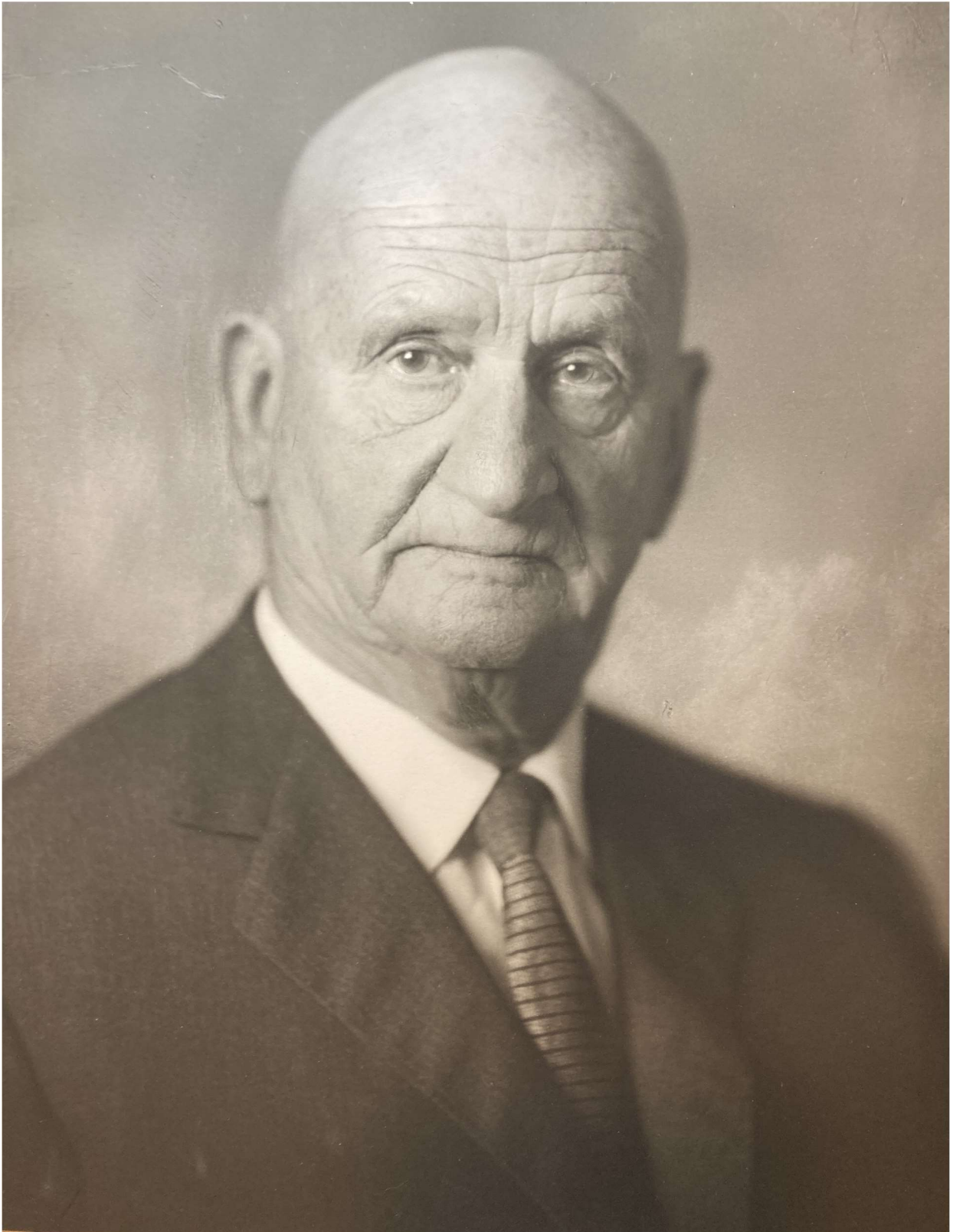


ROBERT DAVID WOLFF
22nd DECEMBER 1890 - 29th JUNE 1983



INTRODUCTION

I was in my early teens when my mother, Ruth, told me that her father, my grandfather, had been born in a small village in East Prussia and had a birth name that was unfamiliar to me, Robert Ludwinowsky. Unfortunately, this was imparted to me at a time when I was far more interested in my friends and 1960s pop music than in hearing tales of the “Old Country” and I don’t remember asking many questions. Still, that piece of information stuck with me until, in retirement, it finally seemed the right time to excavate the details and write down what I know about his life history for you.

EARLY LIFE, EAST PRUSSIA 1890-1893

Imagine, if you will, a sparsely populated landscape in Northern East Prussia (part of the German Empire) of flat lowlands where moose roamed, swampy areas, and forests, crisscrossed with rivers and canals. This area was dotted with small villages, intermingled with farmlands. The area thrived on agriculture and, even more importantly, the export lumber trade. One of the many villages was Gross Friedrichsdorf¹ which, despite its grand name, had a population of only a few hundred people. Very few Jews lived here and there was no synagogue. The nearest town with a sizeable Jewish population was Tilsit², a trading hub about 14 miles away, situated at the Neman River separating East Prussia from the Russian Empire. The means of travel would have been by horse and cart as the area was not connected to the railway. Being a border area, Tilsit (and its surrounding villages like Gross Friedrichsdorf) were sites of active trading and markets.



Map of Central and Eastern Europe around 1890 showing the borders of the German Empire, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Romania and Russian Empire. Near the upper-middle, the blue star indicates the location of Gross Friedrichsdorf near the Russian border.

¹ Gross Friedrichsdorf is now known as Gastellovo in Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia

² Tilsit is known today as Sovetsk in Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia

Robert David Ludwinowsky was born on December 22, 1890, the 5th son born to Therese Sladowsky³ and Jacob Ludwinowsky. Jacob was a successful merchant and the family was financially comfortable. Therese and Jacob had settled in Gross Friedrichsdorf after their marriage⁴ possibly because Therese's elder brother Abraham, a merchant and owner of the village's large timber mill, lived there with his family.



Jacob and Therese Ludwinowsky in Tilsit, date unknown. The photo, mounted on card stock, is thought to be a wedding announcement as the couple both display their rings. Photo: Personal collection, Lorraine Fig Shapiro

In 1892 a 6th son was born to Therese and Jacob. Tragedy struck the same year when within the space of a few weeks, the three eldest boys succumbed to diphtheria⁵ in quick succession and, to make matters infinitely worse, Jacob died suddenly of a “burst appendix” a dangerous and often fatal condition in the pre-antibiotic era.

Therese, at the age of 27 was left a widow with her three surviving younger boys, the eldest being Wilhelm (Willy)⁶ aged 4, Robert, 2, and Herman (known as “Bill”), an infant. It is said (and it does not seem surprising) that Therese had a “nervous breakdown”. Together with her sons, she was taken into brother Abraham's home for rest and recuperation.

Meanwhile, a plan was being hatched for Therese's next phase of life. Two elder sisters (Miriam and Annie) and a younger brother (Robert) were already settled in Oudtshoorn, South Africa, so the family likely thought this would be a logical place to start afresh. Perhaps the most important reason was that a former suitor from Therese's youth, Adolf Wolff, still a bachelor, was also already established in Oudtshoorn. A marriage between the former acquaintances was soon arranged.

³ Therese was born Tauba Sladowsky in 1865 in Wizajny, Poland. Jacob's Hebrew name was Yaakov. He likely was born in the same area.

⁴ Jacob and Therese's marriage date and place are unknown.

⁵ Diphtheria epidemics were relatively common at the time in Germany and there was no definitive treatment.

⁶ Wilhelm was named Wilhelm Ludwig, but later known as William Louis.

Therese and the three little boys, together with Therese's widowed mother, Hannah Sladowsky, emigrated to South Africa, leaving East Prussia a month before Robert's third birthday. Typically, at the time, emigrants from the region boarded a train in Tilsit to the port of Hamburg from where they sailed to the Cape, destined for Oudtshoorn.



An extravagant ostrich feather hat of the late 19th or early 20th Century¹⁰. The ends of the feathers have been curled in the “French style”.

Why had had three of Therese's siblings settled in the small, isolated town of Oudtshoorn? The area would not seem promising as it was a dry and harsh sunbaked landscape hemmed in by two huge mountain ranges and located about 250 miles from Cape Town with no rail connection⁷. The magnet for the many Jews that settled there, beginning in the 1880s, was the financial opportunity of trading in the growing ostrich feather industry. Over time, these beautiful plumes became a fashion craze, a must-have accessory for the elegant woman. Ostrich feathers featured on ladies' hats, boas, and cloaks and were also seen on the stage in music halls and cabaret⁸. From Oudtshoorn feathers were shipped to London where they were sold at public auction to be used mainly by the fashion industries of Europe and America. Back in Oudtshoorn, the ostrich population swelled to one million birds and the feathers soared in value, until ounce for ounce they were more precious than gold⁹

Most Oudtshoorn Jews were involved in the feather trade, directly or indirectly. A few were farmers who raised their own birds, but many were itinerant feather buyers who traveled from farm to farm buying up small lots. Others worked as feather sorters. At the very top of this pyramid were a few feather export merchants, many of whom became extremely wealthy and built extravagant houses called “Feather Palaces”¹¹. Other Jews worked in occupations that supported the feather industry such as shop owners, food suppliers and hoteliers. By 1886, there were about 250 Jews in the Oudtshoorn area. Most retained their traditions (there were two synagogues) leading to the town being known as “The Jerusalem of Africa”¹². The number of Jewish immigrants expanded greatly over the next two decades (to a peak of about 1500 Jews)¹³ as the demand for feathers grew beyond anyone's imagination.

⁷ A rail connection was established in 1902 “Oudtshoorn, Jerusalem of Africa”. Leibl Feldman. University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa ISBN 1 868 14129 2

⁸ “Dreambirds. The strange history of the ostrich in fashion, food and fortune”. Rob Nixon. Picador USA, 1999. ISBN 0-312-24540-8

⁹ “Dreambirds”, Rob Nixon.

¹⁰ <https://blog.americanduchess.com/2012/03/v73-brief-history-of-feathers-on-hats.html>

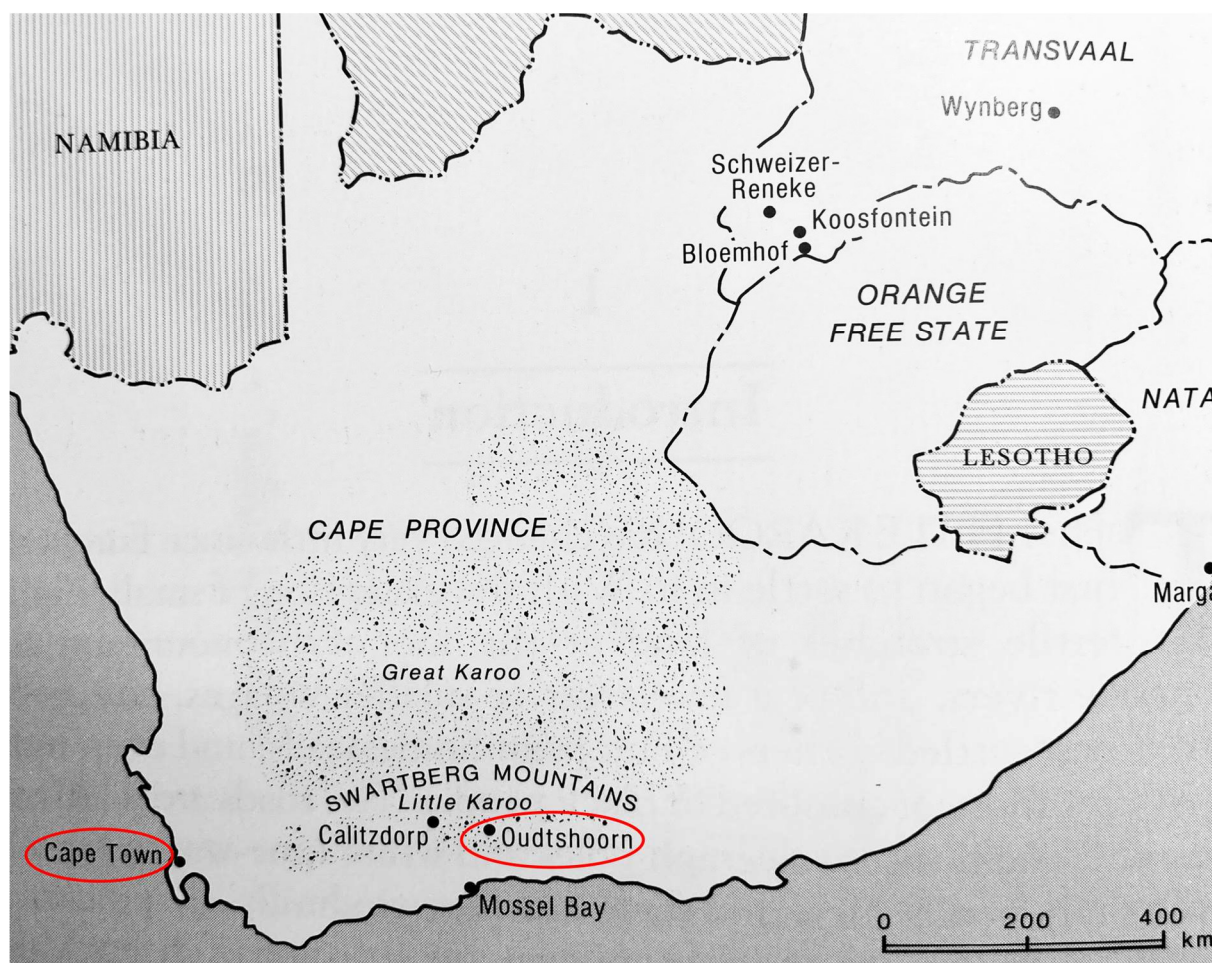
¹¹ One of the most beautiful Feather Palaces was built by Therese's brother, Robert Sladowsky.

¹² “Oudtshoorn, Jerusalem of Africa”. Leibl Feldman

¹³ “Oudtshoorn, Jerusalem of Africa”. Leibl Feldman

THE OUDTSHOORN YEARS 1893 - 1906

Therese and party disembarked in Cape Town where Therese and Adolf were married in The Great Synagogue¹⁴ on the 10th December 1893. They then traveled on to the Oudtshoorn district, probably by boat to Mossel Bay and then over the mountain pass in a horse and cart.



Eight-eight years later, in 1981, Robert was interviewed as part of an oral history project of the University of Cape Town¹⁵. His account was recorded and transcribed at the university. I have quoted his words to shed light on his personal perspective of events. Throughout the document, all statements in italics are Robert's own words from this transcript (sometimes slightly edited for clarity or brevity).

About coming to Oudtshoorn Robert said: *"I came out to South Africa in 1893. My mother's husband died, that's why she came to South Africa. My parents were comfortable – they had a shop and an ostrich farm. They spoke German to each other"*.

¹⁴ The couple was married by Rabbi Abraham Ornstein. The Great Synagogue is also known as "The Gardens Shul". Copy of the marriage certificate in the collection of Lorraine Fig.

¹⁵ Oral History Collection, Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies, University of Cape Town.
<http://www.kaplancentre.uct.ac.za/kaplan/resources/interviews>.



Queen Street, Oudtshoorn, 1899. This was the main street of the town and where the Queen Street Synagogue, and the houses of Adolf Wolff and Robert Sladowsky were located.

Therese's three sons were adopted by her new husband and Robert henceforth became known as Robert David Wolff. It is said¹⁶ that Robert adored Adolf Wolff, though elder brother Willy had difficulty accepting him as his father as he had retained memories of his birth father, Jacob.

In the early days the family lived in Warmwater, a small area of natural springs almost 30 miles from town. There, Adolf and Therese's only child, a son named Eugene was born on 11th March, 1896.

Robert : *"We went to school on the farm. I remember taking Eugene my youngest half-brother - I took him to school when he was about 6 and it was about half to three quarters of a mile walk and he yelled all the way. I stayed in this school until Std 5. All the classes were together in one big room. I studied English and High Dutch. There wasn't Afrikaans at that time."*

The family moved to Oudtshoorn proper, apparently for business reasons and so the boys could get a high school education. *"We stayed in a small house and then moved nearer the synagogue [the Queen Street Synagogue] in a thatched roof house"*. When asked how the youth amused themselves, he said *"We used to play marbles and soccer and we used to run. I played a bit of cricket"*. While attending Oudtshoorn High School, Robert also participated in the Cadets program¹⁷ for 3 years.

¹⁶ Personal communication, Audrey Wolff Levy, Robert's niece and daughter of Eugene Wolff.

¹⁷ This would have consisted of marching practice, marching band and shooting instruction.



The four Wolff brothers, circa 1898/9. From L to R, Robert, Eugene, Willy and Herman (known as Bill). Photo: Personal collection, Lorraine Fig Shapiro

In 1901, Abraham Stusser (the husband of Therese's sister Annie) took out a joint loan with Robert Sladowsky (Therese's brother) and Adolf Wolff and the three brothers-in-law went into partnership in a store, "A. Stusser and Co". This was a large, bustling general store in Oudtshoorn at the corner of High St. and St. John St., selling a wide variety of goods from farm implements to household wares, bedsteads, furniture and bicycles - and everything in between.

Therese and Adolf lived a very comfortable life in those years. In addition to income from the family business and Adolf's farm, Therese and her sons had inherited a considerable sum of money following her late husband's death. Every few years Adolf and Therese traveled to London for business and pleasure, and also visited family still living in East Prussia. Many of the Jews of Oudtshoorn had similarly done very well financially during the heyday of the ostrich feather industry. As Robert said in his interview, probably with a certain amount of exaggeration, "*There were no poor Jews*".

One can imagine an active social life for the family in Oudtshoorn, one that revolved around family events. Both Therese and Adolf had siblings residing locally with their many children of various ages¹⁸. There must have been frequent simchas such as bris ceremonies, bar mitzvahs and weddings.



The wedding of Annie Olinsky and Herman Wolff in 1898 in Oudtshoorn. Robert Wolff (aged 7), a page boy, sits in front wearing an unusual hat. The bride's parents, Jacob Olinsky and Miriam Sladowsky Olinsky, are on the far left. Adolf and Therese Wolff are far right. The groom, Herman Wolff, was Adolf's youngest brother. The other young men are the bride's brothers. Photo: Personal collection, Lorraine Fig Shapiro

Robert: *I went to Cheder [Religious School] and Rev. Woolfson taught us Hebrew. I had a Bar Mitzvah in the Oudtshoorn Shul [in 1903]. My Torah portion was "Vayechi" and I read the whole portion (not just a part), I think that was the first time that happened. Most of our friends were at the party. My mother made the party. We kept kosher".*

¹⁸In total, the Sladowsky family had 30 first cousins in Oudtshoorn. Miriam Sladowsky Olinsky had 11 children, Annie Sladowsky Stusser had 11 children and Robert Sladowsky had 4.

THE MINING ENGINEER 1907 – 1913

Robert finished his schooling in Oudtshoorn at 15. *“I matriculated [Second Class] in 1906 then went to Cape Town for the first 2 years of the mining course. It was a very, very heavy course. It was very difficult, mathematics and physics, chemistry, very difficult”*. When asked why he chose mining engineering, he replied *“I did not know what to do, but there was a friend of mine from Oudtshoorn who was already a qualified mining engineer, and he invited me.”*

In Cape Town, Robert boarded with a religious Jewish family. He attended the University of the Cape of Good Hope (the precursor to the University of Cape Town) for two years (1907-1908). *“I did not [have to] work: my people [family] paid for me.*



Young Robert in his student days – date and location unknown. Photo: Personal collection, Lorraine Fig Shapiro

Robert completed the last two years of the mining course in Johannesburg. *“In 1909 and 1910 I went to the Johannesburg School of Mines for the final two years and in 1910 I was a qualified mining engineer.”* He graduated with a Diploma in Mining from the South African School of Mines and Technology and with a Bachelor of Science in Mining Engineering from the University of the Cape of Good Hope.

Following graduation, Robert worked in a gold mine in the Transvaal. *“I was 2 1/2 years underground after I qualified mining. At first I started as a mine sampler - you take pieces of rock and find out the value of the gold - and then I was an assistant surveyor for about 6 months and then I went into ordinary mining, blasting and breaking of the rock and then I became a ship boss in charge of that section. I started at 8 pounds per month and when I was a ship boss my salary was 45 pounds a month”*.

“I remember the one thing that broke [me] was Yom Kippur - I went underground on a Yom Kippur and my mine captain was a Jew. He came to the mine-head in a top hat and frock coat, he just saw the men go underground and then he went to shul, but I had to go underground.”

“And then my Uncle Sladowsky [Robert Sladowsky, Therese’s brother] he said to me once when I came home - Why do you want to work underground in that muck and that dirt, go and do something else and he persuaded me to take up dentistry, and while I was doing dentistry at the same time I did medicine. I went to England.”

Robert left South Africa in 1913, unaware of the impending collapse of Oudtshoorn’s ostrich feather industry which was to play a life-changing role in his family’s history. At that point, his family was thriving to such an extent that they were able to live comfortably, travel often, and educate three sons abroad. He would not have been able to predict that around the time of his departure for London, the ostrich feather boom was starting to reach its apex. Ostrich plumes were being sold for as much as £500 per pound (a staggering \$75,000 in today’s currency) and there appeared to be no end in sight to the enormous success of the feather market.

DENTAL AND MEDICAL STUDIES, LONDON 1913 - 1922

Younger brother Bill had been the first son to study in London where he attended the Royal Dental School in Leicester Square. *“In those days there was no other real dental school except the Royal Dental”*. Eugene would also attend Medical School in London. Willy had gone into the family business in Oudtshoorn. *“My one brother, the eldest was in business with Stusser and Co.”*

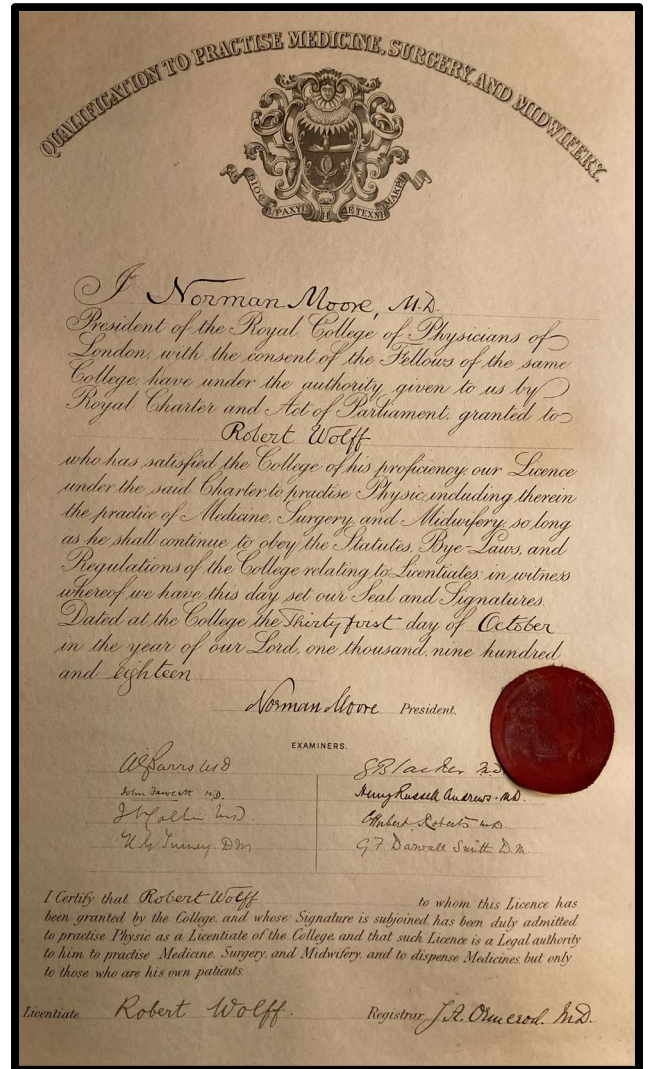
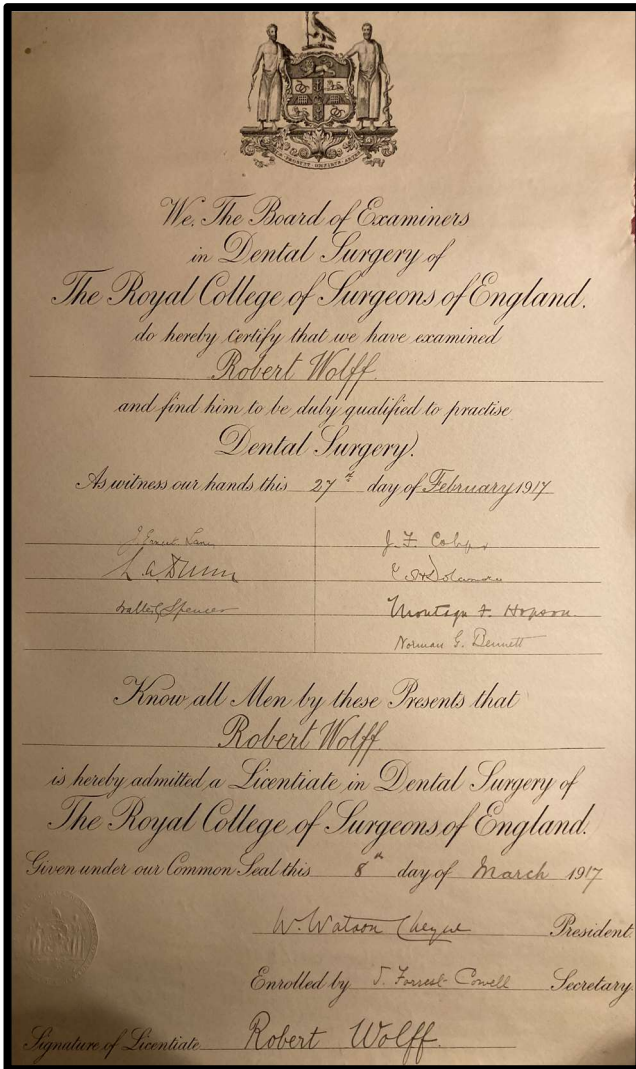
Robert began his studies at the Royal Dental School in 1913 and was an excellent student, awarded along the way with certificates of honour and prizes in dental anaesthetics, anatomy, bacteriology, mechanics, histology, metallurgy, histology and surgery.



Robert with his fellow dental or medical students in London. Photo: Personal collection, Lorraine Fig Shapiro

“I was in England during the First World War”. When war broke out in 1914, the Aliens Restriction Act in Great Britain required foreign nationals (aliens) to register with the police, and potentially be interned or deported. This act was chiefly aimed at protecting Britain from Germans, a problem for Robert because he had been born in East Prussia (German Empire) and had not been naturalized as a South African. He was interned as an enemy alien and was forced to slop out the lavatories. *“I was in Olympia [an internment camp] for six weeks. I was actually in jail too for a matter of days or weeks”*, following which he was allowed to return to his studies but had to report to Bow Street police station each week for the length of the war.

Robert qualified as a dental surgeon from The Royal College of Surgeons, Dental Surgery in 1917 and proceeded to the Middlesex Hospital for his required extra year of medical training. He obtained his qualification to practice medicine, surgery and midwifery in 1918, and followed this with post-graduate surgical training. *“I was studying medicine in London at the Middlesex Hospital and then I was made a house surgeon to Mr. Summerville Hastings who was the Ear, Nose and Throat surgeon and he trained me very well”*.



Robert Wolff’s certificates to practice Dentistry (left) dated 1917 and Medicine, Surgery and Midwifery (right) dated 1918. Certificates: Personal Collection, Lorraine Fig Shapiro

During his student days, Robert lived with the Rev. John and Annie Chapman who owned a large boarding house catering to Jewish students from all over the world. John Chapman had been ordained as an Orthodox Rabbi and had been a prominent Jewish educator.¹⁹ It was here that he met his wife-to be. “I stayed with my late wife’s parents. He was a Jewish minister, a reverend trained in the Jews’ College and he used to make wonderful after-dinner speeches, really wonderful. I met my wife when I was staying with them. The eldest sister Lucy ran the house”. Bill also lived with the Chapmans while he was a dental student.²⁰

Robert’s future wife was Jessie Marie Chapman, born April 17th, 1882, at the Great Ealing School, London where her father was Headmaster²¹. At the time, the family lived within the school premises.

¹⁹ The Palgrave Dictionary of Anglo-Jewish History ed. W. Rubenstein, Michael A Jolles. 2011. ISBN 978-1-4039-3910-4

²⁰ The house was located at 368 Finchley Road, London NW3. The 1911 Census of England shows Herman (Bill) Wolff listed as a resident along with 15 boarders from 9 different countries

²¹ Jessie was the 4th of five children, 4 daughters and one son.



The Chapman boarding house at 368 Finchley Rd, London NW3 with some of their boarders and possibly the Chapman daughters at the upper windows. Photo: Personal collection Lorraine Fig Shapiro

The feather crash was sudden and catastrophic, bringing financial ruin for many families. At the end of WWI there was a minor resurgence in the feather trade but the days of abundance were over and the population of Oudtshoorn started to disperse to seek work elsewhere. By 2017, only about 10 Jewish families remained in Oudtshoorn, from the peak of 600 families (about 1500 people) in 1914.

²² Personal communication, Audrey Wolff Levy, Robert's niece and daughter of Eugene Wolff.

Not much is known of Jessie's youth in London. She grew up at the school and later lived at the family's boarding house. Robert said of her *"My wife was in a dress firm; she was a sort of bookkeeper there. She was well educated."* At some point during Robert's residence at the house he and Jessie began "courting". It is said²² that Jessie was a very determined person and had set her sights on Robert, eight years her junior. "Jessie said she would jump out the window if Robert did not marry her. When he proposed to Jessie he was as white as a sheet". Evidently, the couple planned to settle in London where Robert would practice medicine and further his post-graduate surgical studies. Robert duly proposed to Jessie and was accepted.

Their bright future together in London took an unexpected twist with the collapse of the Oudtshoorn feather trade during Robert's years of study in London. In 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, the demand for ostrich feathers plummeted. The change in ladies' fashion because feather hats were impractical for open motor cars was thought to be the most important factor and the expense of the chapeaus was certainly not compatible with war austerity.

BACK TO THE CAPE 1922-1953

"I came back in 1922 because my younger brother [Bill] had a serious illness²³ and he couldn't work for six months. I came over and took his practice." Robert had to give up completing his surgical studies. He had planned to study for the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons but returned urgently to Cape Town where he was needed provide income for his financially ruined family following the feather industry collapse. Up to this point, Bill's dental practice had been the sole source of the family's income so Robert's return to take it over was likely the only viable financial alternative. Willie's business in Oudtshoorn was failing following the crash. Adolf had died suddenly in London in 1915 (he collapsed in the road outside the Chapmans' boarding house) and Therese had poured the remainder of her two inheritances into the family business in a vain attempt to save it. Ultimately, all the money was lost and Therese would thereafter be financially dependent upon her sons.



**Robert and Jessie on their wedding day, 28th June, 1923.
Photo: Personal collection Lorraine Fig Shapiro**

Heeding the call, Robert departed by ship from Southampton²⁴ bound for Cape Town. *"Then I kept his dentistry practice going till he got well again. I lived in a private hotel right at the top of Buitekant Street."* Jessie traveled alone to follow Robert to the Cape about 8 months later,²⁵. The couple was married on 28th June, 1923 in the Great Synagogue, Cape Town. Robert was 32 and Jessie 41 years old at the time of their marriage.

Robert and Jessie lived at first in a house on the High Level Road²⁶. *"After we got married we lived in a rented house. It was big enough for two, you know My wife was frum. On Friday night we had kiddush and benched after the meal. We ate kosher. We went to the kosher butcher"*. Shortly after the marriage, Therese left Oudtshoorn and came to live with Jessie and Robert. *"The feather industry died and the Jews left"*. The family was still living in the rented house when, on May 27, 1924, their only daughter, Ruth Anne, was born.

²³ His serious illness was thought to be undulating fever, perhaps contracted while he was serving in WWI in East Africa.

²⁴ Robert departed on September 9th, 1922, on the Windsor Castle.

²⁵ Jessie traveled on the Arundel Castle, departing on 26th May, 1923.

²⁶ The address was 4 Craigneuth Villas, Three Anchor Bay.



Robert and Jessie with new baby, Ruth Anne 71/2 weeks.

After Herman was able to return to his dental practice, Robert worked briefly as a General Practitioner “*it wasn’t very long, 6 months or a year*”. Concurrently, he was appointed a Senior Lecturer in Anatomy and Assistant Surgeon at Groote Schuur Hospital and obtained a Diploma in Public Health at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 1925. From 1925 until 1953 he ran a solo private practice as an Ear, Nose and Throat surgeon, a long career broken only by the five years he spent in the army. “*My rooms were in the centre of Cape Town*”. My patients were “*all sorts: Jewish, Coloureds, Afrikaners, Germans, Immigrants. I could speak all the languages. In those days my fee for a consultation was two guineas and if they couldn’t afford it, I didn’t worry. I never, never turned anybody off because they couldn’t pay*”. (His daughter Ruth, who for a time assisted him in his practice, confirmed that he frequently reduced fees or provided free care, observing “that’s why he made very little money”). He also saw patients confined to the leper colony on Robben Island²⁷. Robert must have had a busy ENT practice in the late 1940s and 1950s as tonsillectomy had become an extremely common, almost routine, childhood operation. Throughout my life in Cape Town, people would tell me “your grandfather took out my tonsils”. In fact, he took mine out, too!

With Ruth growing up, Robert found land at 61 Roos Rd, high up on Signal Hill on which to build a house²⁸. He built an upper flat (occupied by the family) and a lower flat which was rented out. Later he would build 2 houses, one on either side of the main house, each with 2 flats. Robert had also bought the steeply sloping undeveloped land behind his houses. Using the mining license that he had kept active since his days underground, he blasted a series of terraces into the mountainside that he turned into gardens, growing fruit and vegetables for the house, as well as flowers. Steep rough stone and cement stairways ended at a blasted-out fenced area housing chickens and ducks, complete with a duck pond.

Robert and Jessie worked in the garden, shared a love of music and a great passion for dogs. There is rarely a photo of them at home that doesn’t include at least one dog. However, by several contemporaneous accounts²⁹, Robert and Jessie’s marriage did not turn out to be a happy one. Jessie did not adjust well to living in Cape Town and found it difficult to integrate into the local Jewish social life. She very much missed her siblings in England and took frequent extended trips to see them, often staying away for months at a time. According to Ruth³⁰, Jessie was a neglectful mother and was not a good housekeeper. She told me that Jessie did not bathe her, wash her hair or give her much attention. This was all left to Robert to do and apparently there was a fair amount of frustration on his side. On the plus side it’s said³¹ that Jessie was a kind person who was very good to her mother-in-law, Therese³².

²⁷ The leper colony existed on Robben Island 1846-1931. It later became an infamous prison for political prisoners.

²⁸ The address was later renamed as 117 Ocean View Drive.

²⁹ Personal communication including Jack Wolff, Robert’s nephew who was Willy’s elder son.

³⁰ Told to me when Ruth was visiting, in the early 1990s.

³¹ Personal communication Audrey Wolff Levy.

³² Therese Sladowsky Wolff died of heart failure in 1941 at 76 years of age.



Left Painting - The house at 61 Roos Road, later called 117 Ocean View Drive.

Right: Coloured photograph - Robert and Ruth (with the omnipresent dogs) on one of the terraces that Robert had blasted from the mountainside.

Robert was a keen and strong swimmer and swam every day. *“I was in practice in Dumbarton House and every lunch hour we used to go swimming at the pier, and I used to swim a good distance and come back, and I did that twelve years, I never missed a day summer and winter except New Year and Yom Kippur”* He was a member of the Royal Life Saving Society and was well known as a life saver at Clifton beach where he assisted several times in saving the lives of swimmers who were in difficulties in the cold Atlantic Ocean.



Left: Certification from The Royal Life Saving Society. Right: Robert with his fellow life savers.

With the outbreak of World War II Robert volunteered for service³³. Since 1927 he had served as Lieutenant and later Captain in the Officer Reserve, Union Defense Forces, but from January 1941 to August 1945 joined the Medical Corps of the South African Defense Force, being promoted to Major in 1942. He was posted to various military hospitals in Pietermaritzburg (Oribi Hospital), Durban and Wynberg Military Hospital and was awarded The War Medal -1939/45 and the Africa Service Medal³⁴. He returned to his private ENT practice after the end of the war.



Major Robert Wolff, circa 1942, at 117 Ocean View Drive and in a studio portrait.

Family life events occurred during the war and in the post-war years. Therese had died at home of heart failure in 1941, aged 76 years.



In 1947 Ruth married Norman Fig. After living briefly in Muizenberg they moved to the top flat at 119 Ocean View Drive (next door to Robert and Jessie; the building was a wedding gift from Robert). This was my first home when I was born in 1949.

Jessie had been diagnosed with breast cancer around 1946. After she died at 71 yrs on 24th June 1953, Robert made the momentous decision to move to Israel. It seems there were no obstacles to his plan as, by now, Ruth and Norman were well settled with two children and had bought a house in Bantry Bay, Cape Town. (Anton was born on the day of the move to the new house in 1952).

Robert Wolff becomes a grandfather (aka “Gamp”). With Lorraine in 1950

³³ His intake physical exam states Hair greyish black, Eyes Brown, Height 5ft 7in, Weight 164 lb, Vision and Hearing good, No signs of disease and pronounced “Fit”.

³⁴ He was also appointed Associate Serving Brother in the Venerable Order of St. John of Jerusalem, a charitable organization that, in part, delivers its activities through ambulance services.

A LECTURESHIP IN ISRAEL AND STUDIES IN SCOTLAND 1954-1962

In 1954 Robert retired from his clinical practice in Cape Town. The practice was sold and he departed for Jerusalem to lecture in anatomy at Hadassah Medical School of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem where he would remain intermittently for 9 years. As reported in The Zionist Record³⁵ “Last year, the Hebrew University and Hadassah Medical School extended invitations as lecturers and visiting chiefs to two outstanding medical personalities Dr. Robert Wolff and Dr. Norman Sapeika, who are both former “Oudtshoorn boys”. Robert was clearly appreciated by his students and there are many photos of him in Israel taken with students, colleagues and friends on social occasions. A special friend was Mrs. Klein and her daughter, survivors of Auschwitz. When Robert left Israel, his former students presented him with a Jewish National Fund Golden Book Certificate inscribed “In sincere appreciation and profound gratitude for the knowledge and wisdom imparted to them with so much affection and devotion”.



Robert in the Anatomy department at Hadassah Hospital, dissecting a specimen.

Towards the end of his stay in Israel, Robert decided to fulfil his long-held ambition of obtaining the qualification as a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. He made several visits to Edinburgh, Scotland to complete the necessary course work. He sat and passed the qualifying examination at the age of 69, possibly the oldest man (at that time) ever to have achieved this. His telegram to Ruth on learning about his success in the examination contained only 2 words: “PASSED. DAD”. After close to 40 years, Robert had finally completed what had been interrupted in 1922 when he had been required to urgently return to Cape Town.

³⁵ August 10, 1956. Published by the South African Zionist Federation.