

S.A. SIG

<http://www.jewishgen.org/SAfrica/>

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Southern African Jewish Genealogy Special Interest Group Newsletter

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The SA SIG (UK) hosted the documentary film *Nelson Mandela, a Righteous Man*, on Sunday, 14th September. Mendel Kaplan presented the film, which was directed by Ingrid Gavshon of Angel Films in Johannesburg, based on research by Ronnie Mink and others.

Largely it dealt with Mandela's perspectives of Jews who had aided him in the "struggle". His very warm feelings for Lar Sidelsky, of Wirtkin and Sidelsky, who gave an opportunity to be an articled clerk in 1941 in Johannesburg, when no other firm would dare to employ a black clerk, came over clearly. Others involved include Nat Bregman, who was articled at the same time, Jack and Rica Hodgson, Albie Sachs, and Helen Suzman.

A very lively discussion ensued about Mandela's attitude to the PLO and Israel, the response (or lack thereof) to apartheid by the "establishment" Jewish community as opposed to the many acts by individuals. Well over 100 people attended, and it became obvious that there is a hunger amongst expatriate South Africans to discuss issues such as this. We hope to hold several other talks along these lines in the coming year.

The digitisation project of passenger list manifests at the Public Record Office is proceeding well, but it will be some time before this data is entered into databases and made available. This project is being run under the auspices of the Centre for Jewish Migration and Genealogy Studies in the Kaplan Centre, at UCT.

Saul Issroff

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EDITORIAL

My intention was to get the September Newsletter sent out to all our members prior to Rosh Hashanah, but due to unforeseen circumstances, the distribution of this issue has been delayed.

However, my good wishes go out to you all for a Happy, Healthy and Peaceful New Year, and may the Jews in Israel benefit from some Peace in this coming year.

This Newsletter brings us interesting feedback on the 23rd Annual International Meeting of the Jewish Genealogy Society which was held in Washington D.C. Please note that the 24th Annual International Meeting will be held in Jerusalem, and being on the spot, I hope to see as many members as possible there – not only to support our Jewish Genealogy organization, but to show their support for their fellow Jews in Israel by attending if it is possible.

Cecil Helman has written a beautiful article about his grandfather, Rabbi Mirvish, the first Rabbi of the Cape Town Orthodox Hebrew Congregation. Coincidentally, my family were members of this Congregation from its inception – first my great-uncle, Hersh Sander, who was one of the founder members, as well as *Shochat* and Teacher at the Constitution Street Shul, and then, when it moved to Vredehoek in 1939, soon after my parents were married, this Vredehoek Shul became our family *Shul* until its demise in 1993. An era now gone, much to my regret.

Manfred Schwartz has written a follow-on article on *East London Memories* which I hope you will all find interesting. Thanks to Manfred for his wonderful memory – without which many of our articles on South Africa would not have been written. How lucky we are to have a person in our group who has travelled and mixed with the general population of South Africa as Manfred has done.

A short interesting article by Lennie Stein tells us about his *Zeyde* and his antics!

Terry Kegel's thesis on S. A. Zionist Youth Movements, titled *Effect of the Zionist Youth Movement on South African Jewry, Negotiating a South African Jewish and Zionist Identity in the mid-20th Century*, which was submitted to Haverford College, was kindly given to us by Terry for publication in our Newsletter.

Because of its length, the thesis is being serialized, and the first section, which has been divided into two parts. The first part, the *Introduction*, appeared in the June/July Newsletter. The second part of his *Introduction* appears hereunder.

Whilst Terry has based his article on the *Habonim* Youth Movement, the other Youth Movements must also be taken into account, and articles from members of the *Betar*, *Hashomer Hadati*, *Bnei Akiva*, *Bnei Zion*, *Hashomer Hatzair*, would be

welcome additions to this series on Zionist Youth Movements.

I hope you continue to enjoy our Newsletters, and your feedback is always most welcome. The fact that many people have already written to me to ask when they will receive the September issue, is a good sign that our readers are enjoying reading it.

However we do need more contributions and I look forward to hearing from you.

Please note that the contents of the articles contain the opinions of the authors and do not reflect those of the Editor, nor the members of the SA-SIG Board.

Once again, a very Happy New Year to you all.

Beryl Baleson

Editor

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Harold Nissenthall

Harold Nissenthall, a former South African, living in Toronto, passed away in September 2003. Harold was a good friend and guiding spirit to all of us who attended the IAJGS Conference in Toronto in August 2002. His insight and helpfulness in facilitating the various arrangements for our SIG at that event will be remembered for a long time. Harold's personal warmth and dedication to Jewish genealogy and Jewish life in general distinguished him in Toronto's vibrant community.

We will greatly miss him, and share the loss with his family. May they be granted long life and comfort in the memory of his life and achievements.

TREASURER'S REPORT: SA-SIG

June 30, 2003

On July 1, 2002 we showed a bank balance of \$395. As of June 30, 2003 it stands at \$372. Basically membership income of \$700, which included some donations, covered the costs of printing and mailing four issues.

We have 41 paid-up members for last year of whom 4 have renewed thus far. In the longer term we may need to use our income for additional projects or goals. The possibility of supplying our newsletter in PDF email format will certainly free up funds. It will be important though to consider what other membership benefits we can offer since an emailed newsletter can be read without paying dues.

Possibly we also need to identify projects where expenditure will yield benefits that can accrue to members.

I think we can continue as we are within the constraints of our income. I am grateful to Roy Ogus for his patient nursing and to Beryl Baleson for her energy and drive. Between them they have made most of this feasible and possible. The ever present, informed vitality of Saul Issroff has been rewarding to work with.

Please pay your dues!

Mike Getz.

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**HIGHLIGHTS OF THE MEETINGS OF
SOUTH AFRICAN INTEREST AT THE
WASHINGTON, DC 2003, IAJGS
INTERNATION SYMPOSIUM ON
JEWISH GENEALOGY**

Roy Ogus

There were a number of sessions of great interest to members of the Southern African Special Interest Group (SA-SIG) at the recent IAJGS Symposium on Jewish Genealogy, held in Washington, DC, in July 2003. These sessions covered a wide range of South African-related topics, and provided the attendees a variety of interesting information and useful resources for their South African family research. This article will summarize the highlights of each of these sessions.

- **Talk: *From Family Tales to Family History: A Genealogical Saga in Dvinsk, London, and Johannesburg*, by Gilbert Herbert**

In his talk, Gilbert Herbert, an architect and architectural historian, and presently a Professor Emeritus at the Technion, in Haifa, Gilbert traced his forty-year odyssey of researching the history of his ancestors from Dvinsk, Latvia, and their descendants, who now extend over nine generations dispersed in over four continents. In addition to covering the fascinating stories of his various family members, Professor Herbert also provided a comprehensive insight into the various research techniques and sources of information that he employed to gather the data that enabled him to assemble this rich portrayal of his family story. His spirited talk presented a wealth of genealogical information, historical photos, and maps, covering many locations in the world. At the end of the session, several members of the audience were heard to remark how fortunate his family was to have been provided with this rich chronicle of their family story.

- **Talk: *Researching Your South African Jewish Roots on the Internet*, by Ann Rabinowitz**

Ann Rabinowitz, a native of Manchester, England, and a member of the SA-SIG Board currently living in Florida, has been a large contributor to the SA-SIG materials and project activities. In her talk, Ann presented a most interesting discussion of methods to research ones South African Jewish roots via the Internet. Due, in part, to an increasing number of expatriate South Africans, or others abroad who

have found that they have South African connections, an interest to locate primary or secondary resources for their South African research from abroad has become more and more common. Therefore, the availability of these records and information over the Internet has become increasingly important.

While much of the pertinent material on South Africa is either still located in South African institutions or is held in a limited number of private hands, there are many records, or references to records, that can now be accessed via the Internet.

In her presentation, Ann discussed these valuable resources in detail, and provided a comprehensive compilation of Web address of interest to those pursuing their South African research over the Internet. In addition to the compendium of the resource links, Ann also provided several examples of actual family searches that were exclusively conducted using Internet resources.

- **Southern Africa SIG Luncheon: Guest Speaker, Ralph E. Yodaiken, *The Origins of a Jewish Id***

In addition to providing a tasty lunch, as well as the company of many good friends, the SA-SIG Luncheon featured a fascinating guest speaker, Dr. Ralph Yodaiken. Dr. Yodaiken, an occupational and environmental health and safety professional from Bethesda, Maryland, focused his talk on the early years of his life in Johannesburg, South Africa. His stories of his contacts with the Revisionist Newspaper, and his camp experience with the *Betar* Youth Movement, provided a fascinating account of his early life experiences. The story became even more intriguing after he was recruited from the *Betar* into the *Irgun Zvai Leumi*, and to a life of clandestine activities. His eventual travel to a refugee camp in Italy, then his journey to Israel and his experiences in the Israeli army as one of the *machalniks*, left his audience enthralled, as well as with a feeling of how mundane one's own life seemed in comparison! All in all, Ralph's gripping account of this true story was most interesting, entertaining, and informative.

- **Southern African SIG group meeting: Roy Ogus, Mike Getz, Ann Rabinowitz, Saul Issroff**

The Southern African Special Interest Group (SA-SIG) meeting at the Conference was a very productive and stimulating session. There was a very good turnout at the meeting. Sign-up sheets were sent around the room and over 30 names were entered on these sheets, and a number of new members signed up as members of the SIG after the session.

During the first part of the meeting, a number of topics describing the SA-SIG were presented, after which followed a general discussion and question-and-answer session. The topics presented during the first part of the session commenced with an overview of the SA-SIG Mission, the comprehensive SA-SIG Web pages containing a large amount of information and resources, and the Internet discussion group. Following these topics was a detailed review of some key ongoing SA-SIG projects such as the quarterly Newsletter and the Clearinghouse, and of two new projects, the South African Communities and Youth Movements projects. Finally, an update was presented on the activities of two non-SA-SIG projects of interest, viz. the recent announcement of new materials available from the Country Communities project at the Friends of the Beth Hatefusoth organization in South Africa, and the activities at the new South African Center for Jewish Migration and Genealogy Studies in Cape Town.

There was a strong interest in all these topics by the attendees.

The hardcopy *SA-SIG Newsletter* has been published roughly quarterly for a number of years, and the publication covers a wide range of topics relating to the South African Jewish communities, both in South Africa, as well as in other parts of the world. Further information the Newsletter, as well as directions of how to subscribe to the publication, can be found at:

<http://www.jewishgen.org/safrica/newsletter/index.htm>

The *Clearinghouse* project was established about a year ago to create a mechanism to exchange information about the various documents, information, and other artifacts relating to one's own research that may be useful to others who are also researching their family connections in this area.

Further information on the Clearinghouse project, and instructions on how to submit information to this project, can be found at:

<http://www.jewishgen.org/safrica/clearing-house/index.htm>

Up until now, the Country Communities project (mentioned above) has received the focus of attention, and the communities in the larger urban areas in the country have been left behind. These are the communities which are not considered "country communities", but have substantial populations and Jewish institutions. Examples of these communities include Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria, Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth, etc. Included in this project focus are the suburbs of these communities, which are also considered quite important to differentiate.

With the departure of so many Jewish South Africans to other places in the world, it is important that the history and cultural heritage of these towns be documented while it still can be done. Many people feel that they want to integrate themselves totally into their new environments in Israel, Australia, Canada, Great Britain, America and the like, and forget their life in South Africa. For others, their connections to their birthplace in South Africa has either been severed by the passing of their elderly relatives or their memories have grown dim of the life they had there and the contributions that they made.

The *South African Communities* project plans to collect information about the various families and communities of South African origin that are located around the world. The objective of this project is to document these far-flung families and communities in order to preserve the information about these groups, many of which have long lost contact with South Africa.

A number of initial communities have been identified, and coordinators for each of these communities are being solicited. There seem to be opportunities for some beginnings in a number of locations in the USA, and probably the UK, and possibly Australia. Ideas about what type of information and data should be collected are under consideration.

The project is inviting current members of the SA-SIG to update family information that includes places of origin, lifestyles, and relocation within SA and to various parts of our world. A form was

provided to the attendees of the SA-SIG session to elicit information on the major Jewish Communities in South Africa from those who lived there. This form will also be made available on the Web pages of the SA-SIG.

A related project, proposed by Bubbles Segall from Australia, has the purpose to collect and compile information about the migration of Jews from South Africa to other parts of the world. This project is focussed more on collecting information on individual families, rather than documenting the nature of the South African communities as a whole, the rationale being to preserve the details of the South African connections in these families for the generations to come. As coordinator, Bubbles is now energetically pursuing the launch of this project, as well defining its goals and organization in more detail.

The description of the information that has already been collected on a number of South African communities can be found at:

<http://www.jewishgen.org/SAfrica/communities/>

The *South African Youth Movements* project aims to collect information and artifacts (such as photographs) about the numerous Jewish Youth Movements that were an integral part of the South African Jewish Communities during the 20th Century. It is of great significance that the Jewish youth societies that arose in South Africa were all identified with the Zionist movement. Indeed, youth involvement as such was taken for granted as a Zionist affiliation. Consequently it must be noted that successive generations of Jewish youth were exposed almost exclusively, to a mode of Jewish identification determined by Zionism.

A start has been made to catalogue and describe the history of each of the major Youth Movements, and a number of photographs have been collected. The initial collection of these photographs, as well as further information on the project, can be found at:

<http://www.jewishgen.org/safrica/youth-movements/index.htm>

After the presentations at the meeting, there were numerous questions from the floor, and these produced a stimulating set of discussions and brainstorming of new ideas

The attendees were encouraged to join the SIG and to volunteer to help on the various projects, and, in

particular, to contribute items to the Clearinghouse and the Newsletter. After the meeting, a number of new members signed up for the SIG.

The various discussions during the session and afterwards led to several ideas for new projects and improvements to the existing and newly-started projects in the SIG.

In summary, a number of most interesting presentations of interest to attendees with South African connections were available at the recent DC 2003 Symposium, and the SA-SIG group session was very successful and productive. The SA-SIG meeting renewed the strong interest in the activities of the SA-SIG and produced several ideas for improving the quality of the new projects that have been initiated. These ideas are being further pursued.

As was mentioned at the SA-SIG session in Toronto, contributions are solicited from all members of the group for Newsletter articles, Clearinghouse items, and for volunteers to help with the various SA-SIG projects. If you would like to contribute your services, please contact any members of the SA-SIG Board. The Board member names can be found on the SA-SIG Web pages at:

<http://www.jewishgen.org/Safrica>

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**24th IAJGS International Conference on
Jewish Genealogy
Jerusalem, Israel – July 4 - 9, 2004**

All members of the SA-SIG are urged to keep in mind the 24th IAJGS International Conference of Jewish Genealogists that will be held in Jerusalem next July. English will be the official language of the conference. A number of lectures will be presented in Hebrew with simultaneous translation into English. There will be a vast array of archives and resources available at the Conference that do not exist anywhere else at the moment. The Program should present some very exciting topics.

Call for Presentations: The Israel Genealogical Society is pleased to invite proposals from potential speakers for Conference presentations. For full details of how to submit proposals for a presentation, see the Conference Web Site at:

<http://www.ortra.com/jgen2004>

RABBI MOSES CHAIM MIRVISH

(1872 - 1947)

Cecil Helman

Many thanks to Rabbi Mirvish's grandson Cecil Helman for providing us with this article. Cecil has requested that this article not be copied or reproduced in any form whatsoever.

Moses Chaim Mirvish was born in the small Lithuanian village of Baisagola, in December 1872. [1], [2]. He was the son of Joseph Ze'ev Mirvish (born c. 1845) – a miller and grain-merchant – and Tzivia (or Pese) (c. 1850 - 1917), and the grandson of Hirshel Mirvish (born c. 1815). He was one of seven children: four sisters and a brother emigrated to the United States in the 1890's, while another sister died in the Holocaust.

He studied for the Rabbinat, first at Slobodka Yeshiva, and later at the Yeshiva of Telz (Telsiai) [1], [3] – in those days, the most famous Yeshiva in Lithuania. His teachers there were the Head of the Yeshiva, Rabbi Eliezer Gordon, Rabbi Yosef Leib Bloch, and Rabbi Eliezer Shkop. At the end of his studies, he received his Rabbinical Diploma or *Smicha* from Rabbi Gordon, and from Rabbi Shmuel Avigdor Feivelson of Plunge (Plungian). In Plunge, he married Seine Margolis (1871-1941), and founded a Hebrew School there, run on modern lines.

In 1908 he emigrated with his family to Cape Town, Cape Colony, South Africa. En route from Lithuania via Bremerhaven (Hamburg), they stayed for four days at the Jews' Temporary Shelter in Leman Street, London, from 5 Sept 1908 (the Shelter records indicate that their entire assets were just 20 Pounds), before leaving from Southampton for Cape Town on 11 September 1908, aboard the *S.S. Dover Castle*. [4]

Rabbi Mirvish was brought to South Africa to be the Minister of the Cape Town Orthodox Hebrew Congregation (the *Beth Hamedrash HaChodesh*), then situated in the Constitution Street Synagogue in District Six, in the old centre of town. Like him, most of its members had originated in Lithuania, and many lived close to the Synagogue itself. It was significant that, arriving in Cape Town on the eve of Yom Kippur in 1908, he based his first sermon or *drushe* on the text "I was a stranger in a strange land." (Exodus II:22).

He was the first fully qualified Rabbi (with *Smicha*) in the entire Cape Colony. [5] His arrival there coincided with a period of turmoil, with the community and the country still recovering from the disastrous effects of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. As the *South African Jewish Times* (29 August 1947) wrote:

"One of the greatest difficulties confronting him was that the bad times which succeeded the Boer War prevailed throughout the country. He soon, however, managed to bring new life into the Congregation in the old Synagogue in Constitution Street, forerunner of that in Vredehoek." [6]

The Cape Town Jewish community had been officially established in 1841 by English and German immigrants, but from the 1880's onwards there was a large-scale settlement of Lithuanian Jews (or Litvaks). The Constitution Street Synagogue was the most Old-Worldly and Lithuanian of the three main Cape Town communities (in Roeland Street, Gardens, and Constitution Street), but also the most orthodox, and the least affluent. In its annual Synagogue accounts for the period 1 Nov 1909 - 1 Nov 1910, for example, Rabbi Mirvish's annual salary was given as 93 Pounds (though this had risen to 116 Pounds a year later). [7]

Dr C. Resnekov, in an article on Rabbi Mirvish in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* of 29 August 1949, graphically describes the situation in the community in those days:

"On the one hand there were the Anglicised Jews, who, recognising their limitations, paid tribute – in kind – to Jewish learning and culture; and on the other hand there was a section of Jewry, concentrated mainly in the Beth Hamedrash in Constitution Street, who were themselves observant and learned. At any time during the day, and far into the night, one could obtain a minyan. Study was a natural occupation for a Jew then, and the benches were full of attentive students absorbed in the unravelling of intricate portions of the Talmud." [8]

While in their book *The Jews of South Africa*, Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz describe the particular atmosphere in the Constitution Street Synagogue – a small piece of Lithuania recreated in Africa – and how it differed from other Cape Town congregations of the time.

"On entering the Beth Hamedrash, one became conscious of a pervading atmosphere totally alien to

that of the other two synagogues. Heavy much-thumbed tomes of the Talmud lay strewn along the long tables. To be shaven was almost as serious a breach of decorum as to enter a synagogue with the head uncovered.” [9]

In 1939 the community moved from Constitution Street to a new, purpose-built Synagogue – the Vredehoek Synagogue – built in the art decor style on the lower slopes of Table Mountain.

Despite this East European atmosphere, until 1910 the Cape was still a Colony, administered by a Governor on behalf of the British Crown. On 11 December 1909, Rabbi Mirvish was given a Commission by Sir Walter Hely-Hutchinson, Governor of the Cape of Good Hope Colony, as a Marriage Officer, empowering him:

“to solemnise Marriages between persons professing the Jewish faith, in the Division of the Cape.”

but requiring him also to ensure that:

“in the solemnization of all marriages you do confirm to the provisions of the Seventh Section of the Order of Her Majesty the Queen in Council of the 7th September, 1838, relative to a declaration made and words to be spoken during the ceremony, and that you do also conform to so much of the Twenty-first Section of the said Ordinance as is not repugnant to the laws and customs observed among Jews.” [10]

Within the context of the growing Litvak community in Cape Town, Rabbi Mirvish was a crucial figure not only in his own congregation, but also in the development of the Cape Town community as a whole. During his years as Rabbi of the *Beth Hamedrash HaChodesh*, he was active in wider community affairs, helping to create the basic social and religious structure of the Cape Town Jewish community, and in turn this influenced developments in other parts of the country. [11], [12] His obituary in the *Cape Argus* (18 August 1947) noted that:

“There was scarcely any activity in the synagogic, charitable or educational spheres of the Jewish communal life in which he did not play an important part.” [13]

While an article in the *South African Jewish Times* (22 August 1947), describing him as “the Grand Old Man of the Cape Town Rabbinate”, reported that:

“So numerous were Rabbi Mirvish’s activities,” said a well-known Cape Town communal worker, *“that it is easier to mention those with which he was not associated than those with which he was.”* [14]

For example, he founded the *Beth Din* (Ecclesiastical Court) in the Cape, and for many years was the *Av Beth Din*, and he also founded the Cape Board of *Shechitah*. [11], [12], [14] He was one of the founders of the Cape Executive of the Jewish Board of Deputies, and a member of its executive board for many years. [5] He was a founder of the *Bikkur Cholim* (Sick Relief Society), and a Foundation member of the Jewish Aged Home. [15] He was always an active Zionist – even before leaving Lithuania he was active in the pre-Herzl *Chovevei Zion* movement – and while in Cape Town became a leader of the *Mizrachi* movement. The *South African Jewish Times* (29 August 1947) noted that:

“History was made by Rabbi Mirvish in 1917, when at a Conference he helped to define South African Jewry’s attitude towards the Balfour Declaration.” [6]

While, putting his approach in a wider historical context, his Obituary in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* (22 August 1947) noted that:

“Local Jewry has been deprived of the foremost link joining up three distinct periods in Jewish history. Rabbi Mirvish grew up in the atmosphere of the Talmud, steeped in the life of a self-contained Jewish community long before emancipation came to the countries of Eastern Europe. That was the first phase. He lived through the period of Haskalah, which witnessed a fundamental change in Jewish outlook. When he arrived here some 39 years ago, the Zionist movement (the third phase) was in its beginnings, and he not only displayed the greatest interest in its progress but unhesitatingly offered it his whole-hearted and substantial support. Rabbi Mirvish’s life was, therefore, part of the very essence of more than one historic episode in our modern history and this, coupled with his virile leadership, explains why he was so universally popular.” [16]

Always active in education [5], [16], he was Chairman of the United Hebrew Schools in the

Cape, founded a Talmudical study group for the young, and was an examiner of Talmud Torah's in both Cape Town and its hinterland. After the First World War, he was active on the committee for the assistance of Jewish War & Pogrom victims from Eastern Europe.

In his overall impact on the South African community, Rabbi Mirvish was undoubtedly a human bridge between the two cultures: the old world of European, particularly Lithuanian Judaism – and the new realities of South Africa, especially within the Cape. He was someone who mediated between these two realities, a living catalyst in the birth and development of the South African Jewish community. His son Dr Louis Mirvish, in an article in *Jewish Affairs* (Vol. 15, No. 5, May 1960), has described how his father had to solve a whole set of problems in this new, South African setting:

“It is not easy for a later generation to realise the legal and practical difficulties which arose in this new land, and which my father was called upon to solve. As a pioneer in his field he was conscious that every step was a precedent. Problems connected with divorce, marriage, proselytism, chalitzah and burial, arose daily and had to be tackled in a practical manner. Jewish religious life had to be adjusted to the conditions of the new country - and there were no precedents.” [17]

After his death, a special Editorial in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* (22 August 1947) noted that:

“Although Rabbi Mirvish devoted himself primarily to his congregation and particularly to the learned orthodoxy in our midst, nevertheless his beneficent influence stretched out to all sections of the community. For he was not only a great scholar but also a leader and a man of action. His scholarly ability was true to the old rabbinical style - he was exceptionally well acquainted with ‘Shas’ and its commentaries – and in addition he was possessed of an extensive knowledge of Haskalah and modern literature. To this wealth of knowledge was added a progressive approach to communal life and he imbued the activities of his community with something of his own spirit.” [16]

At various times, this progressive, more open approach to the realities of communal life, were at variance with those of his own congregation. [17]

During his lifetime, Rabbi Mirvish was one of the few South African rabbis known of abroad, and was listed in an international directory of rabbis, published in 1912. [17] But as well as his many, local communal activities, he was also widely known – both in South Africa, and abroad – through his writings. [14] In addition to contributing to many journals, he wrote two important books: both compilations of his sermons, essays, homiletics, Biblical commentaries, and *Halachic Responsa*. [5] Both of them were written in Hebrew and published in Jerusalem, and each had a Foreword by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Chief Rabbi of Palestine under the British Mandate. The first was *Zichron Yakov* (“In Memory of Jacob”), published in 1924, and named after his son Jacob – a poet and pharmacist – who had died tragically in the Influenza epidemic of 1918. The second was *Drushei HaRamach* – (“Sermons of *HaRamach*” – an acronym of “*HaRav Moshe Chaim*”), published in 1935. Both books, but especially the second, dealt with the particular problems of South African Jewry, and of how to adapt the beliefs and practices of traditional East European Judaism to this totally new environment. An Editorial in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* (22 August 1947), noted that:

“His droshim (sermons) are of a special type, combining the outlook of the Haskalah period with the old type of droshes – a task to which very few indeed were equal. It is this remarkable bridge between the old and the new which gave his published works such value and which led to there becoming books of reference for many orthodox Rabbis of today.” [16]

During his lifetime, his two books were widely circulated among Rabbis in many other countries, and widely praised. [14] Today, copies are owned by the British Library, the Library of Congress, and the Harvard Judaica Collection.

In the 1920's and 30's he carried on an extensive correspondence with rabbis and communal leaders in many parts of the world, including Russia, Eastern Europe, Palestine, Great Britain, and the USA. The collection of over 200 letters – now housed in the Manuscript Collection of the University of Cape Town Library [19] – dealt with communal, Rabbinical and *Halachic* issues, but also with the condition of Jewish communities of Eastern Europe after the privations of the First World War. The collection includes letters to him from Chief Rabbi

Abraham Isaac Kook of Palestine, Chief Rabbi J.H. Hertz of Great Britain, Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog of Ireland (and later of Palestine), Rabbi Salis Daiches of Edinburgh, Rabbi I. L. Bloch, Head of the Telz *Yeshiva*, Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan of Radun (the “Chafetz Chayim”), and the Rabbinical Council of Warsaw. As well as providing an insight into Jewish religious thinking at that time, many of these letters also offer a unique glimpse of the social and economic conditions of Jewish communities of the time – especially those in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Palestine.

In 1930 – together with Rev. Bender of Cape Town, Rabbi Dr J.L. Landau of Johannesburg, and Advocate M. Alexander MP – he represented the South African Jewish Community in a delegation to Parliament, which was considering a Bill which might have outlawed *Shechitah*. As a result of their representations, the Bill was withdrawn. [19]

Rabbi Mirvish worked as a congregational Rabbi, right to the very end. On the 17 August 1947, he collapsed and died on the steps of the Vredehoek Synagogue, after officiating at a wedding. [21] That evening he had been scheduled to preach at the *Beth Hamedrash* memorial service in honour of the 15,000 Jews killed by the Nazis in Ponvez (Ponevys) on 24 August 1941. [14]

Some months after his death, the street alongside the Synagogue was renamed “Rabbi Mirvish Avenue” by the City Council. [11], [12] According to an article in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* later that year, this street was then the only one in South Africa named after a Rabbi.

Saron and Hotz, in their *The Jews of South Africa*, describe him as “a learned and pious rabbi from Lithuania.” [9] He was, as the *South African Jewish Chronicle* (22 August 1947) put it:

“an eloquent and inspiring speaker who, in private life was loved and admired for his piety and personal integrity. He was an orthodox Rabbi of the old school, but understood the needs and thoughts of the young.” [5]

But from all contemporary accounts, it is clear that he was not only a gifted Rabbi, teacher, scholar and communal leader – he was also, by all accounts a *zadik*, a holy man, someone of great compassion and human tolerance. As Dr C. Resnekov wrote, in

appreciation of him in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* of 29 August 1947:

“We cannot evaluate yet the great influence Rabbi Mirvish wielded in the community. As time goes on, we will realise the truth of the Rabbinic saying: ‘The righteous attain a higher stature in death than when alive,’ and the Scriptural verse: ‘The wise shine like the brightness of the firmament and those that lead many to righteousness like the stars forever and aye.’

“We may say over Rabbi Mirvish as was said over Rabbi Abina: ‘Bend your heads, ye palm trees, for a palm tree among men has fallen. Turn the day into night while mourning for him who in search for the light of truth, turned the nights into days.’” [8]

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MEMORIES OF EAST LONDON

Manfred J. Schwartz, 1996.

My earliest connection with East London actually begins in 1912, ten years before I was born, and the reason is simply that my father Alex, at the age of sixteen came on holiday, and stayed at a boarding house at the bottom of Moore Street, not far from the seafront. He used to tell of the transport system then. There were only horse drawn cabs, *Garries*, was the accepted name for these conveyances. There were so few motor cars available in those far off days, and very costly to purchase, as well as maintain, that the Taxi industry therefore remained loyal to their steeds and carriages.

I feel that I must digress and tell of an incident that took place about 1910; it was a murder! As most of the Cabbies were Jewish, it was inevitable that a Jewish man would be involved. It was a Mr. Cornfield who was directly or more correctly, indirectly involved, but he certainly was one of the actors.

I came to hear of this story while listening to the Radio one evening in 1960, when they had a weekly series, which Eric Rosenthal edited. It was famous South African Murder Trials, which came before the High Court and or the Supreme Courts in the early part of the present Century. It happened that a visitor to the City requested a Cab driver to take him out to a farm not far from Cove Rock. So Mr Cornfield obliged even though it was after dusk and a rather long way out of town. Anyway after a journey lasting almost an hour they arrived at the homestead and the passenger told the driver (Cornfield) to wait for him. After ten or fifteen minutes his fare came out of the farmhouse and got back into the cab. They returned to the City and both took their respective ways home. A day or two later the Daily Dispatch, broke the story and reported that a murder had taken place at Cove Rock. I don't remember the details, except that Cornfield had to give evidence that the accused was the man he had driven out to the scene of the murder on the fateful night etc.

During the thirties the majority of the cabbies, some of whom were Jewish, had motorised and the horse and carriage period was over. I can only recall who had cars e.g. Messrs Cooper, Schecter, Lazarus and still plied their trade.

The time that I had anything to do with East London, was at the age of two, when I was brought

down to visit my Grandparents, Max and Annie Ginsberg. They had a house in Rees St, diagonally opposite to the small shop Stickells ran. My grandfather and uncle Abe had a wholesale produce business called Bloemfontein Produce Co at the bottom of Union Street. Subsequently I. Balstein had a sweet factory there. Years later Lipworth & Co had a showroom and warehouse there.

But my association with East London commences with the period towards the end of 1938, when we settled in East London and I have lived here virtually ever since. My father and grandfather bought a wholesale paper and tobacco business called Grahame Hobbs from a Mr S Michaelson, who also owned a tobacco business R Gillison & Co. which we eventually took over from him a few years later.

My thoughts cover mainly the middle of this Century, when I remember a thriving vibrant happy community. I was at a most impressionable age those many years ago, and as everybody was friendly and so very helpful (as they still are), that I have a special place in my heart for the East London Community. We have gone from large numbers to a sorely depleted handful of elderly. The Houses of Prayer were always crowded and the degree of piety was never a barrier to the brotherly attitude extended to their fellow religionists. As a people we have always been a most tolerant and liberal minded nation

Our people are go-getters and prepared to work. Think of what sacrifices were made to educate their children and to send them to university! But that has always been the way of our people.

The following statements by Sir Immanuel Jacobovitz, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain in his Work Ethic, in 1987, epitomises our thought patterns.

Black people should learn self-reliance and cultivate the work ethic to solve their problems in the inner cities according to the Rabbi, who said in a report that his community had much to teach Britain's blacks as they had first hand experience of struggling from the "ghetto" to a life of prosperity and security.

His report, *From Doom to Hope*, is a response to the controversial C of E document on the inner cities, *Faith in the Cities*, which was openly critical of the Thatcher Government.

The Rabbi criticised the document for showing in places a measure of patent political bias, and for failing to appreciate the importance of work and self-reliance.

He is openly critical of what he sees as a tendency in the black community to assume that the ethnic majority has a duty to support them and bend to their street culture way of life.

He criticises, too, the welfare state mentality which rejects hard work for modest rewards.

In addition, he admits that blacks, because of skin colour, can face prejudices in addition to those experienced by Jews.

He calls for patience instead of the "give it to me now" attitude, the development of strong family ties, with strong moral principles, and above all a major effort to educate their young to the standard at least as high as the host community. A technique long and effectively used by us.

He insists that blacks should, enforce the strongest discipline in their own communities to stamp out crime which can only alienate them from the host community.

He asks: How did we break out of our ghettos and enter the mainstream of society and its privileges? Certainly not by riots and demonstrations.

Above all, we worked on ourselves not on others. We gave a better education to our children than anybody else had. We hallowed our home life.

We channelled the ambition of our youngsters to academic excellence not flashy cars.

We rooted out crime and indolence from our midst by making every Jew feel responsible for the fate of all of us.

We did not gatecrash into our gentile environment, we made ourselves highly acceptable and indispensable by our industrial, intellectual and moral contributions to society.

He admits that such lessons are bound to be unpalatable to a generation conditioned upon rights, demanded from others, rather than duties owed to others, but points out that they have worked for us.

He concedes that our work ethic is a great deal more demanding than that suggested in the C of E report,

which suggests that people should no longer be judged by their work, or whether they work at all.

He asserts that “idleness is an even greater evil than unemployment”, cheap labour is more dignified than a free dole, and that no work is too menial to compromise human dignity and self-respect.

For us an urgent imperative for a spiritually and materially healthy economy is therefore the cultivation of pride in work, he writes.

The Rabbi concludes that we could make no greater contribution to the inner city problems than helping to shift the emphasis from “rights to duties” and from “having a good time, to making the times good.”

Every business and profession was practised by the members of our Community, as everywhere else in the Free World. We had a few first citizens such as Dave Lazarus, Abe Addelson, and Leo Laden.

I will make an effort to record as many as I can remember and think of. I might incur a few errors regarding the chronological data, or some of the first names of many people, but I too am getting old and am liable to mental aberrations from time to time.

There were many Wholesalers such as: D. Gottlieb & Son, N. Edelstein & Co, Katz & Rabinowitz, Traub Bros, M & B. Traub, N Traub & Co, Shwer Bros, N & J Strelitz, Gochin & Pincus, Novelty Craft (Fisher and v.d. Carr) also their father in law, Louis Aarons' business M Hertz & Co, Solomon Wholesale (Solly Strelitz), Border Trading (Brandenburger & Landauer), Elco Trading (Ellie & Collie Jankelson who with their father had given up a big business in Butterworth and opened Elco in E.L), Grahame Hobbs & Co, and R Gillison & Co, which we ran for some time before selling out in 1947 to L Suzman & Co, Louis Stein (Louston Wholesalers), Walter Fels & Co.

As far as retailers went there were many: North End Bazaars (Cohen & Buchalter), M Hertz's Langes Stores (Ginger Hertz in 1939 bluffed his age – sixteen – and joined the Army, one of the youngest recruits in the Union), and S Wilken & Son, in Moore Street, A Keet & Co in Pearce Street, D Albert & Co, Baskir & Radomsky, Hamburger & Wolf, S Weil & Co, Lewis Outfitters, Armist Bros, J Buchalter & Co, I Balstein, Hollywood Fashion Store (Paul Hoffman & Manfred Strauss), Solly Solomon, Joe Levy, Levi's Shoe store, Baskirs

Bazaar, Baskirs Sputnik, Strand News Agency (Harold Winnet), Oxford Jewellers, Harry Berman, Wolks Jewellers, Rosemount Stores (Cohen), Zasman Outfitters, KWT Reliable Stores, Barney and Albert (Goggy) Gersowsky, B Behr & Co, Hessi Rozman, Modern Outfitters, Jack Hurwitz (Jays Outfitters), The Blochs (Harry and Barney), Lennie Marcow under retailers first (Armist Bros & Co), then with Ben Armist at Metro Cash, Baskir and Radomsky.

The Armist Family who had Armour Engineering Works in King Williams Town, Charlie Armist's Hippo Roller Mills, eventually selling out to Epic Oil Mills. Alex Schwartz, my father, started the Central Refrigerating and Engineering Works (CREW) in one of the old barracks buildings at the old Woodbrook Aerodrome. Then he started up a Woodwook Factory in Settlers Way and also a Toilet Roll factory in the same premises.

Just before the war, Tom Schechter was in the motor trade with Buller Meyer at Frontier Motors and did some motor racing. No wonder his nephews took up motor racing. His brother Max bought Excelsior Motors from Ronnie Levy who then opened in Nahoon, when he got the franchise for Mercedes Benz. My father bought one of the first three Diesel Mercedes that were ever sold in East London; he got his car sometime early in 1958 and the other owner was Louis Isenberg (Dad's golf pal), and was with Frankel and Seehof (Fransoff). The motor men were Barney Zimmerman, and also Phillip Zimmerman and Barney Rothbard of Orient Garage and Fleet Motors. Percy Eagle joined Fleet Motors after he married Blanche Zimmerman, some time after Barney Zimmerman died. Kazerson, a service station in the North End (his daughter Kooksie was quite a well-known musician). Isaac Gaitelband and Kimmel (known as Isaac and Himmel) used motor spares. Sid Kruger had a filling station on the Esplanade. Samuel Michaelson with the A-1 Retreading Co, which Blackie Schwarz took over, followed by Hilton Cooper. Ben Wolk (who was tragically killed in a motor accident outside the Voting Booths in a general election early 1970's) started Buffalo (New) Motor Spares; now his son Phillip is still in the motor trade as Midas Spares.

G. Gersowsky had the Model Steam Bakery, which he later sold to Rubin and Super. There was another baker on the Quigney, (Al) Capon.

The furniture stores were: Fishers, Olstein & Co, O Wacks, Toyk, D Teper, Leo Hellman, Ruttenbergs, and Heinz Bergman.

The butchers were: Touyz Farmers Meat Supply, S Meyer Berea; ICS had a Kosher Butchery. There was the fish shop owned and run by the Kutocks, and then Mrs Rubin ran the business after them.

The hoteliers were: Lowenberg's Grand Hotel, Moritz Arenson Carlton, Schmahman's Marine Hotel (Sasher Schmahman as a youth fought on the side of the Boers in the Anglo Boer War of 1899-1902), Cyril Closenber Oceanic, Leo Laden's Seaview, Sammy Becker Clarendon, S Schlesing Strand, Gustav Deal Deals Hotel, Louis Kirsh Deals Hotel, Henry Cowen Kidds Beach Hotel, Arthur Porter and then Herman Continental, Monty Selesnick then Metter Dorchester. Tchucky Tewkolsky took over the Carlton from Moritz Arenson. The Birmingham Private (unlicensed) Hotel was owned by S Weincier; then the Rosenbaums bought it. Then the Lowenbergs of the Grand Hotel when their Breweries lease expired. The Vincent Hotel Sucker.

The builders were: Chaim Katz, who built the Municipal Market Building on the Market Square among many other fine buildings. Zawa's husband Robbie Robinson then took over, and now Louis runs the firm. Then Snowy Banks came to East London, and with the Horwitz Brothers all got into the building trade.

The only plumber that I can think of was Edelstein and his stepson.

Aubery Wulfson was in the Electrical Contracting business, after he stopped trying to make porcelain (china) cups with Mossie Horwitz.

There was a Lionel Wolfson with one of the Firms. McKechnie Bros was owned by the Kerbels; after matriculating, Herby joined his father in the "glass business" before joining up in the Air Force.

An early dairy farmer was Morrie Toyk, and from 1959 I also farmed and ran a Dairy Herd till 1980 when we sold and moved to a smallholding in Cove Ridge, where we did a little farming. Tunnel growing of Cucumbers etc.

The farmers of note were Milton Adler, who had his farm in the Macleantown district, and Charlie Touyz out beyond the Gonubie Farmers Hall. Salkinder

was doing some farming and speculating at one stage, while his son Bobby, was well known for his horsemanship exploits in the show ring, at many agricultural shows. I even met up with him in Rhodesia in the early fifties where he performed with his teams of horses.

Louis Jaffe had a few Cheese Factories: Fort Montgomery Cheese and the one at Cross Roads, he also had ranches in the Northern Cape at Vryburg. He took Freddie King up to SWA on one trip, and as a result King was introduced to the possibilities of Karakul Sheep farming in that area. He became a wealthy man, and I wonder whether he ever acknowledged part of his success to Louis Jaffe?

The Taitz Bros bought a Kidds Beach farm and ran pineapples. I met them in Salisbury early in 1950 after they settled in Rhodesia.

At one time Herby Kerbel bought a piece of ground from Hilton Elliot at Rockcliffe to grow pines. The Laden brothers bought Wiltonside also to grow pineapples. Even before the pineapple boom, Sam Hillier, who ran the Esplanade Tea Room on the Orient Beach, had a farm at Rockcliffe, which Elliot bought after he sold his original farm to Herby Kerbel

The manager of the Mauberger Blanket Factory was Sam Max his wife was a Myers. Then when Phillip Frame took over the factory he put his nephew Sydney in as manager. They were very good in always trying to find jobs for many of our people. For many decades the local black workers were wont to call the Consolidated Textile Mills the Mauberger factory.

We had Leo Borman as manager of CDA the Mercedes Benz assembly plant, and here again the local workers called it the Nash factory, as this marque was assembled there when the factory was first established, when they also assembled Fiat and Alfas.

Ackermans before the war, employed and gave a start to many young school leavers, who went on to open their own businesses. Jack Berman was the manager for many years; he would walk from Vincent to town most mornings, in this way he kept extremely fit.

Woolworths had Morrie Sklar among many of their managers. O K Bazaars had Alex Kibbur as a

manager at one time, also Oscar Cohen and another time they had Joe Block among many others.

When Tiger Oats opened up in East London, as Meadow Feeds and Milling & Trading, their first manager was Willie Frankel. They had a very nice young man as their sales representative, Charlie Kantor, from Oudtshoorn, who was tragically killed in a motor car accident at the lower end of St Georges Rd. as he was alighting from his car.

We would all come down to the Orient Beach, of a Sunday morning, and enjoy the swim, company, and happy times.

S Rabinowitz (a large property owner) had a coal agency in addition to the Wholesale Business with his partner R Katz. The firm was referred to as Katz and Ratz. Old Mr Courlander had Courlanders Agencies (Wayside Tobacco and many others) He was a typical German of the post first war period, always immaculately dressed, with the starched collar, and always very correct, prim and proper.

Harry Wacks had a business of night soil removal.

Natie Wolf, bought the First National Battery Factory, from a Jackson, who had started it up.

Willie Hurwitz, who was a buyer of scrap machinery etc., and metal, won a tender round about 1937 to buy all the tram lines from the municipality. When it came to get his steel rails, a controversy arose as to how the rails were to be recovered from the tarred roads. It ended up that the council still paid Willie not to take up all the track, which they in turn covered with extra layers of tarmac. It would have been too expensive to redo all the streets if the rails were salvaged. His tender never stated that the streets were to be left in a usable condition, after getting the tram rails out of the ground. He also bought the wreck of the Stuart Star, which went onto the rocks opposite the Hood Point Lighthouse on the West Bank Golf Course, not more than 25 metres from the tar road. This ship was carrying, among other cargo, new 1938 model Dodge and Plymouth cars from the USA for distribution in the Union. These were the days when only General Motors assembled vehicles in South Africa.

The few Civil Servants included a railway man, J Sieve (married to an Israeli girl Nachama); his brother owned the Melrose Cheese Co. Then there

was a Fishbein at Revenue; Davey Miller, of African Films, was an ex East Londoner.

The woolbuyers were: I Blumenthal, Harry Prussos, Jacob Abelman, and Louis Goldblum, who started off as a sheepskin buyer from the Free State and started Merino Fur Products a factory making items from fleeces and also Basuto Black Shawls; afterwards the Altshulers took over the factory.

Alex Schewitz, who had Atlas Laundry and Dry Cleaners, then started Atlas Engineering and Pumps. Alex once told me of the time he was in Johannesburg. He had a factory in Nugget Street, or the next one parallel to it, and at next door, Anton Rupert had his Voorbrand or Voorpos Tobacco retail business. During 1941, I, on occasion, bought my tobacco from this bearded man young man, who if I still recall would only speak Afrikaans (a real verbrandte if ever there was one) – these were the war years. Somehow Alex helped someone to store some tobacco and cigarette machinery, and Rupert showed interest in the equipment and bought same. It shows how from small beginnings, great Empires are built. The acorn into the mighty Oak tree idea.

Early in the 1920's the King Tanning at King Williams Town was run by Maurice Kramer, and the boot factory I think was owned by Joe Mankowitz.

Jack Albert with Zip Dry Cleaners and the Bag Depot as well as D Albert & Co, which kept him occupied for many years. Simmie, Ferdie and father Stern with Same Day Dry Service. Hygienic Cleaners was owned first by the Pearl Brothers and then by Helen and Louis Rosen.

Theo Blumberg had the printing works (Waldecks). Now Ronnie Kahn is the only one in this the printing trade.

There was one barber, Micky Marks. And, one ladies' hairdresser, O. Pager.

The radio repair store was run by Hans Reiffenberg.

Among the managers of the various Cinemas were Fels (Felschenfeld), 20th Century, Fillis of the Astoria, and many others. Eli Spilken was mainly in the Transkei, but also had interests in East London.

Morrie Belikoff was into the importation of garments from the States as well as ex-army goods.

Rupie Gottlieb started a flying school after the war; he had a Piper Cub plane, in which I had lessons

until the school packed up after a few months existence .

Of the medical men there was an army of names, but to start with there was Roovy Buchalter, as he was the only Veterinary Surgeon. The doctors were: Leon Albert (FRCP), Alfie Butt, Jack Cunard, Louis Jaffit, Louis Alexander, Dr. Sacks, F Drusinsky, Cooper, Melmed, L Schneider, Ben Navid, Leon Sunn, Cyril Blumenthal, and on and on. Just after the war when Leon Albert returned to East London, he and I would regularly attend the Sunday Night Musical Recitals at the City Hall, which Hans Muller arranged and conducted.

At one performance of a Lawrence Tibbitt concert at the Coliseum he was asked by Leon why he was not clapping. His reply was: “You clap at a football match but applaud at a concert.”

Another family of long association were the Feinsons. Bernard and Ray were friends of my parents in Bloemfontein in the very early 1920’s. At the age of 18 months or so, my mother would visit Ray, and I would be with Sidney. When we came to East London in 1938 the friendship was resumed. Then some years after the war, Sid settled in Port Elizabeth, with the result that we lost touch.

One person I remember well was Stan Freedman from Port Elizabeth. (His mother was a Gluckman of the wool trade people.) He was stationed in East London during the war and was attached to the Veterinary Section, because that was the unit which had to monitor food supplies such as milk, etc. Or that was the story he let out at the time. I say this, due to the fact that he was stationed at Igodo, adjacent to what is now Winterstrand, and this was the site of the then very hush-hush coastal battery bunker site and little-known and secret radar defence capability during the war.

The older generation (the over seventy-year-olds) definitely were all friends. All the young people would gather on the Orient Beach to spend the Sunday or Public Holiday mornings together. We played tennis at the Selborne Courts. We attended dances at the Communal Hall. It was also used for badminton. The caretaker, Charles, was often a spectator, and on one occasion brought his young six- or seven-year-old son to watch, telling him that the “ball” is called a shuttlecock.

I have compiled the above description for future generations to be informed of *what it was like* in East London so many decades previously.

Perhaps in the future, some persons with time on their hands, as well as an interest in continuing this record might attempt and bring it up to date for another generation of younger residents, interested in local history.

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FAMILY STORY: MY ZAYDE THE REBEL

Leonard Stein

I grew up in a conservative family where the word “rebel” was a term of derision reserved for uncultured and uncivilized families. But none other than the King of England declared my *Zayde* Solomon Stein to be a rebel. Thereby hangs a tale.

Zayde Solomon came to South Africa in the 1880s from his native Lithuania. His surname in those days was Landy. Why did he come? It was probably a combination of poverty and anti-Semitism. Diamonds and gold had also been discovered, and Jews were among the immigrants who thronged to the far away country. Some Lithuanian Jews had already gone to South Africa and written letters to their relatives extolling the virtues of their new home. In a small East European community the word spread rapidly and Jews often traveled to unknown villages in the middle of nowhere merely because a relative happened to live there.

At that time England controlled the coastal region of South Africa, consisting of the Cape Province with its major city Cape Town, and Natal with Durban as its principal port. My *Zayde* did not have a profession. He settled in the interior of the country in the Orange Free State – one of the two independent Boer Republics, where he worked on the railways.

In 1899, Imperial England declared war on the Orange Free State and Transvaal. This was the Anglo-Boer War. *Zayde* Solomon decided to volunteer with the Boers and fight against the English bulldog. As a Boer soldier, he changed his surname from Landy to Steyn – an Afrikaner name.

I never knew my *Zayde* because he died before I was born. As a child, all I knew was that at some stage Queen Victoria’s English army captured him and

sent him to a concentration camp in Ceylon for two years. There were pictures of him in our home, but the sole relic of his imprisonment was a small wooden chair, which he had made while in Ceylon. It was kept in the pantry and was big enough for a child. I used to like to sit on it. My brother always used to laugh at the fact that our grandfather took two years to make one chair.

For years I wondered about *Zayde* Solomon in the tropical country so far from home. How was he treated and what did he think about? I decided to try and find out more about him. I wrote to the Imperial War Museum in London and asked them for details. They referred me to the Public Records Office in Richmond just outside London. They have the records of prisoners of war from the 1815 Napoleonic wars until the First World War. They told me to come and do the research myself or pay someone to do it for me. A few years ago I went to London on holiday. One day I took a train to the Public Records Office. They gave me a list of three books which contained the names of the Boer prisoners of war. The volumes were in alphabetical order, but there were hundreds of lists. I had to go through them one by one. I managed to check two of the three volumes, but found no trace of my *Zayde*.

The next day I was scheduled to return to Israel in the afternoon. I decided to return to Richmond to examine the final volume where I was sure my *Zayde's* name appeared. I went through the book thoroughly, but to no avail. In desperation, I went to a reference work which listed the three volumes I had been supplied with. Suddenly I found the number of a volume dealing with Boer prisoners which was not on the official list supplied to me. I looked at my watch and saw that I had half an hour left to catch a train back to my hotel on the other side of London. With dismay I saw that the fourth volume was far thicker than the others. I started from the beginning and read rapidly through the first thirty pages. I didn't find what I was looking for. I turned to the back page and worked forward. I glanced at my watch. I had another fifteen minutes left.

Suddenly I saw a notation:

“Steyn, Solomon. 37 years. Captured at Viljoenskroon November 9, 1900. Jew. Burgh.”

I was elated. I wanted to shout out loud. But such things are not done in the Public Records Office. I

photocopied the page and went back to my hotel with a feeling of accomplishment. Finally I had further written proof of the bravery of my *Zayde*. When I got back home I added it to the letter which King Edward sent to *Zayde* Solomon in the year 1903 where he wrote, “His Majesty hereby pardons you for being a rebel.” It is for you my *Zayde* that I dedicate this story.

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**EFFECT OF THE ZIONIST YOUTH
MOVEMENT ON S.A. JEWRY,
NEGOTIATING A SOUTH AFRICAN
JEWISH AND ZIONIST IDENTITY IN
THE MID-20th CENTURY**

Terry Kegel

Editor's note: Terry Kegel kindly sent us his Thesis (submitted to Haverford College) on the Zionist Youth Movements in 20th Century South Africa. This Thesis will be serialized in several issues of the SA-SIG Newsletter. The previous issue of the Newsletter contained the first part of the Introduction – this issue continues with the next portion of the Thesis. Terry's acknowledgements will be published at the end of the last chapter in this series.

This thesis is divided into five sections. The first three sections describe the history of Jewish identification and the Zionist movement in South Africa, setting the scene in which the youth movement is operating. Section I provides a general history of South African Jewry and highlights several important modes of Jewish identification for youth. Section II explores the history of a particularly important mode of Jewish identification: Zionism. It outlines the history of the Zionist movement internationally and in South Africa. Section III examines the ambiguity of South African Zionism and the Israel vs. South Africa debate, an important dilemma facing South African Jews and Zionists, which affected their decisions about identification.

The final two sections focus on a particular Zionist youth movement, *Habonim*, and its effect on the identity construction and negotiation of South African Jewish youth. Section IV presents the ideology and role of *Habonim* as its leaders define it, showing the intended effect on identity development. Section V shows the actual effect of the movement on identity development, through the analysis of interviews.

In these five sections I hope to give the reader a sense of the Jewish environment and the Zionist youth movement and their effect on individual identity and the South African community.

Towards a South African Jewish Identity: A Brief History of South African Jewry

The first significant influx of Jewish immigration to South Africa occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Individual Jews, mostly from England and Germany, had already been living on white settlements for two centuries and started to form their own communities in the mid-1800s. But South African Jewry, as a nation-wide community, only began to take shape with the arrival of these late-19th century immigrants. From 1880 to 1910, 40,000 Jews immigrated to South Africa, the majority from Lithuania.

Starting in 1881 and continuing off and on over the next few decades, a wave of horrifying pogroms swept across Eastern Europe where Jews had lived for centuries. Relatives and friends murdered, homes ruined, these Jews began to look abroad for a safe environment away from persecution where they could earn good lives for themselves. Most chose America and some went to Palestine, but, among Lithuanians especially, many immigrated to South Africa. South Africa was such a popular destination for these Lithuanians, or "Litvaks", that it is often described as "a colony of Lithuanian Jewry".

Early immigrants often ended up in South Africa by chance. Throughout the emigration process, a variety of factors could have determined one's final destination: what ship company was advertising in your town, what time of year you were traveling, who you met along the way, what restrictions or quotas you encountered. Those immigrants then wrote home reporting on their experiences in the new country. In the case of South Africa, the reports were mostly glowing. They raved of this new land of wealth. Immigrants sent proof of their newfound success to their relatives back home in the form of money for tickets to join them. Word spread that South Africa was another popular destination, in addition to the United States, and sometimes, whole towns relocated there.

South Africa offered a favorable economic situation for Eastern European Jewish immigrants which enabled them to adjust relatively comfortably. Unlike the U.S. and England, but similar to Lithuania, South Africa at this time was not too industrialized and commercialized. Immigrants were not forced to take awful jobs in sweatshops upon arrival and, rather, could use the skills they learned in their professions in the Old Country to

find work in their new home. “To a much greater extent than in the United States and Britain, which already had highly developed economies, South Africa was a land of opportunity for immigrants.” If they had enough money and connections to start a business, they could easily find cheap labor amongst the Blacks and Coloreds. The Lithuanian and South African societies were also similar in their ethnic polarization, where Jews in Lithuania looked down upon Lithuanian peasants as many South Africans did with blacks.

By 1911, the Jewish population was 46,926. Immigrants continued to arrive and by 1926 the population had reached 71,816. However, the rise in population was seriously stunted with the passage of the Immigration Quota Act in 1930, which purposely limited the flood of Jewish Eastern Europeans into the country. Along with this restriction on Jewish immigration, in the years leading up to the Second World War, important political figures were openly anti-Semitic. There was increased tension against the Jewish immigrants for taking jobs away from Afrikaners. After the War however, such noticeable political anti-Semitism had diminished.

Immigration continued, albeit at a slower rate. As the years passed, the rise in Jewish population was increasingly attributable to those early immigrants having children in South Africa. By 1936 78% of all Jews under 30 were South African born. By 1946, the Jewish population was 104,156, which was 4.39% of the total White population. In 1960, the population had risen to just under 115,000. A decade later, the South African Jews numbered 118,200, which was approximately the peak of their growth. In recent decades, the population has decreased due to emigration.

Development of a Unique South African Jewish Community

As immigrants poured into South Africa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the Jewish population rose dramatically, the Jews developed a sense of a greater community. These were formative years on their path towards a South African Jewish identity. In addition to the major institutions that were founded at this time, particular circumstances of South African society also shaped this developing identity.

One such circumstance was the coincidental founding of Johannesburg during the wave of Jewish immigration. With the discovery of gold in 1886, immigrants, including Jews, flocked to this city, which would later become one of the capitals of South Africa. As a result of Jews being present at the birth of the city, they had a part in founding it, which made their experience different than Jewish immigrants in most cities that had already been established:

“Jews were present in Johannesburg at its birth and never looked upon themselves as immigrants having to overcome the obstacles of arriving in an established community. Elsewhere, they might have tended to be almost apologetic about their identity, but in Johannesburg they felt self-confidence not only in being Jewish, but in being part of the town’s varied and wider community.”

Johannesburg became the most populous and influential city of the Jewish community, so the favorable circumstances enjoyed there in maintaining the Jewish identity were characteristic of much of the South African community.

Another identity-forming factor, perhaps the most unique to South Africa, was its ethnic, religious, and racial pluralism and segregation. Not only did this have a great influence on South African history in general, but also it was important for the development of the Jewish community.

The South African population was composed of Blacks, Coloreds, Asiatics, and Whites, each with its own set of institutions. Within each of these broad ethnicities, there were many subdivisions. The Whites could generally be divided into two groups: the Afrikaans and the English communities. As far as the development of the Jewish community is concerned, it is the dualism within the White population that was most significant. The Afrikaners were the more dominant force amongst the Whites. Not only did they have a greater population, but they also succeeded in achieving a national consciousness. The English, on the other hand, never developed a national identity. They were however, numerous enough to counteract the Afrikaner and create an overall ambiguity of self-definition amongst South Africans.

The pluralism, or the lack of a dominant national identity, of South African society, enabled the Jewish community a certain amount of freedom in

establishing its own identity, which strengthened its sense of community, separate from the general population. If Jews were slower to assimilate in South Africa compared to the U.S. or England, it was due to this ambiguous South African nationality:

“Because Afrikaners and English shared hardly any common national symbols, there was, in fact, no agreed South African national identity equivalent to that provided by the notions either of being ‘British’ or of being ‘American’. This cultural duality and inchoate national identity was of far-reaching significance not only in preserving Jewish identity but also in endowing it with an ethnic-national dimension of its own, which ... found expression in Zionism.”

Pluralism was the result of a changing philosophy in South Africa at the time on the question of assimilation. In contrast to the “amalgamationist” politics of the 19th century, which called for the civilization and assimilation of different peoples (in this case, this refers to Africans), a new ideology emerged around the turn of the century, which favored the preservation of diversity:

“A new ideology of segregation had gained ascendancy in which Africans were rather to develop along their own lines. A new sense of cultural difference (in today’s parlance ‘multiculturalism’) was emerging in which ethnic or, in the case of Jews, religious differences were fully accepted.”

This ideology of segregation was most harshly realized with the system of Apartheid. While racial segregation always existed in South Africa, it was politically systematized in 1948 when the Afrikaner National Party came to power. Apartheid reinforced segregation and blatantly discriminated against Blacks and other non-Whites.

“At its crudest level [apartheid] meant simply the preservation of White domination (*baasskap*) in all aspects of South African society. At its most refined level, it postulated a regulated system of race relations in order to guarantee White self-preservation while at the same time providing parallel ‘separate development’ for all of the racial groups comprising South African society...As a programme of action, apartheid meant reinforcement of White domination of the political and economic life of the country. It also meant systematization of social separation between the various racial groups

and the gradual provision of frameworks, institutional and territorial, for the proposed separate development of each racial group.”

Jews, lumped into the White group, benefited from this system of apartheid. First of all, along with the other Whites, they had much greater educational and economic opportunities. Black labor was cheap, so they were able to maintain a comfortable lifestyle. Secondly, the Whites’ paranoia about the “Black problem” distracted them from worrying about the “Jewish problem.” They saw the Blacks, who greatly outnumbered them, as a bigger threat, so, for the most part, they left the Jews alone. Thirdly, this racial segregation further reinforced the general segregation of South African society, which allowed the Jewish community to develop independently

Add to this segregated tendency of the South African political system, the Afrikaner and the *Shtetl* mentalities to maintain exclusive, insulated communities, and the result was an extremely polarized society. The Afrikaner mentality called on Afrikaners to band together to protect themselves from hostile natives in this African colony. Similarly, the *Shtetl* mentality motivated Jews to remain within an exclusively Jewish community so as to protect against external anti-Semitic threats. Allowed by the political system to develop independently and motivated by its own insular tendencies, South African society was segregated and polarized. This was a favorable coincidence for the South African Jewish community; South African Jews were able to maintain a tight community, which created amongst themselves a strong Jewish identity.

While free to maintain an insular community with its own organizational institutions, there was still some pressure from the government that the Jews assimilate with one of the two dominant White groups. The Jews, for a variety of reasons, chose to associate more with the English than the Afrikaners. Many of the earlier Jewish immigrants to South Africa in the 19th century came from England so the founders of the Jewish community had cultural ties with the English. While the Afrikaners remained a primarily farming people, the English and the Jews were mostly urban and interacted more frequently through business. The Jews also found a greater ease in upward economic mobility through assimilation into the English community. Despite this tendency among Jews to assimilate into the

English community, the parallel existence of the Afrikaner community created enough competition and ambiguity, which still enabled the Jews to guard their own identity, more so than their contemporaries in the US or England.

Allowed the responsibility of developing their own institutions, South African Jewry formed a well-organized community, which created a simple and productive system of opportunities for Jewish identification. The South African Jews, whose population was growing rapidly at the time, took charge of establishing a national Jewish community in the late 19th century. The institutions they founded in these early years would shape the future of the South African Jewish identity. Two of the most influential organizations they founded were the Zionist Federation, which will be discussed in the next section, and the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBOD). Founded in 1903, SAJBOD later officially defined its role as follows:

“(1) it is the representative body of the Jewish community and its spokesman; (2) its main purpose is to safeguard the religious and civic rights of the Jewish population; and (3) it endeavours to contribute to the strengthening and enrichment of Jewish communal life and to improved communal planning.”

Along with the Zionist Federation, the SAJBOD was responsible for overseeing most of the Jewish organizational activities in South Africa. The existence and acceptance of these two controlling powers from an early stage was key to the unity of the South African Jewish community.

Another characteristic of South African Jewry that made its community especially tight and effective was its relatively small size and its homogeneity, both in origins and in religious affiliations. First, compared to the approximate American Jewish population of five million in the 1950s and 60s, South Africa’s approximately 115,000 Jews had a significantly easier time maintaining a close-knit and organized community. Second, as mentioned earlier, the majority of South African Jews came from Eastern Europe, particularly, Lithuania. Therefore, the immigrants naturally had a lot of cultural similarities, which encouraged their social interaction. Religiously, the vast majority of South African Jews were affiliated with Orthodox synagogues. Religious activity was not nearly as divided as it was in the U.S. There were only two

options: Orthodox or Reform, although, in some smaller cities, Reform was not even an option. Therefore, since the majority of South African Jews attended synagogues of similar religious ideology, religion was rarely grounds for division within the Jewish community, as has been the case in other countries.

All of these factors of the Jewish community and of South African society in general made South African Jewry a strongly identifying ethnic minority group. They were always aware of their label as Jews and the fact that they were different. They were proud of that difference. In fact, for many, their Jewish identity superseded their South African identity. A popular phrase used by many of my interviewees to describe this fact was that they identified as “Jewish first, then South African.” Clearly, Jewish identity in South Africa was strong.

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The Southern Africa Jewish Genealogy Special Interest Group (SA-SIG)

The Southern Africa Jewish Genealogy Special Interest Group (SA-SIG) was created to provide a forum:

- for a free exchange of ideas, research tips, and information of interest to those researching Jewish family history in the communities of South Africa, Lesotho (Basutoland), Botswana (Bechuanaland), Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia), Zambia (Northern Rhodesia), Swaziland, Mozambique and the former Belgian Congo.
- to reflect the homogenous character and traditions of Southern African Jewry
- to address broader issues relating to the region's Jewry and its institutions and maintain contact with them
- to assist members intending to travel to the region with information and contacts
- to promote, support and assist projects relevant to the family history and genealogy of SA Jewry

The SA-SIG purposes and goals are generally aimed at bringing together Jewish genealogy researchers with a common interest in Southern Africa.

The SA-SIG maintains a set of Web Pages that can be found at: <http://www.jewishgen.org/safrica>

These web pages are a portal to the SIG's extensive information about Southern African genealogical research, as well as provide access to other resources such as SA-related databases, and the South African-related microfilms available in the Mormon Family History Library (FHL). Directions on how to subscribe to the online SA-SIG discussion group hosted by JewishGen can be found at:

<http://www.jewishgen.org/safrica/subprimer.htm>

A number of extensive JewishGen Info Files on the subject of Southern Africa Jewry can also be found at:

<http://www.jewishgen.org/infofiles>

These files provide a wealth of information on the history and background of the Jewish communities in Southern Africa.

Other key projects relating to the SA-SIG include the following.

- The SA-Special Interest Group has been producing a quarterly hardcopy Newsletter since 2000 which has featured articles on various topics such as: Jewish communities in SA (present and past), personalities in the SA Jewish community; religious congregations, youth movements, the South African-Israel connection, as well as general news about the Southern African Jewish community. Members of the SA-SIG receive the Newsletter as part of their membership. Instructions on how to become a member of the SA-SIG, and to receive the quarterly Newsletter can be found at:

<http://www.jewishgen.org/SAfrica/newsletter/index.htm>

- Following on an initiative by one of the speakers at the 21st International Conference on Jewish Genealogy, Mendel Kaplan, the South African *Center for Jewish Migration and Genealogy Studies* has been established to research the estimated 15,000 core families who migrated to Southern Africa between 1850-1950. This new Center has been founded under the umbrella of the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Cape Town.

In broad terms, the research at the new Centre will focus on the Eastern European locations of origin of the families, the patterns of migration to South Africa, places where families first settled, the connection of these families to the broader non-Jewish communities, their later resettlement and relocation, the inter-relationships of families, and the destinations of subsequent emigration.