

Newsletter

Jewish Genealogy – Southern African Special Interest Group
Volume 3, Issue 2 –March 2003

Table of Contents

<i>President's Message</i>	1
<i>Editorial</i>	2
<i>SA-SIG Clearinghouse</i>	3
<i>History of the Bloemfontein Jewish Community</i>	5
<i>The Private Reminiscences of Lionel Hart – Part 2</i>	10
<i>Jewish Pioneers of Northern Rhodesia: Oral History of Gersh family</i>	13
<i>Book Review: "Haven in Africa," by Frank Shapiro</i>	18

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dr. Saul Issroff

The year 2003 has already seen much activity in the Southern African SIG. The first meeting of the UK branch of the SA-SIG was launched with an informative and amusing talk by Prof. Joseph Sherman titled "The Litvak Diaspora – South Africa as a case study". About 100 people attended this meeting, many of whom were new to the activities of the JGSGB.

For those who wish to read more about this topic, Prof. Sherman advises that his most recent piece (which appears in a book of particular interest to ex-South Africans), describes the destruction of the Yiddish language in South Africa. This article can be found in the following book:

- Shain, M. and Mendelsohn, R. (eds.): *Memories, Realities and Dreams: Aspects of the South African Jewish Experience*. (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2002)

In addition, the introductory chapter of the following book has an outline of much of what Prof. Joseph covered in his presentation.

- Sherman, Joseph (editor and translator): *From A Land far Off: South African Yiddish Stories in English Translation*. Foreword by Dan Jacobson. (Cape Town: Jewish Publications, 1987)

Copies are also still available directly from the publishers (the contact person is Janine Blumberg (Janine@humanities.uct.ac.za), or from the Jewishgen Mall at <http://www.jewishgenmall.org/>

Some upcoming events of interest should be noted:

- A workshop on researching Southern African Genealogy will be held at Finchley Synagogue, Kinloss Gardens, London, on Sunday, 22 June 2003, at 2.30 pm.
- A number of SA-SIG events will be held at the upcoming 2003 IAJGS International Symposium on Jewish Genealogy, to be held in Washington, DC, from July 20 – 25, 2003, at the Marriott Hotel. At the Symposium, Roy Ogus and Mike Getz will hold a SA-SIG meeting and Workshop, Ann Rabinowitz will present a talk titled, “Researching SA Genealogy on the Internet”, and a SA-SIG luncheon will be held on Wednesday, July 23. Any good ideas for a guest speaker for the luncheon are welcomed, otherwise the speaker just may have to be me!

Full details of the Washington Conference can be found at:
<http://www.jewishgen.org/dc2003/>

For further information about the SA-SIG Newsletter and Discussion group (now having around 300 members), see: <http://www.jewishgen.org/Safrica/>

Thanks for your participation in the past, and I look forward to your continued support!

Saul Issroff

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EDITORIAL

Roy Ogus

I am pleased to have been given the opportunity to be the Guest Editor for this issue of the SA-SIG Newsletter. As has been the case with the previous Newsletters, this issue is again packed full of a collection of most interesting articles and materials.

An article describing the history of the Bloemfontein Jewish Community is written by Dr. Sheila Aronstam, and is based on her presentation at the opening of the Joseph and Fanny Hodes Archives in Bloemfontein in 2000. The article traces the evolution of the community since the early 1800's to the present day.

The second part of the reflections of Lionel Hart in his Memoirs can be found in this issue, continuing from the first installment that was part of the last Newsletter. Again, we wish to thank Stan Hart for providing this material to us.

Finally, we include a very interesting account of one of the pioneer families of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), in the form of a transcription of the oral histories of two brothers, Maurice and Harry Gersh, who came to Northern Rhodesia around 1923 to work and find their fortunes. Their stories paint a fascinating picture of the country during that time period. Thanks go to Frank Shapiro for his transcriptions of these oral accounts, and for making available the material to us for inclusion in this issue.

I hope that you will enjoy reading these main articles, as well as the rest of this Newsletter.

Another recent event of interest to the SA-SIG community deserves note. On February 19, 2003, the South African Friends of Beth Hatefutsoth launched the first in a series of regional books, based on their research into the Jewish communities that lived in the small towns of South Africa (the “dorps”). (Much more has been written about the communities in the larger cities, but this research is the first to concentrate on the smaller communities.) The aim of this research has been to compile a permanent record of the Jewish communities that lived in the “dorps” of South Africa. The first volume covers the Jewish settlements in the Lowveld, the Bushveld, the northern Highveld, and the northern Great Escarpment. In the future, a total of five volumes are planned to cover the stories of the communities in over 1000 dorps.

On the same date, the Friends of Beth Hatefutsoth also launched the prototype of their Web site. At this stage, the Web site contains the basic information about the project and covers just two of the communities – Marble Hall and Lydenburg. However, it is planned that the Web-site will eventually describe many more dorps in the future. The web site can be found at the following address: <http://www.jewishdorps.org>

We continue to encourage you to send us your feedback on the Newsletter. The more feedback we receive, the easier we can make the Newsletter more interesting to our readers.

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.

I hope that you enjoy this issue. I’d also like to take this opportunity to wish you all a Happy Passover.

Roy Ogus
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SA-SIG CLEARINGHOUSE - *Input needed*

Roy Ogus

We all know that many of us researching our family histories in Southern Africa possess various documents, information, and other artifacts relating to our own research that may be useful to others who are also researching their family connections in this area.

It was agreed at the meeting of the SA-SIG at the 2000 International Jewish Genealogy Symposium in Salt Lake City, that it would be useful to create a clearinghouse of this information, and provide this resource to the SA-SIG research community.

The SA-SIG Clearinghouse will contain references to the various items with enough information to allow researchers to determine whether the actual item may be of interest to them. The Clearinghouse will also provide contact information (e.g. an e-mail or other address) to the person who owns the particular item of interest.

I am now in the process of creating this clearinghouse of information, which, when completed, will be accessible on the Web pages of the SA-SIG on the JewishGen Web site. Note that the Clearinghouse is initially planned to contain only the *references* to the various artifacts of interest, and not embody the actual information from the references themselves. It is hoped in the

future that some consolidation of this information may be possible in an on-line database, but the latter project is out of the scope of the present Clearinghouse activity.

I am soliciting your help to make this Clearinghouse as comprehensive and complete as possible. I would appreciate your sending me information about any items that you possess which you think could be of possible interest to other researchers. Examples of such items are books, documents, articles, photographs, passenger lists, city directory information, etc.

Once again, I'm not asking that you necessarily send me copies of these actual items (unless you wish to), but rather I would like just a short description of the artifact that you own.

I will compile and organize these descriptions and make this information available via the SA-SIG web page.

For each item, please provide as much of the following information as you can:

- Type of artifact, such as book, document, article, photograph, passenger list, city directory information, etc.
- A short description of the item
- Places mentioned or referred to in the artifact (towns, etc.)
- The approximate time period that the item covers
- Any surnames mentioned in the item
- Anything else about the item that you think would be interesting to your fellow researchers
- The method by which you would prefer to be contacted, if others were interested in learning more about your item (e.g. e-mail address, regular mail address, etc.)

Some examples of submissions to date are as follows:

1. Article on the Jewish Community of King Williams Town, Cape Province, dated 1984.
2. Photograph of the residents of the Cape Town Jewish Orphanage, 1920's or 1930's.
3. Passenger list which documents the names of people sailing on the ship "Usaramo", from Hamburg to South West Africa and South Africa in October 1931.
4. Article on the history of the "Silver Aerated Water Factory", a soft-drink factory that was established in Stellenbosch in 1902.
5. Article from the SA Jewish Times (dated 1948) on the "Story of South African Jewry".
6. Partial extracts from Middledrift and King Williams Town (Cape Province) residents directories during the period 1922 - 1930.

Thanks for your help. I look forward to your inputs. I hope that this compilation of information will be useful to all of us in our research.

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HISTORY OF THE BLOEMFONTEIN JEWISH COMMUNITY

(This article is based on the address given by Dr Sheila Aronstam at the opening of the Joseph and Fanny Hodes Archives in Bloemfontein on 25th March 2000, using material taken from her doctoral thesis.)

The Jewish Community of Bloemfontein started with the arrival of one man – Isaac Baumann – born in Germany in 1813. He migrated to South Africa to join his school friend, Mosenthal, in Graaff Reinet. Isaac first saw the Free State in 1845, when he went up on a shooting trip. The grass veld and the abundance of game impressed him.

In 1848 after the battle of Boomplaats and the establishment of the Orange River Sovereignty, Isaac crossed the Orange River and pitched his tent at a spot known as Bloemfontein.

Karel Schoemann, in his book, says the town owes its name to a man, Jan Bloem, a farmer who settled by the strong and never-failing fountain and stream. This was to be part of the town's water supply.

In 1849 the town was divided into erven and at the first sale of land, Baumann bought all the ground between Church and Charles Streets, Westburger and Maitland Streets.

In 1852 he went back to Germany to marry his 18-year-old bride, Caroline Allenberg and returned the same year to establish the first Jewish family in Bloemfontein. Baumann established himself as the first civilian trader and brought out his brothers, Jacob and Louis, and together they formed "Baumann Bros."

The Baumanns had 10 children; some of them played a notable role in Bloemfontein's development. Gustav became a land surveyor – he laid out President Brand Street. Alfred became the first eye specialist in the Free State. Herbert and Otto fought at Magersfontein for the Boers.

On the death of his infant son, Louis, in 1871, Baumann purchased a plot of ground next to the Christian Cemetery surrounded it by a railing and it was to serve as the first Jewish Cemetery for the whole of the Free State for years to come. It was also in 1871 that the first Yom Kippur service was held in the Baumann home, but there were still not sufficient Jews to establish a Jewish Community.

In 1874, Bertha, their eldest daughter, married Henry Adlar of Winburg. Because she was the first Bloemfontein girl to get married, a half-holiday was proclaimed. The town was decorated with flags, and all members of the *Raad* attended. Rev. Samuel Rapoport of Port Elizabeth officiated at the ceremony.

It was in 1877 that Rev. Rapoport again officiated at the marriage of Sophie Baumann to Moritz Levisieur and three years later officiated at the marriage of Helen Baumann to Wolff Ehrlich. Rev. Rapoport travelled up six times to circumcise the four Levisieur sons and two sons of the Ehrlichs.

Moritz Levisieur was a remarkable man and his two great projects were the first hospital in Bloemfontein and the National Museum. He and Sophie were highly respected members of the larger community.

After 1870 a number of Jews were attracted to the town. We read of Mr. M. L. Pincus who settled here and was the first Chairman of the Bloemfontein Club. The first dentist to arrive in Bloemfontein – Ernest Moses, followed him. Mr Moses was to become the first President of the Hebrew Congregation.

In the first census of 1880, there were only 28 Jews in Bloemfontein out of a total of 1600 Europeans. One of the outstanding public figures of Bloemfontein Jewry was Mr Wolf Ehrlich. Born in Germany, he settled in Bloemfontein in 1897. He founded the Chamber of Commerce; he was a Member of Parliament in the Orange River Colony, and in 1921, elected as Senator. He was a life-long friend of General Herzog; he was mayor of Bloemfontein for two terms. He helped establish the South African Jewish Board of Deputies at the National Conference held in Bloemfontein in 1912 where he succeeded in amalgamating the Cape Town and Johannesburg Jewish Board of Deputies. He was President of the Bloemfontein Congregation from 1902 until his death in 1924.

Yet another member of the Baumann/Leviser/Ehrlich families who added his name to the annals of Bloemfontein Jewry was Ivan Haarburger, a nephew of Moritz Leviser. He arrived at the age of 17 years and worked for Messrs Deale and Borckenhagen in the music store and purchased the business on their demise. He was a talented violinist, pianist and conductor. He was Consul for the Belgian Government, and Mayor from 1912- 1914, President of the Chamber of Commerce and President of the Hebrew Congregation.

These early German-Jewish settlers laid the foundation for a Jewish Community in Bloemfontein, but it is doubtful whether this small Congregation would have continued because of the general assimilation of these Jews with the non-Jewish population, largely due to the scarcity of Jewish girls, whom they could marry.

What then prevented the Congregation from disappearing? The answer came with the arrival in the 1880's of a new stream of immigrants from Eastern Europe, fleeing the pogroms and persecution. The majority came from the province of Kovno, Grodno and Vilna in Lithuania. It is estimated the between 1881 and 1914, three million Jews fled from Eastern Europe. In Bloemfontein leadership of the community was to remain in the hands of the German-Jewish settlers from 1900 – 1933, but the community would not have prospered if not for the arrival of these Eastern European immigrants.

It is not possible to make mention of all the settlers who arrived and made their mark in the town, but there were some interesting characters, namely, Barnett Levy, who built the Masonic Hotel and served on the City Council; Woolf Lewis and Joseph Friedman, who were Produce Merchants; Fred Shtein who established the firm F. Shtein and Co.; G. Hailparn who opened a jewelry business. In 1900, Louis Shapiro founded Shapiro's, a tobacconist firm. J. H. Levy owned the only mineral waterworks in the town. Another gentleman who left his mark on the town was Lionel Nathan, who was proprietor in turn, of the Masonic, Royal, Queens and Cecil Hotels. By 1890, the census showed that there were 41 Jews living in Bloemfontein.

Up to now, there had not been an organised religious community, and services were held in private homes. In 1893, the Bloemfontein Congregation was established as a recognised Jewish Community. Ernest Moses was the first President and the Rev. Urdang was the first Minister of the newly-founded Congregation, to be followed by Rev. M. L. Cohen in 1896. The following

year, New Year Services were held in the Town Hall and Mr B. Levy became the second President of the Congregation.

In 1899, Rabbi Dr J. H. Hertz, Chief Rabbi of the Transvaal, visited Bloemfontein and the erection of a Synagogue was mooted. The Town Council was approached and a plot of land for a Synagogue was granted on the corner of Zastron and East Burger Streets but the Anglo-Boer war broke out and the building was deferred.

At the time of the Boer War, the Jewish population in the town rose to 150 people – largely due to the contingent of British soldiers stationed in Bloemfontein.

With the war almost at the end, the thoughts of the young Jewish Community turned once again to the building of the synagogue. On 2nd February 1902, Chief Rabbi Hertz visited the community again and two important decisions were taken. Firstly, to appoint a minister to act as preacher, teacher and *mohel*. Secondly, to appoint a building committee to collect funds and starts building as soon as possible. On 7th May 1903 the foundation stone was laid in the presence of a large gathering of Jewish and non-Jewish members of the town, including the Chief Justice, Maasdorp. In the same year, Rev Cohen was appointed as the *Shochet*, and Kosher meat was available for the first time. He was also instructed to start Hebrew classes for the children and the local press announced the opening of a school to be known as the *Talmud Torah*.

The synagogue, the first in the Orange Free State, was officially opened on 20 April 1904, amidst much pomp and ceremony by the President of the Community, Wolff Ehrlich. Mrs Elsa Levisieur sang a solo; Mr Haarburger gave a violin solo and Rabbi Dr Hertz addressed the gathering.

At the turn of the 20th century, congregants looked to establishing various communal institutions. One must remember that most of the immigrants had come to South Africa from countries with deeply rooted communal organisations. In 1902 the first Institution to be established was the Jewish Helping Hand and Burial Society – a truly unique organisation combining its burial duties with charitable services. As early as May 1900, the Zionist Society was established, and by 1904 had a membership of 164 people. A year later, the Ladies' Zionist Society was formed. The next important Jewish organisation to be established was the Jewish Women's Benevolent Society in 1903. Its first President was Mrs Sophie Levisieur.

It was also in the same year that the Sick Benefit and Loan Society – the *Gemilut Chesed* – came into being.

In 1904 the census figures showed a total of 1616 Jews in the Orange River Colony, of whom 716 resided in Bloemfontein – 519 males and 197 females.

The community was now ready to appoint a Spiritual Leader. An advert was placed in the London Jewish Chronicle and the successful candidate was the Rev. Zachariah Lawrence. He arrived in Bloemfontein on 24th November 1904 and over 300 members of the community met him at the railway station and took him to the home of Councillor B. Levy for a welcoming party. It was due to the efforts of Rev. Lawrence that a sub-committee was established for Hebrew Education. A schoolroom was hired in Elizabeth Street, and in 1905, for the first time in front of a large crowd of parents and members, children were awarded prizes for the Hebrew

examinations. It was also at the stage, that permission was granted by the Department of Education for classes in Hebrew to be held at Grey College and Eunice High School. This association with both schools lasted 40 years until 1945, when it was discontinued.

The distinguished Hebrew teaching staff over the years included Rev. Z Lawrence (1943); Mr Yechiel Blesowsky; Mr E. (Topsy) Levitt; Mr Morris Wolozinsky; Mr M. Sifman; Mr and Mrs Yehuda and Adele Trakman; Mr and Mrs David and Chagit Gorodetsky; Mr and Mrs Gabi and Sara Bitton; Rabbi and Mrs D. Maizels, and Mrs Henia Bryer who taught for 42 years until her retirement in 2000. Mrs Rina Paz is the current Hebrew teacher for 8 pupils.

As the community continued to grow, the necessity for a communal centre became more pressing. The City Council was approached to buy the erven next to the Synagogue for a hall and *Cheder*. In 1918 there were 111 paid-up members, and in that year the foundation stone was laid and in the same year Councillor Sol Harris, a leading member of the community and Mayor of the City opened the hall.

In the decade 1920-1930, the Community entered into a period of growth and communal activity. On the 7th January 1923 the congregation called a combined meeting of all local Jewish bodies. Represented were the Jewish Helping Society, Sick Benefit and Loan Society, Jewish Guild, Hebrew School, Young Israel Society, Financial Aid Society, and Russian Pogrom Orphan Fund. They met to discuss enlarging the Synagogue as membership was increasing rapidly.

1926 saw a very vibrant branch of the Hebrew Order of David being established. Membership of the community stood at 200, and Rev. I. Goldberg, who had been the Cantor of the community, resigned and his position was filled by Rev. S. Hadassin. By this time there were 100 children attending the Talmud Torah and the two rooms at the hall were not adequate. It was due to the generosity of Mr Louis Shapiro that the new Talmud Torah became a reality. He laid the foundation stone in August 1927 and in December of that year the building was completed.

Activities of Jewish communities all over continued to expand and it became essential to establish official Archives and the S.A. Jewish Historical Society was founded. They produced the first SA Jewish Year Book in 1929. Their chapter on Bloemfontein made very interesting reading – to mention a few statistics – The Hebrew Congregation had 228 members; Hebrew Order of David (HOD), had 71 members and the Jewish Women's Society had 190 members while the Jewish Helping Hand had 250 members.

The decade 1930-1940 was a very difficult one for the Jewish community of Bloemfontein. The town, as elsewhere, was hit by an economic depression and members could not meet their financial commitments

The rise of Nazi power affected many families who had left relatives in Europe.

The Rev. Reichenberg was appointed in 1930 as an additional Cantor and *Shochet*. Rev. Lawrence died after 20 years of faithful service and because of the financial situation of the community it was decided not to fill his position with a new Minister.

In 1932 two new branches of national organisations were established, namely the Union of Jewish Women and the Habonim Youth Movement.

With the death of the President, Ivan Haarburger, in 1933, Mr J. Phillips, an outstanding communal leader, became the next President of the Congregation. At this early stage, he tried to amalgamate all local institutions under the aegis of one body, but due to strong opposition from many of the societies, who feared losing their autonomy, this would take many years to become a reality.

The community now felt the need for a spiritual leader and Rabbi Dr. M. Romm of Israel was appointed the new Minister, a highly erudite and academic personality.

With the advent of the Second World War, many of the young Jewish men in the country joined the armed forces and went up north. After the war in 1951, they formed the S.A. Jewish Ex-Service League.

In 1946, Rabbi Romm resigned and two years later, the position was filled by Rabbi Shalom Coleman.

The Synagogue, built 38 years previously, was showing signs of deterioration, and under the able leadership of Mr Henry Bradlow, who became President in 1945, plans were made to build a new Synagogue and Communal Centre. After many years of planning and raising funds, the foundation stone was laid in 1953 and in May 1954, the Communal Centre was officially opened in Fairview Street.

A landmark decision was taken at a Special General Meeting on the 27th March 1955 to amalgamate the four main traditional societies namely - Bloemfontein Hebrew Congregation, Jewish Helping Hand and Burial Society, Hebrew School and *Gemilus Chesodim* Society. In 1958 Mr Bradlow was elected President of the United Hebrew Institutions, as it would now be called.

The consecration of the new Synagogue on the 4th April 1965 marked a new milestone in the life of the Community. Rabbi Coleman resigned in 1960 and two years later, Rabbi Ben Isaacson was appointed. He became the Principal of the Hebrew School and helped to stimulate membership of the Habonim Movement. During this time Rabbi and Mrs Kabalkin served as *Shochet* and Hebrew Teacher respectively. Three years later Rabbi Isaacson left with his family to live in Israel and his post was filled by Rabbi Haim Cohen on the 1st January 1966.

For some years there had been discussion on the establishment of a Hebrew Nursery School. In 1967 it opened with 32 pupils in the Communal Centre. As a result of a generous donation by the Davidson family in memory of their late father, David Davidson, a well-known and respected communal worker, a school was built in the Synagogue grounds, and the David Davidson Nursery School was officially opened on the 27th August 1967, by Dr Maurice Block, the *doyen* of the Jewish Community for the past three decades. Mrs Shirley Kroll became the first Principal of the school, and enjoyed that position for 28 years until 1995.

The following religious officials served the community for a period of time. Amongst the Cantors were Rev. Kuperberg, Cantor Paul Kowarsky and Cantor Jungerlevi. The Rabbis who succeeded Rabbi Cohen were Rabbi D. Maizels, Rabbi S. Steinhaus, Rabbi P. Fishman and Rabbi D. Albert.

From the 1980's the numbers in the community started to decrease and the running of the Synagogue Complex became a financial burden for the diminishing community. A decision was taken to sell the complex and after many years of negotiations this was finally realised.

The local Reform Temple was purchased; extensive alterations were effected, including the building of a *Mikveh*. The new complex was officially opened on the 28th April 1996 by Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris.

The "Joseph and Fanny Hodes" Archives was established and officially opened on 25th March 2000, by the benefactor, Mr Harold Hodes of London, in honour of his parents. Dr Sheila Aronstam and Mr Ronnie Rosen worked tirelessly collating material and photographs for this wonderful project.

Tribute is paid to those outstanding men and women who served this community with loyalty and dedication.

We take pride that our small community has remained faithful to its Jewish Traditions and Institutions and has revealed its indelible imprint of its long and proud history.

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THE PRIVATE REMINISCENCES OF LIONEL HART (Part 2)

(This article continues the reflections of Lionel Hart in his Memoirs. These Memoirs were donated by Stan Hart, grandson of Lionel Hart. Stan's e-mail address is stanhart@mweb.co.za)

I propose reverting back to the year 1886 in which I made my entrance to public affairs. In that year the Indians came in large numbers into the South African Republic to open business. An agitation against their further advances was set up and a mass meeting of the Commercial Communities of Johannesburg and the Reef was arranged and was held in the only hotel Johannesburg then possessed.

The meeting took place in Heights Hotel on a Wednesday afternoon and there were quite 300 people present. I went to this meeting as a spectator when two of the promoters of the meeting came to me and invited me to become the Chairman. I was aghast at the proposition as I was then 18 years of age and had never taken any active part in public affairs. I explained this to the two men who approached me, but they would take no refusal and promptly getting hold of my arms, escorted me to the table, sat me down at the Chairman's table and dumped me into the Chairman's seat. How was I to conduct this meeting? Well, I thought of a big political meeting I had attended in Liverpool, England, when the great W.E. Gladstone was the principal speaker, and so I pulled myself together and explained the objectives of the meeting.

An Association was formed and called the Anti-Indians Association for the purpose of preventing Indians from trading in the Republic. I was elected the first Chairman and a Committee formed and then after the meeting had ended the Committee met and we all set to work. Then the end of this movement came about when, as Chairman, I received a communication from the Colonial Secretary of Her Majesty's Government, Lord Knowlesley, advising me to cancel our activities as he stated the Indians were British subjects and had the same status as ordinary subjects of Great Britain.

In the year 1895 the Mining Industry was hard-pressed to find unskilled labour to work the mines and they proposed to bring over from China hordes of Chinese to do the necessary work. In pursuance of public support for this purpose the Transvaal Political Association was formed to promote the demand for Chinese workers. The mines proposed to bring them over under an agreement and to repatriate them at the end of the agreement. Branches of this Association were formed and I was elected the Chairman of the Doornfontein Branch.

A meeting of this Branch was advertised to be held in a church hall in Doornfontein, but the advertisement did not mention the name of the Chairman. I presided over the gathering; the hall being closely packed and my brother arrived during the proceedings at the head of a number of Anti-Chinese with the intention of wrecking the meeting. When he came into the hall and saw I was the Chairman, he suddenly got severe pains in his interior and had to withdraw, and his followers losing their leader, followed him out. The meeting carried its resolution that this branch was in favour of the Chinese coming to the Rand, amidst great uproar and excitement.

At this point a momentous meeting was held in the Wanderers Hall to protest against the Chinese coming. Mr J. W. Quinn, a friend of the writer, whom I had introduced into public affairs, got up to move the main resolution but the huge audience would not let him proceed and continued shouting out “*Voetsak Quinn!*” until 10.30 p.m. when the meeting was then abandoned.

On another occasion there appeared an advertisement in the Daily Press, calling a meeting at the Grand National Hotel to form a Lancashire and Yorkshire Association. Being born in Lancashire I was entitled to attend this meeting. In conversation with a friend of mine I told him under certain conditions it was possible for any man to be appointed to a committee who was unknown meeting. I made a small bet with my friend that I would go to their meeting of Lancastrians and Yorkshiremen and not knowing a single soul of those present, would be elected to the committee. I won my bet, under the following circumstances.

I first of all chose a prominent seat in the centre of the audience and watched my opportunity. The Association was formed and it was proposed that Abe Bailey MLA should be the first Chairman. I then rose and suggested that it would be better if Abe Bailey was appointed the President as he was mostly away at Cape Town attending Parliament, and I further suggested the gentleman who presided over the meeting as Chairman. My suggestion or motion was carried with enthusiasm.

When the nominations for Committee was called for, my nomination was submitted from several parts of the hall and I was elected at the head of the poll. I really did not want any office as I was a busy man, but I accepted the office in pursuance of my bet and remained on the Committee for a period of three years.

I now propose to deal with South African Jewish affairs, in which I was very active since 1886. In that year there was a very tiny synagogue in Grey Street, Durban, of which I was handed the key and was informed by the President, Mr B. Lipinski, that I could do what I liked with the premises. I arranged for Saturday morning services, which were attended by a Congregation of three or four people. I used to conduct the services in turn with the others who came.

At New Year 1886 our Congregation was augmented by many more people who came from up-country and the ladies were accommodated on the slightly raised platform at the back of the Synagogue.

The following year, 1887, I left Durban for Johannesburg and the first Jewish event which took place in that town was the death of the first Jew.

I was sewing up a bale in my business premises and a man rushed in and requested the use of my long needle to sew up a shroud around a dead body. A hasty meeting of the Jewish community, a mere handful of people, was convened, and there being no consecrated ground, Mr Bension Aaron was requested to proceed to Pretoria to obtain from the President of the South African Republic some ground to bury the deceased in. Paul Kruger granted the request and certain ground at the lower part of Harrison Street was taken over. At the burial, the ground was consecrated according to Jewish Law and then the burial service was read and the funeral completed.

The next step was to arrange for the New Year services of 1887. The Rev. Joel Rabinowitz of Cape Town was procured and services were then held in a hall adjacent to Marshall's Township.

Then came a meeting of the Jewish Community to decide to form a Synagogue or a Burial Society. This meeting chose the formation of the Witwatersrand Helping Hand and Burial Society and proceeded to obtain ground to be formed into a Jewish Cemetery. I was elected one of the first Trustees and sat on the Board for three years. The next movement was for a Synagogue, and debentures were issued, and money was raised sufficient to buy land and erect the building. This was in President Street and was called the Witwatersrand Hebrew Congregation. Rev. M. L. Harris was the first Minister.

In 1889 there appeared some dissatisfaction with regard to this Minister and a Sub-Committee was appointed to deal with it. At a momentous meeting held in the Synagogue the Sub-Committee's report was unsatisfactory to the Reverend gentleman, and the debate over same caused much controversy. Finally the report was not adopted, and the President of the Congregation, Mr Hyman Morris, said he would leave the President Street Congregation and form a rival organisation.

In his remarks he stated he would see the building become a stable. Thereupon I jumped up and denounced Mr Morris for speaking so disrespectfully of a holy building. So a large number of members followed Mr Morris and left the meeting.

I offered my services to those who had remained, and was appointed the Honorary Secretary. My first action as Secretary was to canvass the rich Jews, belonging mostly to the Gold Mining Industry, and I succeeded in getting support from them by way of membership of the Congregation and ample sums of money. And thus the Witwatersrand Hebrew Congregation was prevented from liquidation.

The next step was the formation of the Johannesburg Hebrew Congregation and the erection of a Synagogue in the vicinity of Park Station. President Kruger was persuaded to come to Johannesburg and the officials of both Synagogues went out to Orange Grove to meet the President and to present him with addresses. I had the honour of reading the address from my Congregation. After this ceremony a procession was formed and proceeded to the Synagogue near Park Station. When the time arrived for President Kruger to declare the Synagogue open, he did this by removing his hat, and in the name of Jesus Christ declared the Synagogue open for worship. A great sensation was caused but this speedily subsided for there was nothing one could do, the words had been spoken.

And then, as time went on, the two Synagogues both flourished.

The Witwatersrand Congregation had a vacancy for a Rabbi, and elected Rev. J. H. Hertz of the United States of America to the position. Then, I became Treasurer and during that time a vacancy occurred for the Chief Rabbinate of the British Empire, and I was one of those who persuaded Dr Hertz to apply for the position which he was successful in obtaining.

In 1905 I became seriously ill and in the following year I was obliged to sell up in Johannesburg and go to Durban, the high altitude of Johannesburg being inimical to my health. And so I returned to my first love, from where I started my career in South Africa in 1886.

After a period of recuperation, I was asked to become Secretary of the Durban Hebrew Congregation, and as I was not a member of the Annual Meeting of this institution, the President, C. P. Robinson, proposed to the members the suspension of the by-laws, and this being agreed to, I was then elected Hon. Secretary.

During my term as Secretary, Mr F. C. Hollander, the then President of the Congregation, became Mayor of Durban for three years in succession and it fell to my lot to arrange the Mayoral services, which were held in the Synagogue.

When Sir Matthew Nathan became Governor of Natal, I was amongst those who received him at the Point, and subsequently read the Congregation's address of welcome at Kings House.

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JEWISH PIONEERS OF NORTHERN RHODESIA: THE ORAL HISTORIES OF MAURICE AND HARRY GERSH

Behr and Taube Susmanowitch had come to Africa in 1905 but then re-emigrated to Palestine and settled in Tel Aviv. Their daughter, Marcia, married a Lithuanian-born rabbi, named Emmanuel Gershowitz, later to be known as Gersh. Their sons, Maurice and Harry, were already living in Palestine in 1906 and 1908.

Maurice was the first to arrive in Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia, in 1923, and was followed a year later, in 1924, by his brother, Harry. Harry arrived in Livingstone as young man, and had come to work and to find his fortune.

Harry was living in Livingstone when the British South Africa Company (BSAC) was handed over to the British Government. {The British South Africa Company was a mercantile company incorporated in 1889 under a Royal Charter at the instigation of Cecil Rhodes. By 1900 the Company administered both Southern and Northern Rhodesia. The Company Rule ended in Northern Rhodesia in 1924.} Herbert Stanley, who became the first Governor General of Northern Rhodesia, who was inaugurated in 1924, was of Jewish descent.

This article contains the transcript of the oral histories of these two Jewish pioneers of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), Maurice and Harry Gersh. Both Maurice and Harry are now deceased.

These oral histories were collected and transcribed by Frank Shapiro. Frank is the author of the books, "Haven in Africa", (Gefen Publications, Jerusalem/NY, 2002), and co-author of "Zion in Africa", (Tauris Publications, London/NY, 1999). For a review of the book, "Haven in Africa",

see the next article in this Newsletter. The author's web site can be found at: <http://geocities.com/shapiro002/>

Recollections of Maurice Gersh

My late grandfather, Behr Susmanowitz, was born in 1853 in a small village in Lithuania known as Reitavas (then part of the Czarist Russian Empire), and he died in then Palestine in 1941. He had three sons, Harry, Elie, Oscar, as well as two daughters. Behr Susmanowitz was an extremely orthodox religious Jew. In the 1880's, he emigrated to the USA to New York in an endeavour to improve the welfare and support of his family in Lithuania. He, however, returned several years later to his village in Lithuania. He found New York, as a city, to be immoral and unethical, with no respect for his Jewish religion. It was not his scene and he was quite prepared to suffer the hardships and tribulations of a Jew living in the Shtetl.

Towards the end of the 19th century he sent his elder son, Harry, to South Africa to be followed a year or two later by his second son Elie. The two Susmans worked their way to the Rand gold mines, then to Francistown in Bechuanaland, and from there by ox wagon to Bulawayo. The British South Africa Company were ruling Southern Rhodesia and were encouraging new immigrants. The Susmans were mainly involved in the cattle trade. The rinderpest of the 1880's had denuded Southern Rhodesia of its cattle herds. They hired a wagon and a team of oxen, loaded it with trade goods and went to Northern Rhodesia, crossing the Zambesi River at the Old Drift in 1901, near Livingstone, which was at that time the capital of that country and then on to Barotseland.

Barotseland was a British Protectorate ruled by the King of the Barotse nation, Lewanika. The Barotse owned great herds of cattle, free of any bovine diseases and which could be herded to Bulawayo some 800 miles south. By 1906, the Susmans were firmly established in Barotseland.

They were held in the highest esteem by Lewanika and his hierarchy and by the early missionaries. The younger brother, Oscar, joined them around 1913. In 1919, he died of malaria contracted when serving with the Rhodesian Rifles in the East African Campaign of the 1914–1918 War. Harry Susman died in 1952, and Elie in 1958.

In 1905, Behr Susmanowitz, his wife, Taube, and their two daughters, emigrated to Palestine, then a province of the Ottoman Empire. They landed at Jaffa and from there travelled for several days by camel to Jerusalem where most of the Jews in Palestine lived. My late mother married a young Jewish Rabbi, originally from Lithuania, who unfortunately died in 1910 when I was four years old and my brother Harry was two, so we hardly knew our father.

Around this period a society, of which Behr Susmanowitz was a member, had been established to investigate and participate in the building of a Jewish city, Tel Aviv, and his residence in Tel Aviv was one of the earliest to be built. I remember it very clearly, as it was the last house in the street. All beyond it were sand dunes dotted with Bedouin tents.

About this time, the family were visited by one of the Susman brothers who endeavoured to persuade them to emigrate to South Africa, but their father wished first to return to Reitavas, and we all thus travelled back to Lithuania.

Recollections of Harry Gersh

My uncles [Harry and Elie] happened to be living in Livingstone, and so I decided to join them. I stayed there about 5 years. I worked separately from my brother [Maurice], working for my uncle for about 8-12 months, and I then started out on my own.

I opened up an African general trading store for Africans, called *Harry Gersh*. I had timber concessions in the Chamazonga forest, located on the border of Livingstone and Bechuanaland, and I went out there and opened up another store. This store was a foresighted expansion – I started with nothing but £80 pounds in my pocket. I managed to obtain a little credit, and then went out to Chamovanda where the Zambezi Saw Mills were located. I would take the paymaster's money out there to pay the Africans in the forest. At the same time, I built a shop out of wood and iron, and used to stay there for a week in a month. There were only three white people living there, but I did not feel lonely, since I was too busy trading behind the counter selling merchandise to the Africans. I was extremely busy, and by that time I already had an assistant working for me in Livingstone.

Livingstone was the recruiting point and headquarters for the Africans in Barotseland who were working for mines in the Transvaal. I used to return with gold sovereigns and had plenty of money. I used to trade with the Africans, who bought mainly blankets, shirts, trousers, pots, and pans. I often gave them credit.

I bought my merchandise from all over the place: Bulawayo, Livingstone, etc. In addition, people used to come up and sell goods to us directly. My business succeeded and grew, and I eventually sold out the concession store in Chamovanda at the end of 1928. I then moved up to Chingola (which was then called Nchanga). At that time, the first mine, called Bwana Mkuba, was just opening in Nchanga. Mines had been started in that area from the 1920s onwards, but the operations really started in earnest in about 1926/27 by the American RST companies.

I stayed in Nchanga and opened up a larger store there. I built my trading store there for the use of both Europeans and Africans, and called it the *New Discovery Economic Stores*. At this time, I was not working with my brother; I was in business by myself.

When Nchanga closed down because of the slump in 1932, I contacted the general manager of a mine in Nkana. The manager, a friend, explained the situation, and he gave me a site at Nkana with trading rights (i.e. concessions). At the time, all the mines were starting to close down. Harry Figov (who later became the Jewish mayor of Luanshya) had a concession store there, and I got wind that he was planning to sell. I thus bought him out, using money that I had borrowed from many sources. This new store was the first big stepping-stone in our organization, and grew so large that I asked [my brother] Maurice (who was working for Northern Caterers at the time) to join me to take care of the financial side of the business. Maurice had no money to invest, but I made him full partner, and thus he joined us.

The business held European stock and was intended mainly for the African community. Maurice handled the financial side of the business, and I did all the buying and selling of the merchandise. There were separate lines in the store for Europeans and Africans. There was a hatch outside the store that the Africans used if they were shopping for Europeans; if they were shopping for themselves, they went directly into the shop.

At the Nkana mine, the shops were all together in one area. There was a single street on which all the stores were located, and the stores were of two types (usually separate buildings joined to each other), viz. one for a higher class of trade (i.e. for the Europeans), and the other for the lower class of trade (i.e. for the Africans). This was not the law, but the custom in the area.

We stayed for 2 years in Nkana, and then moved to Kitwe in 1933. I moved the stores from Nkana to Kitwe. When we moved to Kitwe, we then had separate trading areas, but the Africans could still come into European stores and purchase – my policy was never to turn a client away because of color or creed.

My wife and I were the first Jewish couple to live in Kitwe. We got married in 1933 in Bulawayo (I had met my wife in Bulawayo).

I built the first residential house in Kitwe. We built a house made with Kimberley bricks (i.e. mud bricks), adjoining the back of one of shops, and lived there for a while. The bathroom was a round mud house, and the servants brought buckets of water. Eventually we progressed and built a proper bathroom.

My daughter, Jacqueline Wendy, was the first Jewish child born in Kitwe, and my son was the first *brit mila* in the town. Jack Weintrobe, a *mohel* and *chazan* was living in Ndola at the time, and performed the *brit*. My wife was the Chairlady of WIZO for almost 25 years.

There were about 20 Jews living in the town when Kitwe was started, and at its height, on *Yom Tov*, we often had 200 people attending the *Shul* services there. The people came from all over the area – Kitwe was the focal point for the community. At its peak, the town had about 20 Jewish families, who all lived near each other. There was an excellent relationship between the Jews and the non-Jews, with no anti-Semitism in evidence.

As soon as the German Jewish refugees arrived, we fixed them up with jobs and billets. Some were coal miners from the Ruhr, and I found them jobs on the mine. A carpenter would become a bookkeeper – nobody was refused admission. We saw that everybody who arrived received employment whether they liked the particular job or not. There was no official organization in Kitwe organizing this support for the refugees – just the local community members providing their help. The British government didn't cause any problems regarding admitting the refugees. The police were also very helpful. Sir Roy Welensky was the director of manpower in the government at the time, and he made the statement that he would not tolerate anti-Semitism of any form, and he kept to his word.

I was on holiday at Kariba when I heard about the plight of the Congo refugees. I immediately turned and went back to Kitwe. I took out of my shops about 50 beds and blankets, and made room for the refugees in our *Shul*. At the *Shul*, we had a recreation hall, a *cheder* room and several kitchens. Over 100 refugees came through the facility, both Jews and gentiles, but very few stayed for long.

The Jews related to the Black population very well. At the stores, the Africans indeed bought their goods at hatches outside the stores, but it was nothing that concerned them. I certainly had a hatch in my European shop for the African customers, but it didn't bother me as a Jew. Even though it was the custom at the time that Africans didn't generally enter the store through the front door, it didn't bother me whatsoever if my African customers came into the store – we

never refused anyone entry at the front door. If there was apartheid being practiced, it was not noticeable, and the Africans respected the Europeans. I had Africans working for me for 35 years, and I never fired an African unless he was caught stealing. There was plenty of stealing in the area, but in my place very little of it occurred.

The Jews contributed much to Northern Rhodesia in the areas of commerce, industry, and politics. I spent most of the time there devoted to Judaism. I was a *chazan*, and covered many other roles in the *Shul*. Later on, we did have a permanent Rabbi, whose name was Woolfson from Swansea, and he stayed for about 5 years. At the end of this time, he wanted to go further afield, since he was married with children.

In the *Shul*, I did all the davening at every Friday night service. Mrs Lenny Dobkins and my wife ran the *cheder*, providing Jewish education to the children. When Rabbi Rockman came up from Lusaka to perform a *bris* for Percy Kling's son, I was *sandak*, I instructed him to go and wash his hands, since I felt that they were not clean enough for me; I was very strict. Reverend Konviser was a friend of mine, and I got a license at the court, and gave proper *drusher*. Once Rabbi Brodie (the British Chief Rabbi) came and ate in our house that was 100% kosher, with special dishes.

I devoted most of my spare time to other fields, such as charity work, being the rotary in charge of Colored community affairs. I was very involved in Masonic life in Northern Rhodesia, and reached a very high office in the organization. I was born in Jerusalem and returned to the city to consecrate other lodges there. The Masonic organization was very strong in Kitwe for both Jews and gentiles. About 7 Jews were in the Masonic organization in Kitwe. I looked after campaigns for cerebral palsy and tuberculosis funds. I was even invited to Israel to consecrate the supreme grand chapter of the State of Israel in 1978 in Jerusalem.

Any Jewish commercial traveller who arrived in Kitwe immediately came to my home to my table. He would participate in communal *seders* at my home. I would visit other towns to discuss many matters. I brought out my own *Sefer Torah* from Jerusalem – it was tiny and pure white, made from lamb's skin in sheet form. In Kitwe I built my own *Aron Kodesh*, which subsequently housed other *Torahs* that were brought to Kitwe. For example, a *Torah* was left in Gus Leibowitz's house, and this was brought to me for safekeeping. However, my own *Torah* was the first to be housed in my *Aron Kodesh*.

Rabbi Cohen in Bulawayo performed the marriage ceremony of my wife, Gertie, and me there (my wife's parents wedding was actually the second Jewish wedding in Bulawayo – she was a Baron). My wife's father arranged to have sheets stitched and made handles, and we brought these to Kitwe. We eventually took these articles to South Africa, and I still use these articles now in Cape Town.

I eventually left Northern Rhodesia in 1965, since my wife and all my children had moved away by then. My wife had already left in 1961 for South Africa, since our child was attending the university in Cape Town. My wife was also tired of living in Northern Rhodesia and roughing it. Thus, between 1961 and 1965, I commuted every 3 months between Cape Town and Kitwe.

My son and daughter were brought up in Cape Town. Whenever some campaign came up, my wife took the Chair. My wife Gertie was a wonderful worker. There wasn't an organization or

activity that she wasn't associated with. We had a large home, and every big *simcha* or drive was held there.

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REVIEW OF BOOK “HAVEN IN AFRICA”, BY FRANK SHAPIRO

(The book, “Haven in Africa”, by Frank Shapiro, was published by Gefen Publications, Jerusalem/NY, in 2002, Frank Shapiro’s e-mail address is fshap@012.net.il.)

Haven in Africa reveals that on the eve of the Second World War, scores of thousands of Jews could have been saved from Nazi annihilation. The British protectorate of Northern Rhodesia in central Africa was one of the few countries in the world that remained legally open to Jewish immigration. Although neighboring South Africa and Southern Rhodesia had enacted anti-immigration acts in 1937, Northern Rhodesia did not follow suit. This is not, however, widely known. Those few Jewish refugees fortunate to learn of the existence of this haven were granted permission of entry without any hardship. *Haven in Africa* brings to light the establishment of the Jewish-Northern Rhodesian nexus promising salvation to scores of persecuted Jewish souls.

Haven in Africa reveals that from 1934 through to the outbreak of war, the Anglo-Jewish leadership and the governments of Britain and Northern Rhodesia considered and negotiated thirteen settlement plans in Northern Rhodesia for Jewish refugees escaping the Nazi hell. The book relates how these discussions were held virtually under wraps. Shapiro raises the questions: why were these particular files so confidential that their contents were barred from prying researchers? Was there a conspiracy of silence?

In his objective to unravel the answer to these questions Shapiro traveled to a number of countries. At the PRO Archives in London he opened the Foreign Office and Colonial Office files on Jewish emigration and Northern Rhodesia. He was the first person to untie those ribbons since they had been archived away. His initial findings, discovered in Zambia, became rigorously confirmed from hour to hour. As he browsed through handwritten memos, letters, and official typed documents, Jewish emigration to Northern Rhodesia emerged as a unique and very provocative subject.

Haven in Africa also investigates the subject through the eyes and mind of a contemporary key player on the political stage, namely, Malcolm MacDonald, the British Colonial Secretary. We encounter MacDonald’s personal struggle with the complexities involved. MacDonald, in endeavoring to rescue Jewish refugees and settle them in mass in Northern Rhodesia, is rehabilitated from his notorious image associated with British White Paper on Palestine. The Secrecy Act had not only veiled MacDonald’s inspiring objective to save Jews, but it had also marred the character of an outstanding man.

Haven in Africa provides an important missing link in understanding the moral dilemmas and perplexities involved on the one hand in saving Jews, while on the other hand abandoning them to their fate.

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