Researching South African Jewish Genealogy

by Roy Ogus and Saul Issroff

Historical Background

South Africa lies at the southern tip of the African continent, about three times the size of California in area, with a current population of approximately 43 million.

Prior to 1600, the key inhabitants of the region were the Bushmen and Hottentot people in the west and the Bantu (blacks) who lived in the east, who migrated down from the interior of Africa. European interest in the Cape of Good Hope, on the southernmost tip of South Africa, arose from its strategic location on the sea route from Europe to the East Indies. In 1652, the first European settlers from the Dutch East India Company set up a supply base at the present site of Cape Town, for its ships on their way to the Far East. Soon afterwards, some employees left the firm and started independent farming in the surrounding area. They became known as *Boers* (farmers). They were soon joined by French and German settlers. By 1795, the whites had spread to a distance

of about 500 miles from Cape Town and the colony had a total population of about 60,000.

Their descendants are Afrikaners (people of Dutch, German and French descent) who speak Afrikaans, which derives from the Dutch Language. Afrikaners now comprise about 60% of the white population, people of European descent, who number about six million. The remaining two-fifths are mainly of British descent and speak English as their native language. Their forebears arrived in the 1820s. Jews are usually included as part of the English group. After France conquered the Netherlands in 1795, the British occupied the Cape Colony to keep it out of French hands. In 1814, the British were formally given the Cape by the Netherlands.

The Boers soon came to resent British colonial rule; English was the only official language. In 1834, Britain abolished slavery

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throughout its empire, ruining a number of Boer farmers who depended on slave labor to work their farms. This dissatisfaction came to a head in 1836, when there was a mass exodus of Boers from the Cape Colony into the interior of the country. This journey, called the *Great Trek*, brought the Boers into direct contact with the Bantu peoples living there. This resulted in many clashes and much bloodshed. Eventually, the Boers settled in areas now known as Natal, the Orange Free State (OFS), and the Transvaal.

During the 1850s, Britain annexed Natal, but recognized the independence of the Transvaal and OFS republics. In 1870, an extremely rich diamond field was found where Kimberley now stands in the Cape. This resulted in a mass influx of people from Britain and elsewhere, as fortunes were sought. Mining diamonds, gold, and other minerals soon became the basis of the economy. Disputes between the Boers and the British followed and Britain annexed the Kimberley area in 1871, and the Transvaal in 1877. The First Anglo-Boer War took place in 1880, resulting in a victory for the Boers.

In 1886, the huge Witwatersrand gold field was discovered in the present-day Johannesburg area, bringing an even larger influx of foreigners. By 1895, half of the Transvaal population was foreign-born. Relations between Britain and the Boers continued to deteriorate and in 1899, the Second Boer War broke out when Transvaal and the OFS declared war on Britain. In 1902, the war ended with a British victory, and the Transvaal and OFS became British colonies.

In 1910, Britain allowed the four colonies of the Transvaal, Cape, Natal, and OFS to form the Union of South Africa, a self-governing country within the British Empire.

During World War I, South Africa fought Germany alongside British forces. From 1914 through the 1930s, a strong rise of Afrikaner (as the Boers now came to be called) nationalism occurred. During World War II, South Africa was again part of the Allied Forces, but there was a strong sentiment to remain neutral, due to sympathies with Germany.

In 1948, the Afrikaner Nationalist Party won the general election, and its *apartheid* program (separation of the races) was instituted. There was strong international opposition to these policies, which suppressed and eventually banned all black opposition parties. In 1961, South Africa left the British Commonwealth and in the ensuing years, economic and other sanctions were continually applied against the country to pressure the government into relaxing or abolishing its apartheid policies. Significant internal unrest was prevalent throughout the country.

In 1994 a breakthrough occurred in the internal negotiations between the Nationalist government and the African Nationalist Congress, the dominant political organization of the black group. In April, an historic election took place, resulting in the peaceful transition of governmental control from the previously white-dominated parties to a fully multiracial legislature. This has had a profound effect on the country, with political, social, and economic ramifications in all walks of life.

Jewish Migration to South Africa

Jewish links to South Africa started with the Portuguese voyages of exploration around the Cape of Good Hope in 1452. Jews participated in these early voyages as map makers, navigators, and sailors. However, the Portuguese were not interested in permanent settlement in the Cape, but sailed around it to access the profitable trading areas of Asia. The first Dutch settlers in 1652 reportedly included two Jews, but they soon converted to Christianity, because the Dutch East Indies Company allowed only Protestant Christians to reside in the Cape.

Although Jewish links to South Africa start quite early in the country's history, legal immigration began only at the beginning of the 19th century when freedom of religion was permitted. About sixteen Jews were among the 1820 British settlers, and more followed soon afterwards. In 1841, Benjamin Norden founded the first Jewish Congregation in Cape Town. Most of the early Jewish settler families were totally assimilated and had little Jewish connections.

By 1880, approximately 4,000 Jews lived in South Africa, and Jewish immigration increased rapidly thereafter as the first large wave of Jewish immigration took place. Significant numbers of Jews began to arrive from Lithuania for various reasons. The Russian pogroms (1881-84) and other catastrophes, such as droughts, floods, deportation, and fires were major factors in the emigration. South Africa offered strong potential for economic success, particularly following the discovery of diamond fields in Kimberley (in 1869) and gold fields in the Transvaal (in 1886).

The South African Census of 1911 enumerated about 47,000 Jews, almost all of whom were from Lithuania.

Jewish immigrants came by ship, most to Cape Town, although a minority entered at Durban, Lourenco Marques (previously Delgoa Bay, now known as Maputo, the capital of Mozambique), and Port Elizabeth. Major waves of migration occurred from 1895 onwards. British shipping agents had subagents in Lithuanian villages who accepted bookings for passage to South Africa. Many Jews embarked initially at the port of Libau on the Baltic Sea and were transported on small cargo boats to England. A smaller number passed through Hamburg or Bremen. Many came first to Grimsby or London and were taken to the Poor Jews' Temporary Shelter in the East End of London, where they were provided board, lodgings, medical services, and travel advice. From November 1902 to November 1903, 3,600 of the 4,500 individuals helped by the Poor Jews' Temporary Shelter went to South Africa, most on the Union Castle Line to Cape Town. Many records of the Shelter clients are available, and a searchable database is available at **www.sansa.uct.ac.za/cgi/cgi_shelter.exe**

As an undeveloped country, South Africa offered economic opportunities to early immigrants far greater than anything they could find in Eastern Europe. The traveling peddler, called a *smous*, became an institution in the country's remote rural areas. Many other Jews settled in small towns as shopkeepers and tradesmen. A number of efficient, entrepreneurial farmers and traders were active pioneers in the hides and skin, wool, ostrich feather, potato, maize, and citrus farming industries.

A second wave of Jewish immigration occurred during the 1920s. The majority of these immigrants were also from Lithuania. The
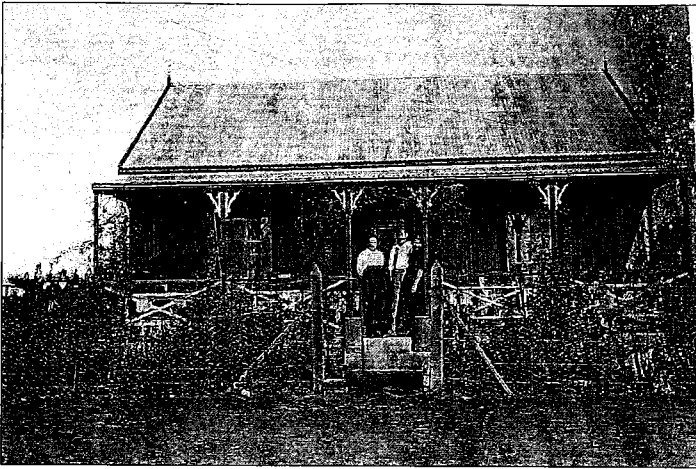
Morris Friedland (c) arrived in South Africa at the time of the Boer War and married an Afrikaaner lady, Elizabeth Schooling (l). His sister Ethel (r) and her husband Elias Abramowitch came in 1920 and lived with the Friedlands in their corrugated tin home in Bethel, Transvaal, South Africa.

deteriorating conditions following World War I and the Russian Revolution, spurred emigration. United States restrictions on immigration, imposed in 1921, diverted many Jews to South Africa who had intended to immigrate to the United States.

In the 1930s, South Africa restricted immigration in general, and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, which was sympathetic to Germany, led to more restrictions on the entry of Jews. In spite of these restrictions, about 8,000 Jews from Germany and central Europe were permitted to enter before World War II began.

From 1970 to 1992, there was a large exodus of Jews from South Africa due to the deteriorating political situation. About 39,000 left, but 10,000 Israelis immigrated to South Africa during the same period. The peak Jewish population was about 120,000, constituting 2.7% of whites. The current population of about 88,000 represents 1.8% of the white population.

Contemporary Jewish Community

The contemporary Jewish community in South Africa has some distinctive characteristics:

- Predominantly of Lithuanian origin, the community is very homogeneous. It is overwhelmingly Ashkenazi with a small Sephardi population in Cape Town.
- A relatively low level of intermarriage and the community is somewhat socially isolated from the general population.
- Relatively affluent and well educated, a high value is placed on education.
- An emphasis on traditional and Zionist ideals, with a very strong support of Israel.
- Typically not directly involved in national politics, Jews were prominent in the anti-apartheid and liberation movements.
- About 80% are part of Orthodox congregations;

however these cover much of the Conservative view as well. There is a small Reform affiliation.

Most Jews lived in Johannesburg or Cape Town. Smaller, significant communities existed in Durban, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth, and East London. More than 1,000 rural towns and small settlements also had a Jewish presence, although most now have a very small or no Jewish presence at all. Today Jews live predominantly in Johannesburg and Cape Town with much smaller communities in Durban, Pretoria, Bloemfontein, and Port Elizabeth. The official central body in the community is the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, which represents all major Jewish organizations and congregations to the government.

Southern African Jewish Genealogy Special Interest Group (SA-SIG)

The JewishGen SA-SIG provides 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, Kenya, and the former Belgian Congo. The SA-SIG maintains a comprehensive set of web pages (**www.jewishgen.org/safrica**) that provide a portal to the SIG's
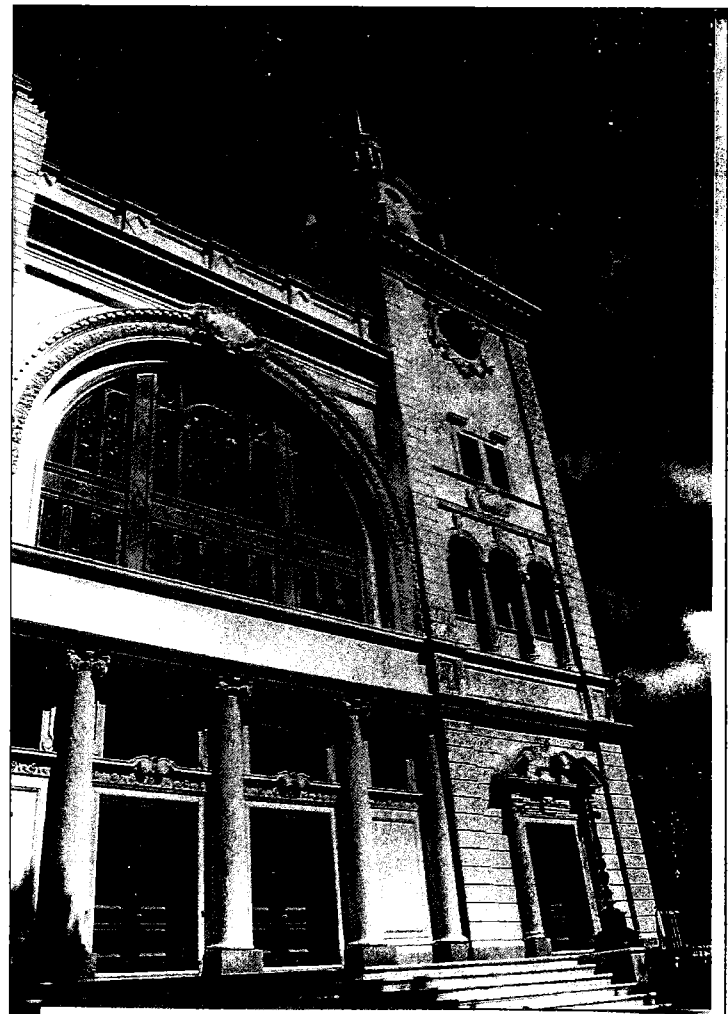
Gardens Synagogue in Cape Town, South Africa.
Photograph from 1999

extensive collection of information about Southern African genealogical research, as well as access to other resources such as South African-related databases and the SA-related microfilms available in the Mormon Family History Library (FHL). A concise compilation of the key South African genealogical resources, together with the relevant contact information, can be found at: **www.jewishgen.org/safrica/conferences/SA-SIG-Resources. pdf** The SA-SIG web pages should be the first point of reference for anyone who is researching South African Jewish genealogy.

Key Sources of Genealogical Information in South Africa

This section contains a summary of those institutions in South Africa that hold the key records of genealogical value. Access to resources cited varies: some may only be accessed by a local visit to the particular institution, while others are available to researchers abroad either directly or by mail. Some institutions are accessible by e-mail, and also make available the catalog of their holdings on the Internet.

South Africa is now organized into nine provinces. Prior to the 1994 elections, however, there were four provinces, which had been in existence since 1910. This prior organization is of greater relevance to genealogical research, since most of the archival documentation has been organized and is stored in relationship to the four provinces: Cape Province, Transvaal, Natal, and the Orange Free State (OFS).

National Archives of South Africa
www.national.archives.gov.za

Before the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, separate archives existed for each of the four colonies. After Union, the colonial archives were transferred to the control of the central government under a State Archives system. The former colonial archives maintained their separate identities as *depots* of the State Archives.

Currently the National Archives head office is located in Pretoria. Archives repositories are located in Pretoria (for Transvaal records), Cape Town (Cape Province records), Durban and Pietermaritzburg (Natal records), Bloemfontein (Free State records), as well as in Port Elizabeth.

The National Automated Archival Information Retrieval System (NAAIRS) serves as a finding aid to assist users of the Archives to identify and locate archival material that is relevant to their requirements. Searching of the NAAIRS database is available on the Internet. Note that NAAIRS contains only information about archival material references and not the texts of the actual documents. Having identified a particular reference of interest, a user would usually arrange to visit the repository concerned to consult the documents, or request further information or copies where such services are available. Some documents have been withdrawn from photocopying due to their fragile condition. In addition, the repository may charge a fee for copying long documents, or recommend that a local researcher be engaged to do so.

Many different types of documents of genealogical interest can be found in the Archives holding, including estate documents, naturalization documents, and legal proceedings. NAAIRS is extremely useful for genealogical searches.

South African Office of the Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths   home-affairs.pwv.gov.za

Copies of vital record certificates (birth, marriage, death) are available from the Office of the Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths in the Department of Home Affairs. This central government office will respond to requests for records by mail. Use of standard forms is suggested when submitting these requests and one should specify that *unabridged* certificates are needed. One needs to supply a relatively accurate date and place of the event for the requested certificate. Note that birth and marriage certificates contain a significant amount of useful genealogical data, but "death notices" (see below) contain more useful information than death certificates.

LDS Family History Library Microfilms
www.jewishgen.org/safrica/mormon-fhc/index.htm

The Mormon Family History Library (FHL) has a surprisingly large number of South African documents on microfilm. More importantly, these microfilms are available at Family History Centers worldwide. Key categories of documentation that are available in the LDS films are:

Estate/Probate Documentation

This documentation includes death notices, wills and liquidation/ distribution accounts. Other documents *may* be found in the estate file, such as antenuptial agreements. The death notice is particularly useful since it may contain information on the deceased's place of birth, parents' names, details of marriages, and the names and birth dates of children or siblings (if the deceased does not have children). The death certificate does not contain most of this information. Available FHL microfilm of the indexes and actual estate documentation includes:

Cape:	Estates	1834 – 1950
	Estate Registers	1950 – 1989
	(only date of death and estate number)	
Transvaal:	Estates	1873 – 1950
Natal:	Estates	1871 – 1950
OFS:	Estates	1853 – 1950

Applications for Naturalization (Cape Colony only)

Available for 1883 - 1911, these documents have a high genealogical value. They include age and birth location, and details of residence both in the Cape Colony and the British Empire, if applicable.

Death Certificates (of limited genealogical value)

Available on FHL films for limited time periods and for selected provinces:

National coverage:	1955 – 1965
Cape Province:	1895 – 1928
Transvaal:	1864 – 1954

A summary of the key documents of interest to those pursuing Jewish genealogical research in South Africa can be found at **www.jewishgen.org/safrica/mormon-fhc/mormon.htm**

South African Master of the Supreme Court Records

The Offices of the Master of the Supreme Court contain estate files for the periods subsequent to those housed in the National Archives repositories. There are six Master's Offices including those in Cape Town and Pretoria. If estate files cannot be found in either the State Archives or the FHL microfilms, they can be obtained from one of the Master's Offices. Documents may only be viewed during a personal visit; requests are not entertained by mail.

Jewish Records

Kaplan Center: The South African Centre for Jewish Migration and Genealogy studies was set up primarily to research the estimated 15,000 core families who migrated to Southern Africa between 1850-1950 mainly from England, Germany, Lithuania, Latvia, and Belarus. The Centre is under the umbrella of the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Institute for Jewish Studies at the University of Cape Town. Their aims are to map the entire history of Jewish migration and settlement in South Africa and to integrate the genealogical data in multi-disciplinary research. Extensive records of Births, Cemeteries, Communities and Congregations, Marriages, Military Records, Naturalizations, Passenger Arrivals and Shipping Manifests have been collected and are incorporated in a searchable master database, the *SA Jewish Rootsbank* (found at **chrysalis.its.uct.ac.za/CGI/cgi_Rootweb.exe**).

South African Jewish Board of Deputies: This organization holds passenger lists documenting Jewish immigrants to South Africa 1924 - 1929. Other holdings include an extensive collection of at least 60 years of newspaper items referring to individual Jews. These are indexed and include obituaries. The South African Jewish Yearbooks of 1928, of 1953/4, and 1961/2, have brief biographies of many well known Jews, including their towns of origin. The library has microfilmed various publications of the South African Jewish press from the turn of the 20th century. A useful potential source of genealogical information are several Yiddish newspapers published in the early 1900s. In the 1920s, the newspapers published on a weekly basis many lists of people in Eastern Europe looking for relatives who had moved to South Africa. The lists are not indexed.

Jewish Burial Records: One of the unifying movements within the South African Jewish community was the development of the *Chevra Kadisha* (burial) societies. These societies not only deal with burials but with general aid to the sick and needy. They exist in all major centers of Jewish population, and records from many of the older societies are held at the Jewish Board of Deputies, and the Kaplan Centre (in Rootsbank). The IAJGS Cemetery project (**www.jewishgen.org/cemetery**) database contains all the records, among others, from the Bloemfontein, Johannesburg, and Pretoria Jewish cemeteries, as well as some records from Cape Town, Bulawayo, and a few other South African cemeteries.

Jewish Genealogical and Historical Societies: Jewish genealogical societies are active in Johannesburg and Cape Town. They do not undertake research on behalf of individual genealogists, but may advise on how to research one's own family. Both societies hold regular meetings, undertake projects and publish newsletters.

Miscellaneous Sources

A number of museums and libraries contain useful information for the Jewish genealogist. The Cory Library for Historical Research (at Rhodes University in Grahamstown) holds extensive materials about the Cape Province, especially the Eastern Cape. Other institutions of interest include the Jewish Pioneers Memorial Museum in Port Elizabeth, the Jewish Museum in Cape Town, and the South African Library in Cape Town.

References

1. As mentioned above, the SA-SIG maintains a comprehensive set of web pages (**www.jewishgen. org/safrica**) containing and extensive collection of information about Southern African genealogical research. A compilation of the major sources of documents can be found at **www.jewishgen.org/ safrica/conferences/SA-SIG-Resources.pdf**

2. An extensive bibliography of publications of interest to those researching Southern Africa can be found at **www.jewishgen.org/SAfrica/bibliography/index. htm**

3. A valuable genealogical reference is R. T. Lombard's *Handbook for Genealogical Research in South Africa*, Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 1990.

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HUMOR

A little girl asked her mother, "How did the human race appear?" The mother answered, "God made Adam and Eve and they had children and so was all mankind made."

Two days later the girl asked her father the same question. The father answered, "Many years ago there were monkeys from which the human race evolved."

The confused girl returned to her mother and said, "Mom, how is it possible that you told me the human race was created by God, and Papa said they developed from monkeys?"

The mother answered, "Well, dear, it is very simple. I told you about my side of the family and your father told you about his."