in the mid-1930s.

Parallel to what was happening in the wider society, Jewish communal life continued to flourish throughout these difficult years, as well as in the ensuing

several decades. The book recounts how the community were able to sustain existing communal institutions while regularly establishing new ones, whether in the religious, Zionist, welfare, youth, cultural, educational, sporting or other fields. There is a strong focus on the part Pretoria Jewry played in World War II and how a high proportion of its young members served, and in a good few cases died, in the fight to defeat Nazism. How the Holocaust impacted on the community, at the time and in how it was memorialised in subsequent years, is recorded, as are the survivors who went on to make their home in the city. This is followed up by recording how a goodly proportion of Pretorians went on to serve as volunteers in the Israeli War of Independence and their experiences in that regard. Since there is a military base in Pretoria, many Jewish national servicemen from around the country became involved with the community for a time when compulsory national service was introduced.

From the post-war years, the unfolding story of the community is told against the backdrop of the struggle against Apartheid culminating in the eventual ushering in of multi-racial democracy in 1994 and the attrition that Pretoria Jewry suffered from emigration during those uncertain times. Pretoria was the scene of a number of high-profile political trials during the apartheid era, with the venue for one of them (the 1956-1961 Treason Trial) famously being the Old Synagogue in Paul Kruger Street, although by then it had been sold by the community and was owned by the State. How this impacted on the local Jewish community and which of its members were involved in those events forms part of the narrative and is one of a good many aspects of *Jacaranda Jewry* that make it of interest to a broader readership beyond the confines of the Jewish community.

Kudos, then, to Pretoria Jewry for producing this landmark piece of Jewish Africana. It is a fitting way indeed to chronicle and record for posterity the saga of one of South African Jewry's most significant communities over the decades, a community whose story has yet to play out.

- **David Saks is editor of *Jewish Affairs*)**



The Grandmaster (All In The Game)

Charlotte Cohen

The King was placed in a prostrate position: face-forward on to the chess-board.

His grandfather stood up, shook hands with his friend and walked him to the gate. Martin stared at the King lying there pathetically, like a fallen hero. As soon as his grandfather returned, Martin said “Grandpa, the King looks like he’s dead!”

His grandfather sat down and drew Martin into his arms. “The King is not dead. When he is overturned, it means he has ‘surrendered’... ‘resigned’. He has given up the game.”

Grandpa righted the King. “But with each new game, he is ready to start again. ... It’s the same in real life, Martin. Sometimes when a man knows he is beaten, he puts his hand out and says: ‘You played a better game this time and deserve to win!’ Often it makes him more determined to work harder, to study and practice so that he has a chance of beating his opponent the next time. Isn’t that so?” The brown-hair nodded against the jacket armpit.

His grandfather set the chessmen out on the board. The hand-carved pieces stood straight and erect, proud and beautifully shaped. The horse’s front legs were raised slightly, ready to jump. The castle, with tiny towers and turrets, was like the one in Martin’s fairy-tale book. Martin knew the pawns were ‘olden-day’ soldiers because they carried shields and swords.

Everyone said that Grandpa’s chess set was a magnificent one.

“The King stands guarded by his army and advisers. He is old – that is why he only moves one square at a time. The King is, therefore, not really a fighter. He is a symbol. He represents honour and dignity. He stands for what is worth fighting for ... Martin, you know that if you’ve lost your King, you’ve lost the game. And that is exactly the same with people. Anyone who loses his integrity and self-respect has really lost everything.”

Martin was lifted onto his grandfather’s lap. Although he did not always understand all the words his grandfather used, he loved being told about the pieces and how they were ‘- just the same as in real life’.

Martin did not always understand all the words his grandfather used, but he loved listening to him.

“Chess is a battle of wits between two armies” his grandfather continued. “It is a game where you capture your opponent’s King in order to win. When you play chess, it is you that directs the whole army. They will do whatever you decide they should do. And they will do exactly what you decide. But, Martin, with authority, comes responsibility. You must think things through carefully before you move. You must consider all the angles – the dangers, the advantages, and the chance for victory ...”

Just then, Martin’s parents returned from the club. Conversation became general – a comfortable hum of friendly family chat.

Martin fingered the King who stood in the centre of his army, his queen by his side, his soldiers standing protectively before him, ready for battle. They would fight, advance, retreat – even be captured – as he commanded. He felt a warm stir of excitement at the prospect.

Ever since he could remember, Martin was taken to his grandparents’ home on Sundays. He looked forward to its familial ritual and familiarity – but more especially because he could be with his grandfather.

His grandfather usually played chess on Sunday mornings. Martin would sit alongside him during the game.

The atmosphere on the enclosed front-porch was one of quiet concentration, broken only by an occasional grunt or ‘check’. Martin was allowed to play with the pieces that were taken from the board which he would place in two matching rows. By the time he was five, he knew that if more white pieces were ‘taken off’, black was winning – and vice versa. And whichever colour his grandfather was playing, that was the colour he hoped would win.

During the morning, Gran would bring in a tray with tea and a glass of milk for Martin. She would pour the tea and place it, with a biscuit, on the right-hand side of each man. "Here's the tea, gentlemen. Drink it before it's cold!" Their heads nodded. 'Thank-you's' were mumbled; but their eyes never left the board. Martin would watch transfixed until a white ring settled around the inside of each cup. "Grandpa" he would nudge "Your tea's getting cold." "So it is. ... hmmm ... so it is ..." Grandpa would squeeze Martin's hand affectionately. "Now let's see ... what shall we do?"

Martin had never seen his grandfather drink a cup of tea during a game of chess, nor had he ever seen his grandmother fail to bring one.

When Martin turned seven, Grandpa asked Martin whether he would care to join them for a sherry. When Martin's mother objected, Grandpa said: "It's a good introduction into the social graces, Jean. Anyway, it's a well-known fact that 'a little of what's bad for you, is good for you'. Martin's mother commented that it was a fact that had never been proved.

Needless to say, Martin was given a little crystal glass half-filled with sherry. A flush of grown-up importance came to his cheeks. He wished them 'good health' and gulped it down. A high-powered explosive erupted in his chest. He started coughing wildly. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

After the ensuing consternation, Grandpa said: "Always sip it gently, Martin. Something to enjoy should be savoured – never taken in a hurry. What's worth appreciating must be relished, not rushed!"

"You and your arm-chair philosophy!" murmured Gran.

And Martin's mother said Grandpa had "more reflections than a mirror." After lunch, the family usually sat on the porch – Martin snuggling close to his grandfather.

When the chess moves were first elaborated by Martin's grandfather to his fascinated little listener, each piece was described with examples that were 'just the same as in real life'.

"This is the Queen! See the coronet around head. She is very grand and majestic and much more imperious than the King himself. She is, in fact, the power behind the throne. She is commanding and demanding!" Martin thought of Aunt Bertha. She was bossy – always ordering Uncle Dave around and telling everyone what to do.

“The Queen is the most powerful piece of all. She can move in whichever direction she chooses and as far as she wishes to go. Use her well, and she will demonstrate her magnificence for you on the chessboard. But think, Martin: one small mistake – a mere oversight – and the Queen with all her strength and grandeur can be taken off as easily as the little pawn. In fact, she can be taken off by the little pawn ... Same with people: So many fine and noble things can be achieved when beauty, wealth and talent are used wisely. But one mistake, one error of judgment – no matter how rich or powerful or celebrated a person might be, can cause him to fail and fall.”

According to Grandpa, the Castle moved like “the square shape of the bricks from which it was built”. It was next in importance to the mighty Queen because “a castle offers shelter and protection. Its strength lies in its solidity ... Anyone who is reliable and trustworthy, is sometimes called ‘a tower of strength’. He is safe and strong – like a castle.”

Martin thought his grandfather was exactly like that.

Gran once shook her head. “What are you teaching the boy, anyway?” she asked.

“Chess? – or a crash course on how to live one’s life in ten easy lessons?” Grandpa smiled. “It’s the same thing” he replied.

Martin was taught to play chess by his grandfather: but he learnt much more than the moves. He never tired of hearing his grandfather’s comparisons between people, situations and the chess-pieces. They left an indelible impression. His understanding of the capability and culpability of human nature grew apace with his knowledge of the game.

The Bishops were described as ‘stately and righteous – church leaders and advisers to the royal household.’ ... “The bishop moves on the chessboard just as he raises his hands in blessing. Diagonally. So that a bishop that begins battle on a white square, remains on white squares throughout the game. He never gets to stand on black soil, so to speak. And the same applies to the other Bishop. He never gets to stand on a white square – ever, right throughout the game.”

Grandpa paused for a moment. “And, in a way, that is their greatest weakness! ... A man who sticks to the ‘straight and narrow’, who is too confined in his thinking (no matter how upright his thoughts may be) never experiences the adventure of discovering what lies on the other side. He limits himself, like the Bishop, to only half the squares on the chessboard!”

Martin could see exactly what his grandfather meant.

The Knights (horses) were men of “dash, spirit and courage”. They moved in an extraordinary manner – jumping right over other pieces – “because the Knights of old were extraordinary men. There are men like that too” Grandpa explained, “men with nerve, guts and determination. They take liberties because people expect it of them and respect them because of it.”

Grandpa never ‘spoke down’ to Martin. He treated him as a younger, smaller person – to be taught, nurtured, appreciated and loved.

The pawns were given the same respect. “In value, the pawn is the lowest-ranking on the board. Small and vulnerable, they nevertheless stand ready for combat, to fight for and protect their King.”

Martin nestled close to the old man. “How are they in real life?”

Grandpa considered. “The Pawn is like any ordinary person– not born to position, fortune or possessing great talent. Nonetheless, if the pawn can make his way over the board, he gains the power of a Queen! It seems a long way and there are obstacles in his course. But look! It is really only six squares! ...So, anyone, no matter how humble he was when he was born – and despite all the difficulties he may encounter on the way – can attain the highest position, on the chessboard and in life! No limits can be set on one’s determination or efforts to achieve one’s goals.”

By the time Martin was ten, Grandpa said he played well for his age. He never said, “I’ll have you a game, Martin.” It was always “I challenge you to a game.” And the two, who loved each other so much, would sit opposite each other – adversaries for a short while.

Grandpa never ‘played down’ to the young boy by allowing him to win. But constantly, reminded him to weigh the possibilities, consider the dangers and plan the attack ahead – invariably making his point by comparing it with situations that were ‘just the same in real life’.

“—Maybe carelessness cost you your Bishop!”

Then, seeing the boy’s face: “Okay! So you lost your Bishop! That doesn’t mean all is lost! There are other men on the board to help you. Same in life: Give others a chance to help you – and keep fighting!”

..... When Martin cornered his grandfather's King in an effort to finally 'check-mate' him, the King was left in a position where he had no place to move – which effectively made it a 'stalemate'. The result: a draw!

Disappointment clouded Martin's face.

"Well played, Martin! Your attack was well thought-out; your moves made with foresight. You did the best you could and you played a really good game. And that's the real victory."

His grandfather showed him something written by Grantland Rice.

"When the One Great Sorcerer
Comes to write against your name
He marks, not that you won or lost
But how you played the game."

Gran brought in tea. "Martin, your grandmother sometimes calls me 'an old windbag'. But always remember this: When we sit before a chessboard, we both start with the same pieces, in the same position. We have, in our lives the same attributes to choose – the King's honour, the Queen's brilliance and arrogance, the Castle's steadfastness, the Bishop's confined virtue, the daring and gallantry of the Knight or the Pawn's humility and endeavor. It's what we choose to use that shapes our destinies and gives us victory."

Gran sighed. "Martin, I have never referred to your grandfather as an 'old windbag'.

But he does sound like a cross between Confucius and Dale Carnegie at times." Grandpa smiled and thanked her for the compliment.

Martin beat his grandfather for the first time when he was twelve. Never had a man lost a game with such pride.

On Martin's fourteenth birthday, Grandpa gave him a book describing the 'Match of the Century', when Bobby Fischer beat Boris Spassky in Reykjavik. They pored over it together; compared Spassky's formidable calm with Fischer's temperamental outbursts. Martin read: "*When Spassky at eighteen was named an international grandmaster, he said, 'The chess figures are like my relatives. I know the peculiarities of each one.' To Benjamin Franklin, chess taught 'foresight, circumspection, caution and the habit of not being discouraged'. For Einstein – 'it in some ways, shapes the spirit.' To Bobby Fischer – 'The game, not the tournament result, is the main thing.'*"

Spassky said, “Chess Is Like Life.”

Fischer said , “Chess Is Life”.

Well, all this was nothing new ... His grandfather had been saying it for years!

Martin thought about his grandfather – a teacher, a story teller, an interpreter, a philosopher ... a grandmaster on the chessboard of life.

One Tuesday, Gran phoned. The doctor had been called. Grandpa had bronchitis.

Martin walked to the mall for a ‘get-well’ card. He could not find any suitable. They were too sentimental and flowery, or silly and frivolous. Martin wrote his own greeting when he returned:

‘I hope you’re not Chess-ty
I hope that you’re not Horse
Please ask the doctor to Check
Whether smo-King has made you worse
A-Pawn my word I’m sorry
That to-Knight you’re feeling sick
Please get better very soon
I need a game – but quick!’

He thought Grandpa would like it, and it was sent.

They went out as usual the following Sunday. Grandpa was still in bed. He was very breathless. His cough was hoarse and rasping and went on for long spells. He proudly produced Martin’s card and excused himself for not challenging Martin to a game.

Lunch was dismal without him. For the first time Martin could remember, Gran’s food was tasteless. The conversation was forced with unnatural stretches of silence – broken only by Grandpa’s intermittent and prolonged coughing. Without Grandpa’s philosophizing, there seemed very little for anyone to say. The family did not remain after lunch.

The following Thursday when Martin returned from school, his mother told him Grandpa had been admitted to hospital. “The cold got on to his chest – like pneumonia”, she said. Although his mother spoke calmly, she appeared flushed and much too busy.

Martin stared at her. He could not visualize Grandpa in a hospital bed. Only at home.... nodding over a chessboard ... thinking ... smiling commenting on life.

He felt the cold hand of fear gripping his throat.

The next day, Martin could not concentrate. Lessons dragged. As soon as the final bell sounded, he went home. No one was there. He tried to do some homework.

At 4 o'clock, the front-door opened. He took one look at them and he knew! Martin swallowed loudly. His father was tight-lipped; his mother's eyes red and swollen. She held the beautiful wooden box containing the chess-set and some books.

"He asked me to give you these. ... Oh, Martin, he was so proud of you. He loved you so much."

Her voice ebbed away as she hugged him and sobbed.

Martin heard himself swallow again. It wasn't possible! It couldn't be! His grandfather couldn't have died!

He took the chess box and went to his room. The tears he held back now released themselves.

He opened the box and fingered the lovely pieces again as he set them out on the board. It was a magnificent chess-set. Everyone said so! He remembered the first time he saw the King lying face-downwards. "Grandpa, The King looks like he's dead!" And the reply: "The King is not dead ... He has surrendered sometimes when a man is beaten, he must accept it. ..."

"Grandpa, tell me it's not true! You taught me about 'Life'. But what when there is no more life? When the game is ended forever? "

The squares on the chessboard merged into wet blurriness.

He heard his grandfather's voice. It was right there opposite him. "Martin, the game is not ended forever. Although it won't be you and me, you'll pick up the pieces and play with someone else ... So life itself continues, even though each of us has just a short span.

Martin, look at the chessboard! – There are white and black squares. Like light, bright days and dark, sorrowful ones. There'd be no game, if all the squares were white! So, just as we accept defeat, we accept the dark days when they come. And they do – in everyone's life.

As for death itself – some chess-games are played by correspondence and can continue for weeks – even months. But whether the game is won, lost or drawn, at some time it must end. Life is the same. It would be meaningless, it would not be so precious, if it went on forever.

Words, phrases, memories crowded into Martin's mind. 'We all have twenty-four hours in one day. It's how we use it that gives us victory. It's the attributes we choose that shapes our destinies'.... "Chess Is Like Life" ... "Chess Is Life"

"He marks not that you won or lost, but how you played the game".

Martin looked at the King. 'He represents dignity... honour ... integrity ... someone to look up to".

His grandfather had been a king too.

Martin closed the box and went outside. He knew now that he understood a little of the game.

- *Charlotte Cohen is an award-winning short story writer, essayist and poet, whose work has appeared in a wide variety of South African publications since 1973. She is a regular contributor to Jewish Affairs.*



NEW POETRY

Sailing from my Grandparents' Synagogue

I

Wholly unprepared,
the small boy stands at the threshold
of a red sea crossing
between regimented rows
of unregimented Jews
in musty theatre seats,
dressed in festival best,
appearing to see and be seen.

In the center of the sea in a floating box
sit The Officers in Pompous Top-Hats.
Behind the detached box, Mount Sinai rises;
atop the *bimah*, a snowy-robed Moses—
an odd pompom wobbling on his hoary hat—
intoning intently in improbable tones,
gaze fixed heavenward, rapt.
Lighting the celestial heights,
a tidy line of luminous nebulas

twinkle among dangling crystal globules.
Modestly secreted about the stratosphere,
elegant painted ladies prating in soaring galleries.
From the choir loft, angelic voices float gently
down, heavenly feathers titillating somnolent souls.
Flanking the Holy Ark, a ruffling pair of great copper wings,
(strangely like dismembered pterodactyl trophies, the boy thinks)
tokens of menacing matching cherubs brandishing blazing blades,
guarding Eden's Gate, barring banished Adam's passage
to the Way of the Tree of Life
Whose Mystery beckons behind the blue velvet veil.
O how the impatient boy longs to flee the theater,
the Pompous Top-Hats, the pompom, the painted prating ladies,
and throw open the curtain
and expose the Secret, and run recklessly amuck
down the uncharted way to Who, Why and What.
But to Life's mysteries there is no shortcut.
Heeding the dreadful cherubs, downcast yet inspired,
the boy embarks on the exile redemption requires.

II

Outside, cold night spreads
across the valley like the shadow of death,
the death of another day,
unlamented by unrepentant killers,
the careless killers ever oblivious
that the doomed dead day was theirs.
In the windows of the cells
that pock the crags of the concrete canyon,

the dark light flickers; acolytes absorb the oracle's subtle programs:

(Think this) (Feel this) (Value this) (Need this) (Purchase this)

(Beautiful) (Ugly) (Idolize) (Despise)

(Relegate) (Prioritize)

(Good) (Evil)

(Subscribe, satisfaction certified!)

Down below, shiny soulless shoals stream endlessly

in dry flumes, sullyng the valley with blare and fumes.

Along the sidewalks, the shackled huddled masses tread,

dying to live, dry bones of the living dead,

blind to the stars and the quiet light within,

rashly chasing the flashing neon lodestar

of desolate souls' never-never nirvana.

In a trance they dance about the cusp of the abyss,

pursuing amusements, fleeing the creeping crisis,

craving stimulus after dulled stimulus to affirm a dubious existence.

Delights soon tire, fashions swiftly shift,

yesterday's delicacies today's feces,

matter crumbles, fleshy things scab and sag and wrinkle and rot.

The day fades. The shell cracks. The abyss sucks.

Lies and crushed life drain, all that remains:

a waning shadow of hollow pain.

Vanity of vanities, all is vain!

III

In the valley's shadows the small boy grows.

Whispering, hissing, howling winds taunt,

haunting the perplexing winding alleyways,

a glossy windowed maze of tricky mirrors showing

what they deem you ought to be, or what you're taught to be,
but what you will never see is reality.

The gap in-between snaps your equanimity.

Watching parched wretches madly suck the mirage's sand,
the baffled boy tries to unpick the twists of bliss and
torture tethering tormented fellow travelers.

Desperately needing to flee that pathless wasteland,
no horizon, no signs, no map, no compass in hand,
he seeks antique wisdom, or an erudite old man.

In a shaft of light, he sights an old book, and a sage,
he obtains a key to unlock the vexatious cage.

He learns to discern the lies, to avoid the decoys.

Like launching to a distant galaxy, Truth's odyssey
begins by breaking free of earthy gravity.

Turn from the dark light dancing in the dismal cells,
drawing frenzied moth-Man to its artful fatal flame.

In the gloom, seek the stars, as far as they may seem.

Struggle to grasp the endless light behind the night.

When you succeed, you'll find the quiet light inside.

IV

Everyman's heart holds a hole deep and dark,
unbounded, unexplored, disregarded.

Its voracious vortex moves mindless man
to mitigate the mystical maelstrom,
to seek a rock, a font, a champion,
a potency to stop the cavity.

Weak wooden manikin seeks relief
in identity, polity, or celebrity.

The narcissist works to wad the void
with a self, swollen and illusory.
Endless pleasures and instant fixes fail
to fill the hedonist's ravenous nexus.
Substance cannot stuff an abstract emptiness.
Infinite as space gapes the gulf from self to Perfection.
This abyss is the swelling source of the soul's distraction.
A lonely exile languishing in an alien land,
longing for lost Shangri-la, Soul's lingering reveries
crash into cold concrete container's callous barricades.
With no way to escape the maze other than play the game,
Soul must purchase redemption in cold concrete currency.

V

Inchoate embryonic notions coalesce in an abstract womb.
In a still squall,
a brimming heart spills black blood from a poet's quill.
In bursting squiggles furious lines curl and coil, twisting letters fuse,
choice new words crowd tight verses
basking in vast ambient blank spaces.
The nascent scribbled song lies silent on the delivery table
awaiting a redeeming reader to discover bursting color
latent beneath the perceptible prosaic black-and-white cover.
Amassed floating notions and flickering images form grist for a
poet's curious wit. An inquiring man of spirit, likewise, tries
to find ideals that hide in an unlikely sensual setting,
collecting samples of inert, vegetal, and animate matter.
Skillfully securing severed smoothed sticks and hewn dressed stones,
knitting worked-wool and goats' hair and linen coverings,

coated in animal-emptied hides,
adorned with gold, silver, and copper, mined and refined;
with hand and mind, he strives to rebuild a temporal, amoral world.
With concrete elements he weaves a divine poem, a humble ode
to a Majesty, transcendent, yet immanently hidden in view
of fleshy eyes that need to seek the source and potentiality
of their owner's majesty, lapsed in a spasm of impetuosity.
Sensing mysterious Majesty, ensuing fealty and self-
mastery sate the soul's boundless hole, restoring mislaid majesty.
With consecrated space defined,
time enshrined,
and substance sanctified,
with covenant and consequence, duty and trying mortality,
frail man is empowered with agency and responsibility
to transform inexorable fate into glorious destiny.
A vexatious mortal coil can be reframed, reshaped, remade,
redeemed.
Man's elemental poem basks unseen in vast ambient blank spaces,
lingering in squandered time, awaiting keen redeeming readers
to release its contained radiance upon the waiting blankness.

VI

If adhering man will not release the concrete, redeem its symbols,
and let his soul float to the remote boundary of infinity –
sanctuaries, ceremonies, and pieties are mockeries.
If soaring steeples, sumptuous temples, and luminous hued windows
fail to inspire humility, awe of Infinity, a search for Divinity –
architectural artifices and cold leaden edifices fashion
only flamboyant monuments of narcissists' self-adoration.

If in prayer man will not search the musty niches of his heart,
if eyes won't well, nor throat swell with agonies and ecstasies,
if a soul won't soar on the urgent wings of fervent yearning,
then preserved liturgical words emerge as stale air mindlessly
expired tenuous echoes of vacuous cultural gestures.

VII

The journey to the Way of the Tree of Life
starts in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.
The trail is ever forked with fateful choices.
They're truly only two whispering voices:
Impulse's velvety purr promises pleasure,
and the squalor of mortal slavish compulsion;
Conscience's quiet murmur chains and tames the beast
Man contains, releasing its acceding master;
the nobility of sacrifice and service,
and the surety of persistent purpose,
bequeathing him fitting kingly dignity.
Look beyond the Valley, its turmoil, its darkness and curses.
Lift your eyes to a gleaming Zion upon the mountain yonder,
where soaring earth and sweeping heaven embrace improbably.
Break the brittle shackles of inertia, blame and apology,
choose only life, blessings and eternity,
as you journey from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil
to the far-off Tree of Life immortal.
With righteous deeds you can redeem
the scattered seeds of infinity
concealed in crude physicality.
In the end you'll taste eternity,

the boundless ambrosial bounty,
ripe on Eden's empyreal Tree.

Baruch Price

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,

...from every person whose heart moves him you shall take My offering... gold and silver and copper; sky-blue, and purple, and scarlet wool, and fine linen, and goats' hair; rams' skins dyed red, and goats' skins, and acacia wood; oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil, and for raising the smoke of the incense, gemstones... and they shall make for Me a sanctuary; that I may dwell in them.

Exodus 25:1-8

"And they shall make Me a sanctuary; that I may dwell in them" – it is not written as one may expect, "that I may dwell in it (the sanctuary)" rather it states "that I may dwell in them" for the Divine does not wish to dwell in a tabernacle, but within human beings, if they are wholesome and worthy.

Commentary of Rabbi Moshe Alsheikh (Exodus ibid., Psalm 78)

Moses said before the Holy One, Blessed is He, "How can [the Tabernacle] be constructed by a human-being?"

[The Holy One, Blessed is He,] said to him, "Occupy yourself with its construction with your hand, and it will seem that you are setting it up, but it will rise by itself."

This is the meaning of what is said (in the passive voice), (Exodus 40:17) "The Tabernacle was raised."

Midrash Tanhuma, Pikudei 11

Moses saw all the work and behold! They had done it as the Lord had commanded, so they had done; and Moses blessed them.

Exodus 39:43

And Moses blessed them -he said to them, “May the Divine Presence rest in the work of your hands. ‘May the pleasantness of my Lord, our God, be upon us; and establish our handiwork for us, establish our handiwork.’”

Commentary of Rashi, ibidem, citing Psalms 90:17

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