

S.A. SIG

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dr. Saul Issroff

Recently Beryl, our hardworking editor, sent me a copy of Souvenir Programme of the Keidaner Sick Benefit and Benevolent Society 50th Anniversary Ball, held on May 30th, 1950. This is no mere brochure – it is over 100 pages, in English and Yiddish. There is a wealth of material about the history and development of the Society in South Africa. There are many photos families who came from Keidan.

A detailed and moving description of the Holocaust in Keidan is written by David Wolpe. He was a writer, whose brother lived in Johannesburg. David Wolpe was in Dachau and survived, and went to Israel. There is a list of people killed in Keidan. This society was the first landsmanschaft to be registered as a charity specifically for post-war aid in South Africa. There is mention of a "Keidan Memorial House" to be built on the banks of the river Jordan in Beth Zara, with an architect's drawing. Was this ever built? In addition the many advertisements provide an insight into the commercial and industrial composition of Johannesburg Jewry in 1950.

I have also recently been looking at the Fordsburg-Mayfair Hebrew Congregation 75th anniversary book- edited by Bernard Sachs. Again, this has a fascinating story of migration from Lithuania and settlement in South Africa.

It seems to me that there may be SIG members who have other booklets, programmes, brochures etc., the type of ephemeral material that seldom finds its way into libraries but has tre-

mendous significance to all of us interested in our rich Litvak- South African Heritage. So, if you have anything lying around, either pass it on to Beryl, Mike or myself, or at the very least, photocopy and send us the copies. We will start trying to index some of this material (- volunteers would be welcomed!).

I am very pleased to have arranged the first of what I hope can become regular S.A. SIG talks. As I am in London, this is where it is starting!! The Jewish Genealogy Society of Great Britain is proud to announce that Professor Joseph Sherman, Corob Fellow in Yiddish at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, Yarnton, Oxford will be speaking to the Society. His subject will be "The Lithuanian - Jewish Diaspora : South Africa as a case study." It will be held on Thursday 6 February 2003 at 8pm at Finchley Synagogue, Kinloss Gardens, London.

I hope that in other localities people will take the initiative and arrange their own local speakers - there will surely be no shortage of attendees to any topic relating to South Africa.

For anyone visiting Cape Town in January 2003 there is a conference on Port Jews: Jews and non-Jews in cosmopolitan maritime trading centres, 1650-1914.

An interdisciplinary, international conference sponsored by the AHRB Parkes Centre for the Study of Jewish / non-Jewish Relations, University of Southampton, UK and the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa, 6-8 January 2003.

Some of the topics are as follows:

Victorian Cape Town: Cosmopolitan Melting Pot [panel with Milton Shain and Richard Mendelsohn and Vivian Bickford Smith]

Prof Aubrey Newman (University of Leicester) on "The Reactions of London Jewry to Transmigration, 1885-1914."

Nicholas J. Evans on "The Forgotten Port? Libau and the Evolution of Port Jewish Identity, 1880-1914.

And I am talking on "Colonial Port Jews; The Jews of Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape".

Not related to the above conference:- The Centre for Jewish Genealogy and Migration Studies will have a public meeting on the afternoon January 9th, 2003, in the Africa Room at UCT. Prof . Aubrey Newman, Nick Evans and myself will make short presentations followed by a panel discussion chaired by Mendel Kaplan on South African Migration.

Prof. David Cesarani will be speaking on 'Eichmann' in the evening of January 9th, at the Cape Town Holocaust Centre in the Gardens.

So, this is an active start to 2003 – may it be a more peaceful year than 2002

Saul Issroff

EDITORIAL

Beryl Baleson

After the last Newsletter, feedback was received that our Newsletters were becoming too much of an "Alumni Special"! As always requested, I appreciate such feedback and hope that with this issue you, our members, will find the articles on early Jewish South Africa, together with the success of fellow South Africans interesting.

A very hearty congratulations goes to Dr. Sydney Brenner, former South African, now living in Berkely, California for receiving the 2002 Nobel Prize for Science. Colin Plen, Chairman and founding member of the Johannesburg Genealogical Society has written about Sydney Brenner the family man, whilst Jacob Herberg gives us an insight into Sydney Brenner the Scientist.

Larry Burnett's story of how he found his family in the United States is particularly interesting, as we realise that our families who started off together in Europe, England and even South Africa, have now spread to the four corners of the world. Since the demise of the former Soviet Union when records became available to the world, great strides have been made in family finds and genealogy in general. Lets hope that as we South Africans move around the world, our children and grandchildren will not have to rely on Genealogy methods to find family members - lets keep our South African family ties strong so that we do not lose the contact that our grandparents and parents lost with their families when they moved to strange shores.

Nechamia Dov Hoffmann brought the first Yiddish press to South Africa when he arrived from Lithuania and produced the first Yiddish book "*Sefer Hazichronet*" - (*Book of Memoirs*), in 1916. It has been translated into English by Lilian Dubb and Sheila Barkusky of the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies. I plan to give excerpts in the next few issues of the Newsletter - Hoffmann's articles are enchanting, and his observations on the lifestyles of the peoples he met in South Africa give a fascinating insight into an age that is past, but which definately merits attention and mention.

The first article in this issue is entitled "*The First Jewish Immigrants*".

Besides the above-mentioned people, I would also like to thank Ann Rabinowitz, for sending an article on the Friedlander family's return to De Aar for its Centenary celebrations. Thanks also to Joe Woolf who is in the final stages of printing the "Machal" book, "South Africa's 800", for giving us an insight into the "Machal" legend. Lionel Hart's memoirs for which I thank Stan Hart has been divided into two parts because of its length. Part II will appear in the next Newsletter.

As previously mentioned, please continue to send feedback on the Newsletter. It is your magazine and comments are welcome on what you would like to read in it. Please also note that the contents are the opinions of the writers and not the Editor nor any members of the S.A. SIG Board.

Beryl Baleson
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THE EARLIEST JEWISH IMMIGRANTS

N.D. Hoffmann - 1916 "Sefer Zichronot"

(Editor's note: Hoffmann writes in the present tense, so therefore his information is as was known in 1916)

Jews began immigrating to South Africa during the middle of the 19th century. Before that there was no sign of Jewish life here. I have researched old records in the local public library and found that the first Jew who stepped onto South African soil was a sailor from London, who arrived in Cape Town 21st August, 1835, by name Simon Meyer Levian. He had served on the sailing ship "Africa". The journey lasted eight months. He remained in Cape Town where he settled and went into business.

The first Jewish immigrants in South Africa came from England, Germany and Holland. They all arrived in sailing ships, since there were few steam ships at the time plying between Europe and Africa. The journeys lasted more than six months and not many people were willing to undertake such a long and hazardous journey.

The immigrants of that period were generally simple artisans and unskilled petty pedlars who lived by their wits. On settling here, they took to small business ventures and in time were successful in building bigger enterprises. Later they brought out their families and relatives, and so the total number of immigrants to South Africa was greatly increased and East-European immigration started. The immigrants were simple artisans who had difficulty making a living back home. When they arrived in South Africa they took to peddling outside city limits, carrying heavy packs on their backs. In time, they became well off, having succeeded in business. They then sent money home to their families, brought them out and settled in South Africa.

EARLY PIONEERS

The reader will be interested in the history of some Jewish pioneers who came to South Africa, poor, helpless and anxiety ridden, but who made good. Through their qualities of great energy and determination they climbed the ladder of success to the top. They became wealthy and much respected citizens.

Here is the story of two young people from Neustadt-Sugind born into poor but respectable homes. Their parents were honest and worked hard in order to make a decent living. In 1871 these two young men arrived in Cape Town, poor, lonely and insecure without a relative or friend to help them in this wild country. They therefore had to help themselves, adapting to the conditions of the country from the very beginning. Whatever they did, they acted honestly and justly and with extraordinary diligence. They were rewarded with much prosperity and reached the top of the ladder of success. Their names were Lewis and Marks - the versatile millionaires whose names resound throughout the world as the richest and the most philanthropic Jews in South Africa, who have excelled themselves in their generous donations to various institutions. Mr. Samuel Marks is an Honourable Senator in the Cape Parliament and is an arbitrator on behalf of the Jewish community.

BARNEY BARNATO

It is interesting to record another Jewish pioneer, a man of many parts, the millionaire and philanthropist Barney Barnato. He was born in London on 5th July, 1852. His father Isaac Barnato came from a poor, simple Jewish background. His mother was Leah Harris. Barney was the third son in the family. He was educated at the London Hebrew Public School. At 20 years of age he decided to see his fortune in the wider world, since he saw no prospects for himself in London. Without much ado he took leave of his parents in 1873 and sailed for South Africa. He arrived in Cape Town in August with twenty-seven shillings in his pocket; he found himself alone, far from home and thrown back on to his own resources.

He did not stay long in Cape Town. He was enticed to the Kimberley Diamond Fields, and it was here that he eventually made his fortune.

In his climb up the ladder of success, he encountered many hardships and setbacks. At the peak of his success, however, he enjoyed wealth, honour and fame. However, at the height of his fame he suffered an enormous personal tragedy and died in mysterious circumstances.

In June 1897 he suffered a severe depression. His diamond and gold mines became meaningless to him. All his honour and his material possessions no longer satisfied him. His life had become burdensome and therefore he put an end to it all by taking his life.

He had expressed a desire to his nephew, Woolf Joel, that he wished to attend the Queen's Jubilee in London. Accompanied by his wife and children and Woolf Joel, he embarked on the next ship for London - they sailed away on the "Scott". As they approached Funchal Bay, an Island off Madeira, he jumped overboard and sank like a piece of lead. His untimely death was a great shock to the whole world. It was reported in many newspapers and detailed descriptions of his life and work appeared in many international financial journals.

The question is asked now, "What did this millionaire achieve in South Africa in the philanthropic area? What did he do for the good of humanity or simply put for "gemilut chesed", for "tsedokah" and for "ma-asim tovim" - i.e. for traditional Jewish benevolence?"

This same question was asked many times while he was alive and is now being asked after his death. I regret to say that the reply is in the negative. He did not distinguish himself in this field as did the South African millionaires, Lewis and Marks. He was totally immersed in his gold mines, in his financial undertakings, and he had no time or enthusiasm for communal affairs. When he was approached for a donation, he never refused to give; but for a millionaire, the amounts that he gave could be regarded as totally inadequate. However, despite all, Barney Barnato remained a Jewish patriot. Often he spoke on behalf of his people in Parliament and in other influential places.

FASCINATING FAMILY FIND

Larry Burnett

I was born in Cape Town, South Africa and grew up in Woodstock and Camps Bay. This is a true story about how I found family on my Bobba's side, in the U.S.A. This is family we didn't know about or we thought was entirely lost.

It starts in 1977 when I came to the U.S.A. as a tourist with a multiple entry visa, valid for 6 months. I received a stamp allowing me to remain for 6 weeks. I arrived at the height of the Ayatollah/Shah of Iran crisis. There was gas rationing. One could only buy gas on alternate days depending on the last number of the car licence plate.

My Mothers family was from Kovno, Lithuania. Ever since I'd arrived in the USA, I'd been searching for missing family on my Zaida's side. It never occurred to me to look for my Bobba's family, since I was always under the impression that they were lost forever.

My Zaida's name was Herzl Beigel. Beigel is an unusual name in itself. I called information in New York, New Jersey – in fact in every major city on the Eastern Seaboard. Nothing I expanded my search to every major city in the USA, using a map to check off which city I'd already searched. Nothing. I contacted Ellis Island, then the Mormon Genealogical Society and another 16 other less well known Genealogy Specialty search companies. Still nothing. I did come across about 8 people in total who had the last name Beigel. None of them were Jewish. Their names had been shortened from something else into Beigel. This went on over a period of 15 years, it cost a lot and produced nothing. Little did I know that I was looking in the wrong places for the wrong things.

The next part of my story is about my Bobba's family and this is where fate kicked in making the story very exciting. Keep in mind that 15 years had gone by already. My Bobba's English name was Bessie and her surname was Mishelsky.

I got married in 1986, to a Jewish American girl from Highland Park, IL, which is close by to Skokie, just outside Chicago. We are no longer married but have two gorgeous kids together

A friend of my ex-wife got engaged in Beverly Hills and we went to the engagement party. I spent some time with the bride to be's mother at the party. While chatting to her, I noticed there were a group of elderly women playing bridge in the living room of the hostess's Beverly Hills home. These women were all smoking and drinking tea from clear glasses. They were all dressed up in a very familiar way to me. The hair was all poofed up and some of them had purple streaks in their hair, there was a lot of jewelry and ropes of amber which was also familiar, since all the older women in my family used to wear it. I asked the hostess who these women were because they reminded me of my Bobba and her friends, especially when they had tea on Saturday mornings at Stuttafords in Cape Town.

She replied that they were all her "Landsmen" from Lithuania and all of them were Survivors. I felt a shiver up my spine. I asked her to introduce me as a Jew from Africa, of Lithuanian descent. I asked her to ask them if they knew of my family, the Beigels from Kovno. She spoke in a combination of Yiddish / Lithuanian / English. None remembered the name Beigel.

One of them asked the hostess if she could ask me what my Bobba's maiden name was. I said Mishelsky and the room exploded in an uproar and hundreds of questions came at me in a variety of languages and accents. I'd hit the mother load after 15 years and quite by accident !

What happened was that there were supposed to be 2 Mishelsky sisters from Kovno, Lithuania, in attendance at the engagement party. However, the husband of one of them was ill, so both sisters decided to keep him company. I was given their phone numbers and called them the next day. We discussed the possibility of being related. These 2 sisters were in their late 70's this time that contact was made. I saw them repeatedly and whenever my Mother was visiting in California, I took her to visit the sisters. Each visit between my Mother and the sisters enforced the fact that we are related, but distantly.

All the Mishelsky's were one large family, all were located in and around Kovno. The sisters invited me to attend a Holocaust Survivors event one year in the San Fernando Valley, north of LA. It was quite an event, very moving, being with so many survivors and their families. Between the 2 sisters, there are several children and numerous grandchildren.

Five years later...

On my Mothers latest visit to California, I once again drove her to see the sisters and during tea, one of them mentioned, by accident, another surviving Mishelsky relative, located in Skokie, IL. He had written a book called "*Kaddish For Kovno*" published by a Chicago publisher. The sisters did not have the family's phone number. His name was changed from Vulia Mishelsky to William Mishell. I called information. There were 15 Mishell's in the Greater Chicago area. I called them all and left the same message on each answering machine, that I was looking for lost relatives, originally from Kovno. I had no response to the messages I left.

My next call was to every Shul listed in information in the area. I spoke to over 2 dozen Rabbi's and none had heard of the Mishell family. I decided to try to get the number from the book publisher. They would not release the number to me but they agreed to contact the family to see if it was OK to release the number.

Before the publisher got back to me, I received a call from Pola Mishell, William's wife. William had died 2 years ago. They have 3 children and numerous grandchildren. Pola and I talk every couple of weeks and when my Mother was here recently, I put her onto the phone with Pola, once again establishing the family connection, even though it is a distant connection. William had created a full family tree and Pola sent me a copy, which I sent to my family in Cape Town and Israel. We are planning to add our respective current families onto the tree. Pola had a gift store until very recently in Skokie. She recently sold it and is now retired. She is a great and extensive resource of information about the events that took place in Lithuania.

The fact that some members of my family survived the horrors of the Kovno Ghetto is amazing. The Lithuanians were particularly brutal to their Jewish fellow citizens

It has been a long road, looking for lost family. As the years have gone by, so it becomes more challenging to find family. I'm very glad that I had the good fortune to meet up with some of my family.

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DR. SYDNEY BRENNER -

by Jacob Herberg

The Nobel Prize given to Sydney Brenner by the Karolinska Committee in Stockholm atones for perhaps its most notable omission – Brenner for the past 30 years having ranked high on anybody's list of overlooked candidates. He has now been honoured, so the Institute explains, for having pioneered the use of the primitive worm, *Caenorhabditis elegans*, to study the origin, development, death and interactions of each of its 959 cells – including nerve cells that provide a model in miniature of our own brains. This worm is now also at the centre of scientific research in genetics, neurochemistry, primitive learning and ageing.

But at least as much merit could be claimed for Brenner's earlier work in deciphering the genetic code. The doubly-spiralled structure of the coding material (DNA) had been identified (but not interpreted) a few years earlier by Crick and Watson, and Brenner went on to show, ruminating at his desk, that permutations of non-overlapping groups of three nucleotide units from the four different nucleotides that constitute DNA, could in principle specify each and every one of the 20 amino acids that when linked in series create any of a thousand different proteins. Brenner, Francois Jacob and Mathew Meselson then went on to show in more detail how the coded information was translated (via Messenger RNA), and Brenner's lab subsequently tied joint first (with Alan Garen's lab) in working out how the code was punctuated by stop codons. Brenner gained little recognition in Stockholm for his contribution to these achievements despite earning dozens of the scientific world's most prestigious honours.

Sydney was born in Germiston in January 1927, the son of Morris BRENNER, an unlettered Litvak cobbler from Ponovezh, and Lena, nee BLACHER, of Dvinsk (now Daugavpils) in Latvia. Sydney's younger brother Itzik became Professor of Geology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Sydney's married sister, Phyllis, is still living in Johannesburg. Sydney himself was married in 1952 to May Woolf BALKIND, nee KOVEDZ, who earned her PhD investigating certain illusory qualia in visual perception, a mystifying phenomenon which coincidentally happens to be at the centre of Crick's most recent book. Brenner's early South African career left indelible memories in everyone lucky enough to be around at the time. Even as an (indifferently successful) medical student he had published pioneering work on the chromosomes of the tiny elephant shrew, captured on expeditions to Bronkhorstspuit or Kromdraai, while also finding time to teach an extraordinary cram course in physiology, a task shared on alternate evenings with another contemporary giant, Phillip Tobias. Their tutorials are acclaimed by one peripatetic student as being by far the best teaching he received in 12 years of Wits, Oxford, Cambridge and London. Brenner also took on the leadership of the Wits Students' Representative Council, opposing the imposition of apartheid in the face of a reactionary student body and an increasingly supine University Principal.

Those close to him soon became aware of another side to Brenner's character – an impish and sometimes bawdy sense of fun, details of which might not be altogether appropriate here. But their flavour may be gleaned from a collection of regular espioglerie commissioned by *Current Biology*, and published by them in hardback (1997) with the title *Loose Ends*. A more substantial introduction both to Brenner's character and to molecular biology has recently been pub-

lished in paperback by *BioMed Central (2001)* as *My Life in Science*, being the edited transcripts of a series of previously unpublished interviews with Lewis Wolpert for *Current Science*.

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DR. SYDNEY BRENNER -
by Colin Plen

(Information supplied to Colin Plen by Phyllis Finn, sister of Sydney).

Sidney's father Morris came from Ponovezh in Lithuania to South Africa in 1910. He had two older brothers who had settled there previously. Two sisters went to the United States. He set up as a boot-maker and cobbler in Knox Street, Germiston.

In 1922 Lena Blacher (or Blecher) came out from Dvinsk, Latvia. There was a large group of ex-Latvians, the Silver and Suckerman families who gave a party to welcome Lena. Morris and Lena "hit it off" and married soon after. Sidney was born in 1927.

In WWII, Morris enlisted in the South African Defence Forces and served the duration as a cobbler. My father, who was a friend of Morris, said that Morris was a blacksmith in the Army, but Morris' daughter insists that it was not so!

The youngest son of the family, Isadore, aka, Itzke, matriculated at the same school as his brother and then went to the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS), but he dropped out when his Zionist inclinations got the better of him, and he went on Aliyah. He became a paratrooper and served in several wars. He later became a Geologist.

Their sister, Phyllis, was a dancer but during the War, Mrs. Brenner could not afford to send her to lessons, so she became a legal typist. She says that Sydney taught her to smoke, because as she earned money she could buy cigarettes for the two of them. He of course was studying on scholarships and bursaries, and so couldn't afford to smoke, but he did!

Sidney is married to May, nee Kovedz. May had a child from her previous marriage and together they have three more children. Sidney and May have 5 grandchildren and all live in England.

Sidney went to University at the age of about 14 and graduated as a Doctor in Medicine. He then decided not to practice Medicine but to become a Scientist, so he returned to the University of the Witwatersrand and received his Science degrees. In 1952 he went to Cambridge where he received a scholarship to study further.

It is of interest to note that Morris Brenner, Sidney's father, probably, like all Jewish boys in Latvia, received some Jewish education, but in South Africa to all intents he was regarded as illiterate.

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COMMUNITIES - DE - AAR

(Material submitted by Ann Rabinowitz as it appears in the S.A. Jewish Report and with permission of Edith Friedlander and her family).

De Aar in the Northern Cape is well known as the second most important railway junction in South Africa. Not so well known is the fact that it was established 100 years ago by two Jewish brothers from Courland, Wulf and Isaac Friedlander. (Note: the Friedlander family originated in Sabile, Latvia).

Edith Friedlander, Wulf's daughter-in-law, was invited to attend De Aar's official centenary celebrations in Oct 2002 by Gerhard Engelbrecht, the organiser. "We drove for 10 hours through the Karoo in the heat, but when we arrived" said Edith "the warm welcome we received made the journey worth while".

Edith's late husband, CK Friedlander, the legendary sports commentator and attorney, was born there in 1912. His father and uncle arrived in South Africa in 1878 and opened an hotel and trading station in Renosterfontein.

They sold everything from calico to cocoa. It was a wide expanse of bare Karoo scrub, with many sheep, and few people, hot in summer, bleakly cold in winter. For 11,000 pounds they bought the nearby farm De Aar, and laid it out as a town initially called Friedlandertown. The Friedlanders planned a model township with wide streets and donated building sites for the cemetery, churches, a synagogue, schools, sports fields, town hall and hospital. They also made an application for De Aar to receive municipal status (which it received on May 20, 1904) and for a Town Council to be elected.

"We started off by driving round the town looking for any sign of the family's role in the founding of the town. We found Friedlander Street next to the station, which used to be the main street, and streets named after Jenny and Alida, their wives, and their sister, Amalia. We could find no trace of their houses." Their original hotel and store, built of wood and iron, had burnt down when a drunken soldier overturned a candle, during the Boer War. The army helped to rebuild it but this time the Friedlanders insisted on bricks. The hotel still stands, basically unchanged and was flood lit for the occasion. "I did not expect to find such an impressive building!" said Edith. The hotel was well-known for its good table, organised entertainment and was famous through the area for the silent films shown there. Background music was provided by "Morgan's organ". One night Morgan, who had dozed off, woke up in the middle of a death scene, and thinking it was the end of the film, hammered out "Vat you goed en trek Ferreira" cheered by the audience!!

Edith and her party looked for the Shul which is now the Apostolic

church. They only recognized it by the convex projection behind the building, which had enclosed the "Aron Hakodesh". Edith's son, Hessel, has the Friedlander's "Sefer Torah" from the Shul, which is now in the "Yeshivah Gedolah" in Johannesburg.

We went to the Jewish cemetery which has been vandalized, and Isaac's "Matzeivah" lying broken on the ground. There are two elderly Jews left in De Aar.

She found it sad that there was no recognition anywhere in the town of the major role played by the Friedlanders in its history. Wulf and Isaac each had nine children. One of Wulf's daughters was Feodora Clouts, one of the first women to graduate from the University of Cape Town. One of Isaac's daughters was married to the well known Jewish historian and educator, Dr Louis Hermann.

Of interest was the Olive Schreiner connection with the history of De Aar. She was a friend of the Friedlander family, and there are letters from her, one of which congratulates Johanna upon the birth of her son, "CK". Her home is now a restaurant.

The De Aar municipality had organized an extensive centenary programme. Among the events were a national sheep counting contest, choirs, dancing, Cape tenors, sporting activities, rickshaw rides, a firework display, and the arrival of the first steam train in forty years, 3 hours late, aroused tremendous excitement! It was accompanied by 3 television crews. So warm was the welcome to the passengers, that the Spoornet representative said on his arrival, that it brought tears to his eyes. South Africa is a magnet for steam train enthusiasts. It is planned to make the Jhb - De-Aar steam train trip an annual event.

Edith was asked to say a few words at the dinner sponsored by the Mayor, B J Markman, the first Black mayor of the city and Michael Friedlander, grandson of Wulf, a Professor of Physics at Washington University in St. Louis, U.S., sent a message which Mr. Engelbrecht read out.

"At first I felt ambivalent about going," said Edith, "but my children, Hessel and Rae, encouraged me and I am glad I went as I was the only member of the family able to be there. I felt I owed it the Friedlanders to see that their contribution to the town's development was acknowledged."

SOUTH AFRICAN "MACHAL" - VOLUNTEERS FROM ABROAD

Joe Woolf

Ilaniya, Israel.

Little is known world-wide, that in World War I and World War II, South African Defence Forces participating were all made up of volunteers. There was no draft, no conscription. Being part of the British Empire they were hardly heard of, but they did play a vital role. In the Second World War, Jews volunteered as well, roughly in proportion to the general white population. Therefore, the tradition of voluntary military service was not something new. Even before, Jews had served on both sides during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). Those serving on the Boer side numbered an estimated 300. Very likely a similar number on the British side. It is known that some Litvaks stranded in England at the turn of the century and anxious to get to South Africa, volunteered for the British Army. If they survived, they could get discharged in South Africa.

On the Boer side, some Jews played a leading role. One Slobodka "Yeshiva Bocher", Chaim David Judelowitz, became a legendary heroic Boer commandant (Colonel). On 28th May 1902, he led his commando in a last ditch stand on the north bank of the Orange River against superior British numbers. He was amongst those found lying dead on the battlefield. He was 24 years of age.

It was therefore not surprising that the highly Zionist Jewish community, never ever numbering more than 120,000, provided proportionately the largest group of "Machal". The community started immediately after the November 1947 U.N. Resolution, to mobilize their efforts to assist the Jews of the "Yishuv."

It was only between the wars that military service was compulsory for 18 year olds, in what was called the Active Citizen Force. It involved one parade per week, some week-end maneuvers, and one month per year of full-time training, for four years. Most South African Machal were experienced World War veterans, also a good number, like the writer, had received their basic military knowledge as A.C.F. trainees in the post-World War II period.

The first attempt to reach Palestine by volunteers was made on 15th December 1946. Eight young men, one who subsequently became Mayor of Johannesburg, aged 18-24 from different Zionist youth movements including Betar, made a valiant attempt in a secondhand former military 3-ton Dodge truck to carve an overland Aliyah Bet route. They got as far as a town called El-Deum in the Sudan. Shortly after leaving this town for Khartoum, an unfortunate accident knocked two of them off the truck. Luckily, one was not seriously hurt but the other suffered a cracked vertebra and was sent to hospital at Khartoum. When the truck arrived, it was sold to have the funds to pay for the seriously injured person to be flown back to South Africa.

Six of the eight got back to South Africa from Port Sudan, experiencing all sorts of adventures, including working on a sailing yacht. The seventh was the only one to reach Palestine in 1947 via Alexandria, Egypt, but almost a year later. He spent two months working on a gold mine near Port Sudan. The others eventually reached Israel in the Machal groups, serving in various units in 1948.

The second attempt was in May 1947, by sea. Three Cape Town Jewish businessmen, hoping to establish a Jewish Mediterranean fishing fleet, acquired a 500-ton whaler, formerly a South African Navy mine-sweeper. It was renamed "Drom Afrika 1". Seven young Jewish men, again of various youth movements, were part of the all South African lower deck.

It took two months via the Suez Canal to reach Palestine, and was the first ship to sail into Haifa flying the flag of the future Jewish State, infuriating the British authorities who would not permit the crew to land. The ship spent some frustrating months in the Eastern Mediterranean, a lot of time in dry dock at Alexandria, Egypt. She never made it as a fishing vessel.

Shortly after the 29th November resolution, the Jewish sailors were smuggled ashore by men of the "Haganah", the first group of South African volunteers to reach the land.

Some Jewish and one non-Jewish pilot flew a number of small civilian aircraft from South Africa to Israel arriving the second day of the new State. When recruiting started in earnest, there was no shortage of World War II veterans to command, organize, recruit and train volunteers. Jewish farmers opened up their farms for secret week-end training.

There were three main recruiting organizations. The official South African League for the "Haganah", the flamboyant Hebrew Legion (which turned out to be a scam) and the South African wing of the "Irgun", which had operated in complete secrecy for 12 months, starting about mid-1947.

The writer and many others, who had no Zionist movement background, were early recruits of the Hebrew Legion. When it broke up, the disillusioned volunteers were mostly absorbed by the "Irgun", and some by the "South African League for the Haganah".

Movements northwards began by small groups and individuals about 6 weeks before the Declaration of the State - experienced Air Force, Artillery, Radar, and Tank men, etc. expanding in the months of June and July, then one Dakota flight per week until about November, when volunteers were no longer required. About 3,000 volunteers still in training were left in South Africa, "S.A. League for the Haganah" recruiting included Kenya, Rhodesia and the Belgian Congo.

An Air Force "Machal" psychiatrist attributes the South African Jewish spirit and motivation to the good elements of their Jewish Lithuanian village life, and added to this, the openness and frankness of the South African European culture.

South African Machal served in all branches of the Israel Defence Forces and the known breakdown is as follows:

General headquarters	6
Navy	10
Artillery	21
Air Force (183)	49 pilots including 14 trainees on a pilots course started in South Africa;

Air Force	62 other aircrew including advisors and those on command duties; 19 radar; 19 administration; 34 ground crew technicians .
Scientific Corps	3
Engineering and Signals Corps	14
Woman Corps	6
Various "Palmach" Brigades	30
Carmeli	1
Alexandroni	10
Etzioni	5
7th Armoured & Infantry Brigade	95
8th Armoured Brigade	36
"Etzel"	3
Miscellaneous, including Kibbutz posting, Drom Africa 1 and II and the overland safari attempt	30
Subtotal	569
Kibbutz members, about two-thirds being earlier "Chalutzim" and one-third coming with general Machal arrivals	176
Subtotal	741
Plus about 100 whose units are still unknown	<u>100</u>
Total	845

Hence the title of Henry Katzew's book on South African Machal, "South Africa's 800".

Different to the movement of the American volunteers who were hounded by the F.B.I. all the way, South Africans had no problems with the authorities, who provided everything kept in low profile, turned a blind eye to the movements.

Seven South Africans died in battle:

Yehezkiel "Chatzi" Berelowitz and Zvi Lipschitz fell in Kfar Etzion's last days, 12th and 13th May.

Shoval Kibbutz member Gideon Rosenberg fell in the Jerusalem Corridor on 16th May serving in the Palmach Harel Brigade.

Meir "Matey" Silber, Etzel fighter, fell on 25th May defending Kibbutz Ramat Rachel.

Pilot Eddie Cohen in the historic engagement of 29th May, was shot down by AA fire as one of a flight of four Messerschmitts which halted the Egyptian advance towards Tel Aviv.

Pilot Leslie Bloch, also flying a Messerschmitt, downed over the Syrian border on 10th July.

The seventh South African Lou Hack, serving in the 72nd Infantry Battalion, fell on 23rd October during a deep penetration raid in the Western Galilee hills.

About 30 South African married couples were amongst the 800. Some already engaged brought forward their weddings. One qualified nurse, determined to serve, left behind her one year old and five year old children with her mother and husband. Her dentist husband arrived a month later. Another South African nurse delivered the first Jewish baby born in Be'ersheva in 2000 years.

Some South Africans held important command positions. So important was the role of a Fighter Squadron Commander that he received the honour of a send-off of four Spitfires, as he left Israel to continue with his medical studies in South Africa.

Many South African Machal interrupted their university studies and it is known that very many South African Machal members had interrupted their studies twice in all fields to serve in WWII and again in 1948. They qualified, being about 10 years older than the others in their classes.

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THE PRIVATE REMINISCENCES OF LIONEL HART **(Part I)**

Memoirs donated by Stan Hart, grandson of Lionel Hart..

I arrived in Cape Town with the SS Athenian in May 1886. I had to wait for a Donald Currie boat, which in that year only traded between Cape Town and Durban. On arrival at Durban, passengers were conveyed by means of a full size basket, which was hoisted into a barge which was towed to the Point by a very small tug.

Arrangements had been made by my uncle Asher Hart to house me with the Wartzki family, residing in West Street East. Their shop and house was approached by steps from the street. West Street was a very sandy thoroughfare -horse trams were the mode of conveyance from the Town Hall to Musgrave Road, Poynton's Corner- the terminus and now the corner of Sydenham Road.

I was invited to a friend's house the first night of my arrival where it seemed a rule for no one to be out on the streets after 9 p.m. When I returned to the Wartzki house, probably at 10 p.m., I found the house locked up and I could not get in. I therefore had to retrace my footsteps to the house I had visited and spent the remainder of the night on a sofa in a room there.

As I had come from Liverpool, England, at the instigation of my uncle, I was given a position in his boot and shoe business. He was doing a large turnover in his wholesale department, with a retail store as well. The store of Hart and Henochberg was situated in West Street where Dennis & Co., is now. It was a fairly good distance from the Wartzki residence.

In those days I was considered a good pianist and consequently had heaps of invitations to entertain people. One event in 1886 was the production of the *Mikado* at the Theatre Royal, with

Allen Hawes as Ko-Ko. As I had seen the original production in London at the Savoy, I was invited to help the local production with hints on how the original production was staged. Adjoining the Wartzki residence was the Philharmonic Hall where some first rate concerts were frequently given. Mrs Maccoll was the amiable accompanist and proved a capable artiste.

In this year I changed my lodgings to the Central Hotel where Mr and Mrs Hilder were in charge. Towards the latter end of 1886 gold was discovered at Barberton, South African Republic. A terrific rush was seen in Durban with ox wagons despatched, fully loaded with iron and wood for buildings there. Subsequently Witwatersrand was discovered and the prospectors promptly left Barberton for the Rand. Johannesburg was founded in October 1886.

The Moss Rose Syndicate was floated in Durban and Mr P. Wartzki was chosen to proceed to the Rand to peg out claims. The syndicate was eventually floated as the New Primrose Gold Mining Company. At that time my firm Hart & Henochberg decided to open a branch in Johannesburg. At the first sale of stands my uncle purchased several, at prices ranging from £40 a piece. He opened his business on the Market Square.

I was left in charge of the Durban branch whilst Mr H.J. Henochberg managed the firm's branch in Pietermaritzburg. In 1887 during Queen Victoria's Jubilee, I visited Pietermaritzburg to see the celebration of this event.

My uncle required further assistance in Johannesburg, and offered me a position there, which I promptly accepted. I travelled to Ladysmith, which was then the rail head and from there in a mail cart, drawn by 14 mules, via Harrismith to Heidelberg. The adventures en route were innumerable, particularly the difficulties of crossing rivers. Sometimes we had to wait hours for the waters to subside. I eventually got to Johannesburg and was allotted a bed on the floor of Hart & Henochberg's store. It was my responsibility to see that mattresses were laid out on the floor for several friends of my uncle, who later became well known celebrities. Amongst them were the proprietor of the Standard & Diggers News and John Stroyman, a big promoter of Companies who became a millionaire.

Amongst my jobs was the collection of accounts owing to the firm. Wednesday afternoons, which the commercial community of Johannesburg always kept as a half holiday, I used to devote to this service. An account due to my firm by Barnato Bros was difficult to collect. So on one Wednesday I approached Barney Barnato between the chains outside the Stock Exchange. I asked him whether the firm of Barnato Bros. was going bankrupt because I found it so difficult to get their account settled. Barney was very angry, directed me to his office and to say I was to receive my cheque immediately. I got the cheque, needless to say we did no more business with Barnato Bros.

Saturday was our busiest day, and according to arrangements previously made, I went to the Natal Bank about 10 p.m. with a bag of money. I was escorted by a gang of our native employees who were armed with sticks and broom handles. I carried a revolver and we had to go through a lane of mud to reach the Bank's back entrance, where our deposit was received.

I had a client about this time, named George Aaron, who was enthusiastic about theatricals. We

improvised a small theatre inside the store of my firm, erecting our own, very crude scenery, in those days. We produced various entertainments, mainly extracts from operas for the entertainment of our friends and ourselves.

I had purchased for £43, a silk fronted piano, the first brought to Johannesburg. I was then able to give dances where men represented girls by placing a white handkerchief around one arm.

Occasionally we used to meet at Wemmers house, at the top of Ferreira's Township for a dance, where music was played on a concertina. George Aaron and myself produced a comedy called Dimity's Dilemma at a friend's house in Jeppe Street. Friends of the players came to watch the rehearsals. In this play Dimity had to propose to an heiress.

As the rehearsals proceeded the first young lady who took the part of the heiress withdrew, owing to her becoming engaged. Another young lady took her place and she had the same fate. In despair, and after much trouble, we arranged for a young married woman to take the part of Winifred Hare. All went merrily as a marriage bell and the production came off as a great success.

In 1889, together with other young fellows, I founded Johannesburg's first debating society and became its first Chairman. After one of our meetings a few members proceeded to the Government Buildings, then situated on the Market Square, and saw the national flag of the South African Republic flying from a flag pole in front. One of our numbers, edged on by the others, climbed up the pole and brought the flag down. The following morning there was great excitement amongst Government officials when they discovered the flag had disappeared.

The incident caused some correspondence between Pretoria and London as it was the act of Uitlanders, as we were called in those days. Eventually, to restore harmony between the South African Republican Government and the British Cabinet, the flag was restored much to the relief of the officials and the incident was speedily forgotten as a boyish act.

In 1890 my firm Hart & Henochberg, decided to liquidate their business, having made enough money. I accompanied my uncle Asher Hart in the SS Norham Castle, a very small boat at that time, for a trip to England. I returned the same year with support to establish my own business in Johannesburg. My intention was to return in 1891 to London to be married, having become engaged to a young lady resident in London. I found, however, that my business so increased in volume, that I could not take the time involved, to get away even for marriage. So I arranged that my fiancée should come out to Port Elizabeth where cousins of hers resided, and I went there a few days before her arrival. She had a great friend of on board the ship who came out with her - a Miss Waylaw who subsequently became Lady Farrar.

We were duly married in the cousin's house and went for our honeymoon to Uitenhage after which we left for Johannesburg. Kimberley was the rail head from which we had to travel to Johannesburg in a mail coach. The journey took three days and three nights, the coach being drawn by sixteen mules. The journey was most uncomfortable and terribly dusty. However, we got to our destination and gradually settled down in our new home.

In 1895 the Wanderers Orchestra was formed, James Hyde was the conductor. The Orchestra had great difficulty in procuring a drummer to play the bass drum. A member of the Orchestra who was then the Secretary, approached me and finally persuaded me to join and learn to play the big drum. Subsequently, I became the Secretary and we used to perform in the Wanderers' Hall before thousands of people.

In 1898 I resigned my Secretaryship as I had been elected to represent Johannesburg at a World's Congress of Chambers of Commerce to be held in Philadelphia (U.S.A.). I traveled to Durban and left in a very small German ship, the Kanzler, going up the East Coast. We touched at Lourenco Marques and Beira and whilst en route I took up the drum playing in the ship's orchestra. Every morning we had to play a German hymn to the tune of "G-d Save Our Queen". The Germans claimed the English had used the tune for their National Anthem.

Dar-es-Salaam and Tanganyika belonged to Germany in 1898 and the toast, "Hoch the Kaizer" was the popular toast whilst scanning the coast of Tanganyika. Whilst feting some German residents of Dar-es-Salaam, I propounded the question, much to their dismay, to some of the Officers of the Kanzler - "Why is Berlin the most drunken city of the World?". The answer was "Because it is always on the Spree". The Speer being the river of Berlin. I became very unpopular needless to say for the balance of the voyage.

At Aden I received a cable stating that the Congress to which I was going was postponed. War had broken out between the United States of America and Spain due to the destruction of the battleship Maine by the Spaniards. I left the Kanzler at Naples and enjoyed myself by going up Mount Vesuvius, on to Florence, Bologna and Rome, reaching Milan which was in the throes of a revolution. I was unable to go further than the Square where the railway station is situated, owing to the firing between the Revolutionists and the Italian military.

My train took me through the Alps calling at Berne, Switzerland and Lucerne. Crossing through Germany I was witnessed some German military manoeuvres which proved a wonderful sight. I arrived in Paris in due course and delighted over the sights of this famous city. After a week in Paris I went to Boulogne, then to Calais, where I took the mail boat to Dover. In London there was nobody to meet me, the wire I sent from Calais was not received by my parents.

In 1899, back in Johannesburg the Mining Magnates promoted a revolution against Paul Kruger's Government because their demand for a franchise was refused. A Reform Committee was established and munitions came into Johannesburg under truck loads of coal.

The Commercial Community of Johannesburg were very much concerned on seeing the miners of the Reef clothed in khaki, bearing rifles and bayonets. I assumed the chairmanship of the Johannesburg Mercantile Association, a very powerful commercial body. In place of the Chairman who had become ill, I arranged for a mass meeting of the Commercial Community of Johannesburg and the Reef to be held on the Market Square one afternoon. I presided at this Mass Meeting, speaking from an ox wagon which was the platform. I accused the Reform Committee of starting a revolution at a time when Johannesburg was very prosperous. We were not in favour of the vote they claimed, unless obtained through constitutional methods.

The next morning, after the speech, two khaki clad miners armed with rifle and bayonet came to my place of business in Harrison Street and arrested me, by order of the Reform Committee. I was marched between them to the Consolidated Gold Fields Building and escorted up stairs. At the first landing I was halted and one of the men went up some further stairs to report my arrest. Presently George Farrar and Colonel Rhodes, brother of Cecil Rhodes, came down to where I stood and harangued me about my speech against the Reform Committee. I was told this was a case of lese majeste (high treason) and was punishable by confinement in the Fort.

However, owing to my intimate acquaintanceship with George Farrar, I was told that unless I give my word of honour to refrain from further participation in the politics then, I would be incarcerated in the Fort and probably shot for high treason. I, of course, gave my word of honour and was then free to go. Later on in 1899 there were many rumours of war against Great Britain and I decided to send my wife and children to Durban.

In October 1899 Paul Kruger made his declaration of war and I was told by the Mining Commissioner J.L. van der Merwe, local representative of the South African Republican Government, that he wanted to see me. He said he knew all about my Market Square speech against the Reform Committee and said he was authorised to offer me the post of Assistant to the Chief of Police during the duration of the war. The duties would be to keep law and order in Johannesburg. I told him I was unable to accept this position because I was an Englishman, born in Liverpool, England and my conscience told me if I had to take sides, it must be on the side of Her Majesty Queen Victoria.

He flew into a terrible rage and ordered me to report myself to the officer in charge at Braamfontein Station that same night. After making a very hasty arrangement for the protection of my interests in Johannesburg, which included a Russian subject to take over my house and furniture during my absence, I duly reported to Braamfontein and was assigned to a cattle truck full of dirt and smells. I found we were on the line to the Cape with passenger trains passing us crowded with women and children going in the same direction. While we were shunted into several sidings to allow these trains to pass, I was struck with an idea that I proceeded to put into execution.

At one of these sidings I grabbed hold of my portmanteau and got on to a passenger train. As we were nearing Springfontein I went along the corridor of the train shouting "Anyone here for East London?". When someone opened his door and said "I am". I said "You have to change at Springfontein". Immediately the occupant had departed, I seized the compartment in question and accompanied by a friend of mine who had been with me in this episode, we made ourselves comfortable for the balance of the journey to Cape Town. I was naturally asked for my ticket by a railway official to whom I explained all the circumstances which brought me into this train without any ticket as a refugee from Johannesburg. We proceeded without any further incident.

In Cape Town I was joined by my parents from London and then sent for my wife and children who were in Durban. I then took a house for my family, but I had no particular duties to perform. I decided to join Her Majesty's Forces but had a strenuous time getting a place on the South African Cape Town Docks, where the Army Service Corps were in charge. I worked as a

civilian clerk of the Army Service Corps for several months during which period I was put in charge of the Queen's chocolate boxes, a special present to all Her Majesty's troops in South Africa.

I then became anxious to reach the Front. At that time the Headquarters of the British Army was in Bloemfontein. After a terrible amount of negotiation I got my orders and left Cape Town with a battery of Royal Horse Artillery to whom I had to issue rations to during my journey up to Bloemfontein.

I was given a tent in the vicinity of the Bloemfontein gaol, adjoining which lay a dead mule and a considerable number of empty tins. It was fearfully cold. Almost immediately, I started negotiations to be moved to the town where in conjunction with a Sergeant Major, I was put in charge of the stocks of rations and horse feed belonging to General Robert's Army. My duties included supplies to some thirty five hospitals round the vicinity of Bloemfontein. One instance I vividly recall, was when the awe-inspiring Chief of Staff, Lord Kitchener, came to my office to know why he could not get any fresh milk for his staff. I told him we had not sufficient for the hospitals, which he admitted took preference. His Lordship immediately turned round and walked away.

When Lord Robert's Army moved forward to Kroonstad I was left behind and continued my duties until one day I was peremptorily told by my Colonel I was to proceed to Thaba 'Nchu, in charge of a Steam Transport Convoy. We were halted at the entrance to this town as the troops were chasing General De Wet.

I went to the northern part of this town from where I had a good view of the Boers flying before our troops. They were all mounted and were led by De Wet who was armed with a revolver and a driving whip. The enemy got away on that occasion. My next move was to Ladybrand where I went with a large convoy of ox wagons. We were escorted by the South African Light Infantry who were responsible for seeing us safely through country occupied by the Boers. We had several exciting incidents but eventually reached our goal without any casualties. At Ladybrand I was attached to the Second Royal Highlanders (Black Watch) and made the acquaintance of Corporal Findlater who had received the Victoria Cross which was rarely awarded in those days. He gained the Cross by piping his regiment over the Modder River, amidst the hail of bullets. I got Findlater to teach me to play the bagpipes but I had very little opportunity to continue this recreation.

In 1902 the Boer War reached its end and I went to Bloemfontein to be demobilised. From there I proceeded to Johannesburg and found a tenant in my property in Harrison Street, who had been in occupation for a couple of years. He said he owed me a considerable sum of money and gave me a cheque for £50 on account. I left him, feeling like a millionaire, as I had very little money in my possession during the preceding three years.

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