

# S. A. SIG

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## Southern African Jewish Genealogy Special Interest Group Newsletter

**Vol. 5, Issue 4**

**June 2005**

### In this Issue

<i>President's Message – Saul Issroff</i>	2
<i>Editorial – Bubbles Segall</i>	3
<i>Henry Bergman and Aliwal North: A Tragic Tale – Adam Yamey</i>	4
<i>Out of the Shtetl . . . Into Africa . . . and Beyond (Part 2) – Herzl Marks</i>	8
<i>Oudtshoorn – Jerusalem of Africa – Faye Bourgstein</i>	17
<i>Invitation to Rome to receive recognition for the achievements of Nelson Mandela and Lazer Sidelsky – Dov Sidelsky</i>	18

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

The Southern Africa Jewish Genealogy Special Interest Group (SA-SIG) was created to provide a forum for a free exchange of ideas, research tips, and information of interest to those researching Jewish family history in the communities of South Africa, Lesotho (Basutoland), Botswana (Bechuanaland), Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia), Zambia (Northern Rhodesia), Swaziland, Mozambique and the former Belgian Congo.

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

The SA-SIG Newsletter is published quarterly. Further information on how to subscribe to the Newsletter can be found at:

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

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### **PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE**

Once again it is conference time. The 26th Annual IAJGS conference is to be held in Las Vegas. South African interests will be ably dealt with by Roy Ogus and Mike Getz. I am sure we will get a new crop of people interested in Southern African origins.

I have just been directed to a remarkable site of general South African interest, the Campbell Collections, c. 1865 – 1965, about 200 albums. This is the historic photographic collection of the Campbell Collections and comprises some 25,000 images, mainly black-and-white and sepia toned prints. A large portion of this collection is represented here in a rich visual documentation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, mainly of Natal and Zululand. Pictorial evidence is presented on a variety of topics relevant to the history and culture of southern Africa and its people. The technological advances that make this sort of thing possible never cease to amaze me. If anyone is interested in this collection – *Inventory of the Historic Photograph Album Collection, c. 1865 – 1965*, the contact information is as follows:

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In the course of preparing a talk on part of the history of SA Jewry, I have been struck by the impediments and disabilities that were placed on the Jews and Catholics by Paul Kruger's South African Republic, especially in terms of franchise rights. [Paul Kruger was the President of the South African Republic (Transvaal) between 1882 and 1900.] The right to vote, to be a full citizen, was denied for many years, primarily because of Kruger's wish to make a Calvinist state. The fact that he had several close Jewish friends and advisers did not matter; he was rigid in this approach. It seems that only after the arrival of Chief Rabbi Hertz and pressure from delegations of Johannesburg Jews in 1899, did Kruger and the *Volksraad* relent. We take these rights very much for granted nowadays, and seldom give a thought to the tremendous battles that our forefathers went through to achieve equality as Jews and be full citizens of the countries they live in.

### **Saul Issroff**

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## EDITORIAL

Welcome to yet another issue of the SA-SIG Newsletter. I have been Editor for just over a year now and have enjoyed the challenge.

Many of you have accumulated a mass of information about your families which needs to be preserved for future generations. This newsletter is one way of recording your valuable stories. As Eli Wiesel once said:

*“Your family tree is only the bare framework of your family history. Without the stories, legends, tales and episodes of your cousins and ancestors, all you will have is a dry collection of names and dates.”* Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today*

The last issue of this newsletter included information about the word “smous”. I received the following e-mail from Colin Plen of Johannesburg, who is a member of the South African Special Interest Group Board:

*“The origin of the word smous in Dutch is a derogatory term for the Jewish salesmen, from the expression ‘soos Moses’ which means ‘like a Moses.’ The word came to South Africa from the Dutch, and lost its Jewish-derogatory meaning, just being a word for a salesman. I was actually most surprised to see this origin written up in the HAT Afrikaanse Woordeboek.”*

In the last issue of the newsletter, we published Part 1 of Herzl Marks article about his family’s move from the *shtetl* to Israel and finally to South Africa. Part 2 appears in this issue. An earlier version of Herzl’s article was produced in *Shemot*, the Newsletter published by the Jewish Genealogical Society of Great Britain.

Adam Yamey has provided an article about Henry Bergman, the son of his second great grandaunt, Klara Seligmann. Henry is mentioned briefly in Adam’s article, *Iwan Bloch and Barkly East*, which was published in our September 2004 issue of the SA-SIG Newsletter. This article about Henry was originally published in the Leo Baeck Institute’s journal of German-Jewish research, *Stammbaum*, which is the only genealogical source written in English focusing exclusively on German Jewry (see <http://www.jewishgen.org/stammbaum>).

As reported in this Newsletter previously, the Oudtshoorn Jewish Community celebrated its 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary on 13 November last year. Fay Bourgestein attended this function and has provided an article about the occasion. Faye was born in Oudtshoorn where she spent her childhood and school years. She now lives in the United States with her family.

Dov Sidelsky, a past contributor to this Newsletter, has provided an article about a ceremony he and his family attended in Rome in January this year which was dedicated to Nelson Mandela and the Sidelsky family. Every year the Italian Parliament celebrates Remembrance Day and each year they dedicate the event to someone special.

In the last two issues, I mentioned a book by Mr N.D. Hoffmann, *Book of Memoirs*, which contains some interesting insight into the lives of Jews in the early 20th century. I was hoping to provide information about the people he mentions in each issue. Unfortunately, I have run out of space, so you will have to wait for the next issue to read about the interesting people he mentions!

### **Bubbles Segall**

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## **HENRY BERGMAN AND ALI WAL NORTH: A TRAGIC TALE**

Adam Yamey

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*This article was originally published in Issue 25, Summer Edition, of Stammbaum and is reprinted here with permission from both Stammbaum and the Leo Baeck Institute.*

My late mother was a descendant of two of the five children of Jakob Seligmann (1775-1843) of Ichenhausen, in Bavaria. Quite a few of his descendants left Germany to make their fortunes in South Africa, including my mother's father, Iwan Bloch, and her maternal grandmother, Hedwig Rieser. On a family tree<sup>1</sup> that I possess there is an entry for Heinrich Bergmann that reads: "*Gest. Aliwal-North, Süd Afrika. Verheiratet aber kinderlos*" [Died Aliwal North, South Africa. Married but childless]. No dates are given for this man, who was a son of my second great grandaunt, Klara Seligmann. She married Lazarus Bergmann. It is probable that they both died in Ichenhausen. Heinrich was my mother's first cousin, twice removed. My interest in Heinrich is the belief that he was one of the earliest of the descendants of Jakob Seligmann to go to South Africa. He is the subject of this article.

Sir Harry Smith, then Governor of the Cape Colony, formally founded the small town of Aliwal North in the Cape Province of South Africa in 1850. He named the town Aliwal North<sup>2</sup> in memory of his victory over the Sikhs at the Battle of Aliwal during the First Sikh War in India in 1846. The park in the centre of Aliwal North, the Juana Square Gardens was named after Smith's wife Juana Maria de Los Dolores de Leon.<sup>3</sup> One of the first white settlers in the area, Pieter Jacobus De Wet built a house at nearby Buffelsvlei in about 1828. The settlement of the area and its development into a town probably is in no little way connected to the presence of good water, thermal springs and a good fording place ('drift') across the Orange River, just below its confluence with the Kraai River. The town was laid out in 1849 on ground acquired by the government. This was auctioned and 38 lots were sold for £972. The auctioneers were the Jewish firm, Mosenthal Brothers.<sup>4</sup>

There were two waves of Jewish settlement in Aliwal North.<sup>5</sup> The first, which is the concern of this

article, began in the 1840s. The second began in 1901. This latter commenced with the arrival of Mr. S. Becker and his son Moses as well as the Cohen family. When the Jews arrived in the town at the beginning of the twentieth century, they applied to the municipality in order to obtain a piece of ground for burial purposes. They were surprised to learn that there was already a Jewish Cemetery in existence, and had been since 1860, if not earlier. When these later settlers inspected the cemetery they found evidence of a Jewish community in Aliwal North, many years before their arrival. They were unable to ascertain the fate of these Jews. They had simply disappeared. A notable exception was Benjamin Levy, who was Mayor in 1882, and his brother Joseph who was also Mayor (in 1889, and later during the Anglo-Boer War<sup>6</sup>). The subject of this article concerns one of the earliest Jewish inhabitants of Aliwal North: he died in the town but for reasons that will become clear, his grave was not amongst those found in the Jewish Cemetery. His name was Henry Bergman. Or, was he Bergmann?

According to Saron and Hotz in their book<sup>7</sup>, there was an early settler in Aliwal North: "... *one Bergman, a German Jew, 'a very great friend of the De Wet family, associated with all their earliest experiences and troubles, and who was eventually buried on their farm in 1865'* ".<sup>8</sup> This reference looked interesting to me. I looked at the on-line catalogue<sup>9</sup> of the National Archives of South Africa, and found a reference<sup>10</sup> to the collection of the Genealogical Society of South Africa. It referred to the gravestone of "Bergman, H", with a remark, "De Wet Family Cemetery, Aliwal North, Cape". I sent an air letter to the Aliwal North Museum and was pleased to receive a reply from its curator. She sent me a very clear photograph of this gravestone, which still stands in the De Wet Family Cemetery. The inscription on it is in English: "*Sacred to the memory of my dearly beloved husband Henry Bergmann who departed this life July 15<sup>th</sup> 1866. O God take him unto Thee.*" The stone gives Henry two N's in his surname, as is on my family tree. This is undoubtedly the grave of the Bergman in the quotation above and in the record from the Archives. How did he end up in the De Wet's private cemetery?<sup>11</sup>

The curator of the museum also provided the answer to this. Her translation, from the Afrikaans, of a passage from du Plooy's book<sup>12</sup> on the history of Aliwal North follows (abbreviated slightly, omitting

unnecessary details): *“Financial establishments were confined to the Bank of South Africa, Standard Bank and Frontier Bank ..... The Frontier Bank was a branch of Mosenthal Brothers and was managed by one of its Directors, Mr. Henry Bergman. Unfortunately, Bergman embezzled some of the Bank’s money and committed suicide. The community was deeply shocked. No one wanted to bury him until two of his friends, Koos and David De Wet,<sup>13</sup> came from their farms and buried him in the De Wet cemetery. Because Bergman was a Jew they only read out of the Old Testament ....”* J.G.F. Kruger corroborates this story: *“The Standard Bank closed its branch in the town in 1865, leaving the town to the mercies of the Frontier Bank, in which Mosenthal’s were interested. A robbery of its funds in 1866 led to the suicide of its director and the bankruptcy of the bank.”<sup>14</sup>* Interesting as all of this is, it still does not establish whether ‘my’ Heinrich Bergmann was the Henry Bergman who committed suicide in Aliwal North in 1866.

Last year I met a distant cousin from New Zealand, a descendant of Lazarus Bergmann (Heinrich’s father).<sup>15</sup> He allowed me to photocopy his father’s notes, written in German, about the history of his family. I found a reference to “Onkel Heinrich Bergmann”, which I had translated for me. This is what is written:

*“The most shining person – light and shadow -- was Uncle Heinrich. I did not know nor meet him. But he was an eminent and clever person, very gifted. I remember a drawing he made of a stag that could have been drawn by Dürer. Early on he realised the opportunity to immigrate to South Africa. I remember a masterly description of a voyage by sailing ship, as gripping as a novel, in which is related a mutiny of the sailors. He was not only clever, he was also a brilliant personality. So much so that he married a lady from the Jewish high aristocracy, Miss Schuster. Business-wise he must have been a genius. And yet he foundered. Uncle Henry was very far-sighted and realised the big opportunities in the African gold mines; and he bought up all the shares. But as he needed to pay £5000, he falsified a promissory note<sup>16</sup> in the hope that when it was due he would have enough money. And when that did not happen, he shot himself . . . His most intimate friend was Wernher Beit, who took over his possessions. Wernher Beit whose name*

*I remember well from newspaper and stock exchange reports died the most well to do man in London between 1901 and 1910. The foundation of his riches was the gold shares of Uncle Heinrich. His [Heinrich’s] ideas were in fact correct. If he’d stayed alive, the fate of the family would have been different.”*

This passage strengthened my belief that the Heinrich Bergmann on my family tree was indeed the same person as Henry Bergman, whose tragic life colors the history of Aliwal North. Although it is clear that Heinrich erred, in taking financial risks that did not pay off, he remedied the situation in an honorable way, by nineteenth century standards.

In August last year we set out for a visit to South Africa. Just before we left I was given a copy of a letter written by Heinrich Bergmann from Cape Town, dated 8<sup>th</sup> August 1849. It is written in clear handwriting, in a cursive script that I am unable to decipher, but the person who gave it to me<sup>17</sup> said that she could make out in it a description of a sea voyage and mention of a mutiny. This could well be the account of the voyage alluded to in the quotation above.

In South Africa we visited Aliwal North where we met the town’s museum curator who showed us her excellent museum. She took us to see the gravestone of Henry Bergmann, located in the De Wet Pioneer Graveyard, on the southern edge of the town near the thermal springs. The graves were moved to this location from another De Wet property some years ago. During the disinterment of Bergmann’s grave, his gold wedding ring was discovered. This is now kept in the De Wet Museum, which is housed in the Kerkplein Museum. It was spine-tingling experience, seeing this ring. Judging by the diameter of this ring, Bergmann must have had large fingers.

We were told that Mr. and Mrs. De Wet expressed a desire to meet us. It was the De Wet family who originally provided land to the Jewish community of Aliwal North to build their synagogue. According to P. De Wet, whom we were later to meet, his relative P.W. De Wet provided the Jews with half an ‘erf’ (plot) of land – half because the Jews only believed in half of the Bible!

We drove out to the farm, located between Aliwal North and Lady Grey, to meet Mr. and Mrs. P. De Wet. Our hosts at this farm were interested in their

family history and were visibly moved by the sad story of Henry Bergmann, which also figures in the written history of the De Wet family. Mr. De Wet told me that his grandfather, P. J. De Wet, had acquired the same farm in 1872. P. J. De Wet was the uncle of the brothers Koos and David De Wet who buried their friend, Henry Bergmann. P. De Wet showed us documents that revealed that J.A. Coetzee and Henry Bergmann had bought the farm in 1865.<sup>18</sup> The latter bought 2806 *morgen* of land and Coetzee bought 1215 *morgen*.<sup>19</sup> After his death, Bergmann's part of the land was sold to the De Wet family from his estate. It was a strangely moving experience. After almost 140 years, we were the first members of Bergman's extended family to meet up with the family, the De Wet's, who had befriended him in life and in death. I think that Mr. and Mrs. De Wet felt the same.

I do not yet know the full range of activities undertaken by Henry Bergman in South Africa. Further searching of the catalogue of the National Archives of South Africa has revealed some information about the activities and associates of Heinrich Bergmann. In all of the documents he is named "Henry", and in many his surname has the double "n" ending. In 1853, he was applying for "Burghership".<sup>20</sup> In a document<sup>21</sup> dated 1859 Henry Bergmann is a co-litigant with Adolph, Joseph and Julius Mosenthal<sup>22</sup> and a Louis Goldmann<sup>23</sup> in at least one legal case. This was no doubt in his capacity as a member of the important trading company, "Mosenthal Brothers."

Henry Bergmann was indeed a partner of Joseph Mosenthal in his store at Aliwal North.<sup>24</sup> Bergmann also had his own company "Henry Bergman and Company", which was in existence by 1863.<sup>25</sup> About the activities of this company, I have no idea. In 1860 Henry Bergmann was a trustee to the insolvent estate of James Smith John Stewart, the High Sheriff of the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>26</sup> There are a number of records<sup>27</sup>, which pair Henry Bergmann with Ludwig (sometimes referred to as "Louis") Reichenberger. Ludwig Reichenberger was another Jewish trader in Aliwal North<sup>28</sup>. Ludwig Reichenberger came from Ichenhausen<sup>29</sup>, as did Henry Bergmann. Ludwig's brother Leopold<sup>30</sup> married Mathilde Rosenfels<sup>31</sup>, who was a niece of Henry Bergmann.

What became of Bergmann's widow is not known to me. His land was bought by the De Wet family

and, according to Saron and Hotz<sup>32</sup>, his company was taken over by two Jews who traded "under the style of Bergman and Co." Their names were Ludwig Reichenberger and Sichel. These same authors record that the Manchester born Jews, Benjamin (at one time the Mayor of Aliwal North) and Wolfe Levy, together with Edward Markus, later took over the business of Bergman and Co.

Aliwal North played an important role in the emigration of the descendants of Jakob Seligmann from Ichenhausen. The emigration was started, most probably, by Henry Bergmann in 1849<sup>33</sup> and continued into the later decades of the nineteenth century. In 1874<sup>34</sup> Henry's first cousin Sigmund Seligmann arrived in Rouxville, which is not far from Aliwal North. Sigmund also invited Emanuel Rieser, his first cousin, once removed, to join him in Lady Grey<sup>35</sup> in 1880. Emanuel's two sisters soon followed him to South Africa<sup>36</sup>, and both found husbands there. One of them was my mother's maternal grandmother, Hedwig Rieser. By 1885 Sigmund had set up a thriving trading business in Barkly East.<sup>37</sup> It was to this small town that Sigmund brought his nephew, Iwan Bloch, my mother's father to join him in his by then very prosperous business.

### Postscript

Since my article on the sad end of the life of Henry Bergmann was published in mid-2004 I have come across more information about this man and also about his wife, Miss Schuster. Miss Schuster's full name was Charlotte Jenny Schuster. Henry Bergmann wrote a Last Will and Testament<sup>38</sup> in Frankfurt am Main in 1860. In this he mentions that he had just made a marriage contract with Miss Schuster. This point leads to the possibility that his wife came from Frankfurt, a city, incidentally, which had a Schuster family that might have been considered "aristocratic". The Death Certificate of Henry Bergmann gives Henry's age at death as being 35 years, suggesting that he was born in 1831<sup>39</sup>.

Amongst the various editions of the "Cape of Good Hope Almanac."<sup>40</sup> that I have been able to locate, I have found out that not only was Henry Bergmann an important businessman in Aliwal North but also an important public figure. In 1859 Bergmann was on the Divisional Council and also the Immigration Board of the town. He was still holding these

positions in 1862, in addition to being the Commissioner for 2<sup>nd</sup> Class schools, a position he first held in 1860. He was still on the Divisional Council in the last year of his life, 1866. Knowing that he held such important municipal posts gives us an additional reason to understand why Henry took his own life after his financial misfortune.

## Notes

1. *Die Nachkommen des Jakob Seligmann* [Descendants of Jakob Seligmann]. This was compiled by Reinhold Seligmann in 1935, and revised in 1966.
2. There is an Aliwal South, better known nowadays as Mossel Bay.
3. See *The British Conquest and Dominion of India*, by Penderel Moon, published by India Research Press, New Delhi, 1989, p. 599, footnote 12.
4. Caption on an exhibit in the Aliwal North Museum.
5. Information from a newspaper clipping, undated but after 1941, seen in the Aliwal North Museum.
6. 1899-1902.
7. Saron and Hotz: *The Jews in South Africa*, eds. Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz, published by Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1955.
8. Saron and Hotz: pp. 315-6
9. NAAIRS: <http://www.national.archsrch.gov.za/>
10. NAAIRS: Genealogical society of South Africa, Peter Holden/ Bergman H - Gravestone
11. Many farms in South Africa had their own private family cemeteries.
12. *Aliwal North, one hundred years*, by F.J. Du Plooy.
13. Koos and David De Wet were brothers.
14. *Aliwal North – Historical Notes*, by J.G.F. Kruger: a typed manuscript, unpublished.
15. Heinrich Bergmann was his great-grand uncle.
16. The original German reads: “*Aber als er £5000 zahlen sollte, fälschte er einen Wechsel in der Hoffnung bei Fälligkeit, das geld zu haben.*”
17. See note 28, below.
18. This is noted in a history of the De Wet family written by Abrie Oosterhuis: an unpublished mimeographed document.
19. 1 *morgen* = approx. 1.17 hectares.
20. NAAIRS: KAB/4068/01/95/1/1853/1853. If a person did not have Burghership (“*burgerskap*” in Afrikaans) – i.e. citizenship – they were not entitled to purchase property or land under their own name. In this document dated 8<sup>th</sup> Aug. 1853, Bergmann states that he has resided in the Cape Colony for 5 years. this would suggest that Bergmann arrived in South Africa in 1848.
21. NAAIRS: KAB/CSC/ vol 2/2/1/129 /01/67/1859
22. Joseph Mosenthal arrived from Germany to South Africa in 1839. His brothers Adolph and Julius followed shortly afterwards. They established a chain of trading stations throughout the Cape, and created an organised system of commerce. For more detail see Saron and Hotz, page 349, et seq.
23. Goldmann arrived in Burghersdorp, not far from Aliwal North, sometime between 1845 and 1856 (Saron and Hotz, p. 318).
24. See *Merchant Pioneers: The House of Mosenthal* by D. Fleischer and A. Caccia, published by Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1983.
25. NAAIRS: KAB/CSC/ vol 2/2/1/150 /01/78/1/1863
26. NAAIRS: KAB/CSC/ vol 2/1/1/97 /01/42/1/1860
27. For example, NAAIRS: KAB/CSC/ vol 1/1/2/139 /01/1/1861
28. See Saron and Hotz, p.316.
29. Lazarus (Ludwig) Reichenberger (1835 - 1909) went to South Africa in 1855 as per Ernest Kallmann. Also, see Kallmann’s article in *Stammbaum*, Issue 17, June 2000, “The Reichenberger Correspondence 1877-1947”.
30. Leopold lived for a while in South Africa, before returning to Germany.
31. A number of descendants of Henry Bergmann's sister Regine Rosenfels lived in South Africa and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). Henry's brother Ludwig also settled in South Africa (in Rouxville, near Aliwal North) for a while before retiring to Munich.
32. See Saron and Hotz, p. 316
33. The date on the letter written by Henry Bergmann from Cape Town.
34. Information from a living descendant of Sigmund Seligmann.
35. Another small town near Aliwal North. The descendants of Jakob Seligmann who settled in South Africa seemed to have spent at least part of their African sojourn in the towns around Aliwal North, such as Barkly East, Lady Grey and Rouxville.
36. His older sister Paula married Michaelis Arnholz, who had a store in Rouxville, and her younger sister Hedwig joined her there. It was in Rouxville that Hedwig first met her future husband Franz Ginsberg, who was born in Beuthen (Upper Silesia).
37. S. Seligmann and Co. It existed from 1885 until the early 1960s. My late mother described the store as “the Harrods of Barkly East.”

## Postscript

38. See National Archives of South Africa: KAB/MOOC/6/9/116/f.2796, 1866.
39. See footnote 38.
40. Published by J. Noble & van de Sandt: Cape Town.

## **OUT OF THE SHTETL . . . . INTO** **AFRICA . . . . AND BEYOND**

**Marks/Mordukhovitz – Janowski/Odelski**

**Early Days**

**Part 2**

*Herzl Marks*

*An earlier version of this article was originally published in Shemot in September and December 2004, Volume 12, Nos. 3 & 4. This updated version is reprinted here with permission from Shemot and the author. Part 1 of this article appeared in the March 2005 issue of the SA-SIG Newsletter.*

### **American Trip**

I just had to meet the author Sol and get flesh for the bare bones of his book. In 2000, my wife Julienne and I finally made the trip to Camarillo, California, and struck up a warm friendship with him, now a sprightly and independent 80 year old. Through two days of prompting over breakfast, during walks around his retirement village, over meals in local restaurants I asked questions, and all the while my tape-recorder was switched on. The words in his book took on a new meaning and his characters came alive, and my probing always drew a response tinged with a touch of gentle humour. They were people of quality and I was proud to stem from them.

Sol writes, “Josef Odelski (Ima’s maternal grandfather) came to Łapy, Poland from a small town near Vilna when the Warsaw-Vilna railroad workshops were based in Łapy, 25 km south-west of Bialystok. It was a major junction for the railway line north to Vilna, and east to Russia. When the construction was finished, and the workshops moved further north, some of the working men moved on too and sold their homes to Josef. He purchased six large parcels of property, all located on Main Street. Some of the parcels were built like a compound with a well in the middle, and surrounded by houses and gardens. The family lived in these houses. A painting of one of these compounds now hangs in my (Sol’s) house.

“Josef and his wife Heidle, as newly-weds, established the first general store in Łapy. Soon the name of Josef Odelski was known all over the area as ‘The Store,’ ‘The ‘Place’ and ‘The Man to do business with,’ a man of his word, and a man who

could be depended on. It was said you could build a building on his word alone.”

Josef wanted a good match for each of his three daughters and went to the nearby Grodno *Yeshiva* to find outstanding students of good character. For his eldest, Grunce (my maternal grandmother), he selected Chaim Janowski, a blond, good-looking young man, who wore modern clothes. His main pluses were that he was well-educated, devoutly religious and would soon graduate as an ordained rabbi. Josef did not want to lose his daughter to another *shtetl* and suggested that Rabbi Chaim make his home in one of the houses in the compound.

Chaim started his own business and became one of the leading lights of the Odelski clan. He was so successful that he was given the privileged title “*Pervi Gilda Kupiec*” (Merchant First Class) by the Russian authorities.

### **Good Dealer**

Though Jews were prohibited from travelling ‘beyond The Pale’<sup>1</sup> this privilege meant that he now had the legal right to travel throughout Russian territories in the course of business, which took him as far afield as St. Petersburg and Moscow. He contracted to buy before harvest, entire grain crops from agents of feudal landlords, or direct from peasant farmers, or from whoever was willing to pre-sell. The forerunner of futures trading! No mean achievement in what was essentially an anti-Semitic Russian administration, which restricted the occupations Jews could undertake. The Janowski branch thrived on both sides of the border until the 1917 Revolution closed Russia’s border with Poland.

Poland’s independence put paid to Chaim’s far-flung business interests in the old Tsarist empire and forced him to concentrate within Poland itself. Nevertheless, he improved his business and bought flour mills to supply bakeries throughout the country. (In the 21<sup>st</sup> century parlance this would be known as vertical added-value). His business flourished.

He remained a deeply religious man, believing, like so many others, in the return of the *Moshiach* (Messiah). Though their mother tongue was Yiddish, his eldest daughter, Chana (my mother), was taught in Russian at the local state school. During the German occupation of WW1, lessons



were in German and then after independence they were in Polish. Of course, there was Hebrew from *Cheder* lessons each afternoon after school where she learnt about Zionism. Chana no longer felt comfortable as a Jewish person living in Poland.



**Lapy main square in winter, 1920s**

The country did not seem to offer much future for Jews, and indeed, Ertetz Yisrael, was where her heart and mind were those days. But it was only in September 1979 that we got details when my older daughter Ilana broached the subject. *Ima's* agitated thoughts had been totally focused on *Aba* who was on life support at Groote Schuur Hospital after a tragic traffic accident.

Ilana, who had a strong kinship with my mother, asked,

“Sabta (grandma), what made you leave Poland? How did you meet Saba (grandpa)?” This question has a magically comforting effect on my distraught mother who stops wringing her hands and responds by travelling back into an earlier world.

### **Rampaging Cossacks**

*Ima* sighs “Why did I leave? I had to ... it wasn't a place for Jews. Poles hated us .... They were worse than Russians. Before the 1914 War, I used to visit Warsaw, a six-hour journey by train. I could feel the anti-Semitism from the

Poles getting worse, and it made me very uneasy.

“Not only the Poles. Cossacks were just as bad, maybe worse ... They came to our town by train, on their way to Russia proper. They knew where the Jewish houses were ... they thought all Jews were rich and used the stopover to plunder and attack Jews who weren't quick enough to hide ... we were lucky ... we had a solid house with heavy shutters. I remember one time, they tried to break down the shutters, and I held onto the iron bar inside which kept them closed. The Cossacks were on the outside, and I was on the inside. It comes back to me now ... *Oy!* ... it was terrible. We heard the train whistle from the station nearby .... Again we were lucky ... the Cossacks had to get back to the train, and left us ...

“... I think it was about 1916 when the Russians were driven out and the Germans took over. When they were in our *shtetl* things were slightly better. But we were still at risk because German soldiers would arrive at our houses with false requisition papers ... sometimes in the middle of the night. Everything was rationed, and simple basics were forbidden, white bread, sugar, eggs ... but we Jews made sure we'd have *Challah* for *Shabbes*.

“... one night, they came to our house, banged their guns on our door, one of them pointed to my rosy face, said I should take a candle and show them the storerooms. My father said not to go, he was afraid for me, but I was forced to go ... I couldn't help it. As I was showing them the storerooms, one started with me ... I gave him such a knock in his face, and he spat out blood. It wasn't clever of me, but I had luck ... an officer arrived, and the men ran away ... but still, the Germans were better to us than the Poles.”

“Is that when you decided to leave?” Ilana asks

*Ima* continues. “No, it wasn't that sudden. It just got worse after the war when Poland got its independence. Do you know that hundreds died in *Pogroms* after the war, between 1918 and 1920? Several hundred. No? Well believe me ... very few people realise this. Once the Germans left, the Poles started their nonsense with us ... again. On *Shabbes*, I used to go

walking in the countryside with my cousins, Dobbe and Shulamit ... the ones from Ramat Hakovesh. We must have been about 16 or 17. The peasants would swear at us, 'Zhyds' (bloody Jews). I had long dark hair, and one Saturday, a young man came over, called me 'Zhyd', and pulled my hair ... hard ... really hard. Next day, Sunday, I saw a priest on a soap box, attacking the Jews. It made me feel very bad. I didn't want to live in this place. I walked home and said I was going to live in Eretz Yisrael. Do what you will! You can kill me, but I won't stay on in Poland, It isn't a place for Jews.

"We all belonged to *Hashomer Hatzair* (a Zionist youth movement) ... my cousins, Dobbe Shulamit, Meir and Raisel. We wanted to build up *Eretz Yisrael* (the *Yishuv*) ... to settle there ... to make a life ... to live in peace as Jews ... in our own country."

"But the British made it difficult for you to get in, didn't they?" asks Ilana

"Of course they did, but what else could we do? We couldn't rely on the *Moshiach* ... 2000 years we'd been waiting ... did he do anything? No, we had to do it ourselves. How many times have I told my children '*im ein ani li, mi li*' (if I'm not for myself then who will be for me)? *Ima* catches my smile at the memory of her endless drumming this message into us, and smiles back. Then her eyes cloud over as she's brought back to reality.

"A cup of tea, Ma?" I ask, wanting to take her out of her angst for *Aba*. Lost in thought, *Ima* nods "Thanks," and as she sips continues her tale.

"During World War 1, the British promised Jews<sup>2</sup> they would have a homeland in Palestine, but their Lawrence of Arabia promised the same land to the Arabs. That's why it's called The Twice Promised Land! Now, in the early 1920's, the Arabs put pressure on the British ... don't forget they could, they had oil ... so the British, who needed the oil, decided to reduce the number of Jews coming to Palestine. They would issue permits only to Jewish men or married couples. To make us girls feel better, they told us that life in the Mandate was much too dangerous for girls who were unattached.



***Ima* (right) in Poland with her cousins, 1919**

"Our Zionist Youth Movement (*Hashomer Hatzair*) had a good idea (of how unmarried girls could get into *Eretz Yisrael*). They would get single men to 'marry' single girls ... not real marriages ... just a document to get around the quota! So my cousin Meir Odelski decided to 'marry' me and add my 'married' name to his passport. I became Mrs Odelski ... it was my mother's maiden name, so it wasn't too far from the truth ... Of course, we didn't get married, it was just a way to get two people on one permit ... and it worked."

*Ima* smiles as she recollects.

"And there were hundreds more like us. 300 to 400 couples instead of 300 to 400 single bochers (young men)!! Clever, no?"

*Ima's* face lights up. I think this is the best therapy we can give her to take her mind of the drama of *Aba's* futile fight up there in Groote Schuur Hospital.

My mother had not calculated on the opposition she was about to encounter from her father.

“My father told us we should believe in the *Moshiach* to get to Eretz Yisrael ... but we believed in self-help to get there ... I used to ask him how the *Moshiach* would solve the problems of the Jews in Poland and Russia ... and you know what he said? ‘Trust in God, the day will come when we’ll all be in Jerusalem, there’s no rush, ... ask Choni, he’ll say the same.’”

“Choni?” We chorus, and wait to hear who this Choni is.

Even though Chaim was regarded as a modern thinking, wide ranging businessman, he still firmly believed that the only way into the Promised Land, was the *Moshiach* route.<sup>3</sup> So did Choni!

*Ima* explains, “My cousin had married a brilliant scientist, Choni Einstein, first cousin to Albert Einstein ... the famous one ... the one who discovered relations (*Ima* means relativity). I don’t know if my father put him up to it, but he told me that present day Eretz Yisrael wasn’t a fit place for young Jewish girls. This brilliant scientist, he also believed we should wait for the *Moshiach*. They both tried to persuade us to change our ideas about *aliyah*.”

“Obviously he didn’t change your mind. So what happened?”

*Ima* pauses, her right eye twitches involuntarily as she struggles to get out the next few words, “Well, his cousin Albert was more sensible, and left for America. But Choni, this brilliant Choni, and his lovely wife and children ....,” *Ima* takes a deep breath. “... this brilliant scientist and his family ... they all ended up in the gas chambers of Treblinka ... like all my family ...

“You know, we managed to beat the British system, but you can’t believe what my father did when he heard our plan ....!”

“What did he do, Sabta?” Ilana’s on the edge of her chair.

“He was furious when I told him ... he took my passport ...” *Ima* shivers “and he tore it into little pieces ... then grabbed me and gave me a beating ... he told me, ‘I don’t want to hear such nonsense from you ever again ... you

understand. Isn’t life good here while we wait? You’ve got all you could ever want ... a nice home ... enough money to buy whatever you need ... I’ll find you a good man and you’ll marry him. You must wait for the *Moshiach* ... that’s when we’ll go ... together as a family .....!’”



**Chana (my mother), far left, wearing her sash, as a member of *Keren Kayemet* in Poland, 1919**

Overcome by the memory, *Ima* spits out, “The *Moshiach*? ... Hitler was the *Moshiach*!” Belief in *Moshiach* was a major reason so many Jews didn’t try to get into Israel. None of this newfangled Zionist doctrine for them or their families. Not even after Hitler had declared his intentions in *Mein Kampf*.<sup>4</sup>

Meir Odelski left on his own, to become a founder member of *Kibbutz Mishmar Ha’emek*. Dobba and Shulamit followed a few years later to become members of *Kibbutz Ramat Hakovesh*. After the run-in with her father, a young man, who had emigrated to America before the 1914 War, returned to visit his parents in Łapy. He met the modern, independent of spirit of Chana, now a beautiful woman, with a striking rosy complexion, creamy skin and a good figure. Photographs of her at that age remind me of the early Ingrid Bergman. He was smitten and asked her to marry and return to America with him. Good news for Chaim who gave the proposal his blessing, happy that his dissident daughter had made a match with a successful American. And more importantly, emigration to America didn’t require the return of the *Moshiach*. Chana, however, had other ideas, and refused the offer. She was determined to get to Israel, but

couldn't give that as her reason for refusal. She had learnt that she couldn't compete with the *Moshiach*.

In a sad voice, she recalls, "He was a very nice man, and loved me, but I didn't want to go to America. I refused. It was Israel I had to get to. But I couldn't tell them that. I kept my real thoughts secret from both of them. They'd start all over again about the *Moshiach*. I couldn't speak to my mother, she was no help at all. She did what my father told her. Round and round it went, I was already 19. When would I ever get there? How would I go? With whom? And all the time I get called *Zhyd, Zhyd*. There had to be a way ...!"

### Routes to the Promised Land

*Ima* goes on. "I worked in my father's business and he gave me a lot of responsibility. He wasn't good at collecting money that was owed to him, so that was one of my jobs ... to see we got paid ... business was really good, and I had to deal with large sums of money ... this didn't scare me ... I also had to pay merchants who supplied us. I went regularly to Warsaw, and to other big cities. During these trips I worked out a way how I could leave.

"I still belonged to the youth movement. They used the same route to *Eretz Yisrael* ... train in Warsaw, through Germany to England and then by boat. The Zionist Council in Poland paid for any couple who couldn't afford the fare. Single young women couldn't join these groups because they had to have a husband. Again they found a way around this by using a new route via Bucharest in Rumania where border controls were more relaxed. Here single men with genuine certificates were able to pair up with 'wives' and wouldn't have to go through formal marriages. I decided to join one of these groups.

"The whole scheme was a *schmichel* (subterfuge), but it worked well. Lots of young people left this way. I waited for my turn to leave with Boruchansky, the 'husband' I'd been allocated. Then I got a telegram from him ... from his little *shtetl* that the scheme had been exposed and many in the last group were arrested. He said he wasn't prepared to risk arrest by going with her in any new group.

"Boruchansky was a nice, gentle, honest man but a '*kuhne lemmele*' (ineffectual). I couldn't

lose this chance and decided to go to him to give him the courage to continue. I told my sisters I had to go away and would be back in a day or so. I bought a train ticket to his *shtetl* but was very nervous because at this very time, my father was travelling in the same area on business. My 'husband' lived in a shack with his three brothers ... a decent family, very poor. I said I had a new plan: we wouldn't go to Bucharest, but straight from Warsaw to Vienna. It would cost double but I could get enough money for both of us. We arranged to meet in Warsaw two days later. I returned to Łapy to pack my bag. My father was still away when I finally left. I never saw him again, nor my mother, nor most of my brothers and sisters ...

"... Our route would take us from Warsaw to Vienna, Vienna to Trieste. Then by boat from Trieste to Alexandria in Egypt then by train to *Eretz Yisrael*. In Trieste we met up with the new group of *Chalutzim* (pioneers). Brouchansky got cold feet and wouldn't put me on his passport without a genuine marriage licence. It had to be kosher. So, then and there, I married him officially. We sailed down the Adriatic, our first stop was Bari, a port down south on the heel of Italy. We slept on deck, no cabins, girls separate from the men, even though we were 'married'.

"I was always a bad sleeper, and one night I saw a man walking on deck, approaching us. He was black. I had never seen a black man before, and was terrified ... I tried to scream but couldn't ... I lost my voice from panic. So I pulled the hair of a girl sleeping next to me, hard, and she started screaming. The whole deck woke up. He meant no harm, and I can't explain why I was so frightened."

It's ironic that *Ima* ended up in South Africa with its millions of black people.

*Ima* finally arrived in *Eretz Yisrael* in 1923, passed through immigration control with her husband and immediately went their separate ways. He, to start his new life, wherever. And she hers, living with distant family, the Bloch-Blumenfeld's, in the new Jewish town of Tel Aviv.





TEL-AVIV, ALENBY ST.

תל-אביב רחוב אלנבי

### The Perfect Match

I do not know what kind of work she did, but suitors she had aplenty. Including Moshe Nachman Marks, newly arrived from Cape Town. At 34, he was a confirmed and bookish bachelor but he fell in love with beautiful Chana, 12 years his junior. He had one serious rival, younger and more athletic. "Very nice person," *Ima* sighs "but *Aba* seemed steadier. And he was kind to me. I decided he was the right one." No messing around, no long waiting period, they decided to get married. This wasn't as easy as it sounds, because Chana hadn't thought of getting a divorce from Boruchansky when she parted from him. She didn't even know where to start looking.

After frantic enquiries, up and down the *Yishuv*, she finally traced him to a kibbutz in the Galilee. When he saw her, he was reluctant to give her a divorce and even worse he refused to give her a *get* (a Jewish rabbinical divorce)... "I worked on him, I nagged him ... he said he loved me ... I reasoned with him. Finally, he said ok, but he'd always love me!"

Moshe Nachman and Chana married on 21 June 1925 in Tel Aviv Registry Office. At that time, Tel Aviv was being built on sand dunes at the northern edgy of the ancient port of Yafo (Jaffa). None of

the streets were paved. "I had *kadochess*," *Ima* says of those days. For years I thought '*kadochess*' meant nothing, penniless, zilch, so I always imagined *Ima* had had a terrible struggle to make ends meet. Nothing was further from the truth. The Block-Blumenfeld's were leading lights in Tel Aviv and she mixed in good circles. After the marriage they had enough money to set up a nice home. I found a deposit slip from Barclays Bank, London, transferring £1,700 to *Aba's* account in Tel Aviv.

So it seems they were financially comfortable. *Kadachat habitsot*, in fact, means malaria in Hebrew, which she contracted just after arriving in Israel. Despite malaria and searing heat, humidity and dust from the unrelenting *hamsin* (hot desert winds), and unpaved sandy roads, *Aba* and *Ima* were ecstatic at being part of the vibrant experience of building a new country. For 2000 years Jews had been praying daily for return to the Land of Israel. Whether all took it literally is another matter, but here in their lifetime, in their vital years, *Aba* and *Ima* were presented with this unbelievable opportunity to be part of it.



**My parents in 1925**

“*Rehov* Allenby didn’t have even 20 houses. We used to dance in the streets ... the *Hora* ... joining hands in a big circle, we used to sing *Heiveinu Shalom, Hava Nagila, Tzena Tzena*, and dance to an accordion .... Sometimes right through the night. As we danced our shoes made little puffs of dust, and as we moved faster, so the puffs would become clouds and work into our clothes and hair, we’d breathe dust ... but it didn’t matter. It was *Yishuv* dust, our dust ... hot and sweaty ... we drank anything to help our dusty throats ... water, *mitz* (juice), but no alcohol, not even beer. We first lived in ‘*lev Tel Aviv*’ (the heart of Tel Aviv), on Allenby. Walking home as the sun rose we sometimes saw Dizengoff riding home on his white horse from his girlfriend’s place after a night out.

“And when we weren’t singing and dancing the *Hora* we walked the beachfront singing opera with friends. *Aba*’s favourite was from the Pearl Fishers. Sometimes he took me to recitals at nearby Eden Hall ... I still have the programme for a Jascha Heifetz’s performance. Sometimes I’d meet Paula (Ben Gurion’s wife) also pushing a pram.

“Then we moved to a house with a garden, in *Rehov Hachashmona’im*, across the road from Bialik’s home. We used to go to his poetry readings. Life was so full ...” recalls *Ima*.

“This was the impossible dream come true, without the *Moshiach*. My father didn’t have to go to the gas chambers. Nor my mother ... Nor all the others ... I can’t think of *Moshiach* ...” she murmurs sorrowfully.

The scene in Palestine was constantly clouded by the fear of attack by Arabs<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, *Aba* went into business in Yafo, in partnership with a friend, Lifshitz. A member of Dov Yellin’s family, this Lifshitz had built up a trusted relationship with local Arabs. However, his wife could not adjust to life in Palestine and Lifshitz offered to sell his share to *Aba*, who was quite prepared to run the business on his own. But *Ima* worried that *Aba* wouldn’t be safe, working alone in an Arab area without the protection of Lifshitz.

My mother explains how life became even more difficult after Uri was born in January 1927. “He became dangerously ill with dysentery. I suffered from malaria and still got the shakes and fever. I had just nursed Uri back to health and then *Aba* got dysentery too. All our drinking water had to be boiled. I was afraid to take Uri for a walk more than 500 metres from our house, in case we were attacked by Arabs in the neighbourhood. We started hearing about Arab attacks and riots all over the *Yishuv*. I persuaded *Aba* to sell his share of the business. Once we were freed from this responsibility, why not use the opportunity to visit the family in Cape Town for a few months? *Aba* agreed, but said to make sure it doesn’t become years ...!” It turned out to be prophetic.

### **Return to Cape Town**

On 4 October 1927 my parents and their infant son Uri sailed on *RMS Gascon* from Port-Said to Durban where they caught a train to Cape Town bringing them back into the bosom of the family. *Ima* tried to adjust to life in the city. She had been a free spirit in the exciting, emerging *Eretz Yisrael*, but as a *greenehr* (greenhorn) in strange new Cape Town, she had to earn her spurs all over again under the critical scrutiny of the all-enveloping family headed by its patriarch, *Zeide* Yitzchak, her father-in-law.



**Family Group, Cape Town, 1930.**  
*Bobbe, centre, with my parents on her left*

My mother had to become the little woman whose place was in the home and certainly not in business ... that was a man's world, or at least the Marks-men's world. It must have been really difficult after years of being her own boss in her father's successful business in Poland. She spoke fluent Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish, passable Russian and German but no English: the Marks family spoke only Yiddish or English.

*Aba* rejoined the family business, even though he and *Chana* promised each other that they would return to *Eretz Yisrael*. At the southern tip of Africa, *Aba* and *Ima* at first thought they were far removed from world events but they were reminded that Hitler was not that far away when his supporters in South Africa, the Greyshirts, began to whip up anti-Jewish feeling just like the Brownshirts in Germany. There seemed to be no escape from anti-Semitism. Never a good feeling for Jews and especially so in the middle of an economic recession.

### Staying On

*Ima* and *Aba* had barely settled in, when my sister, *Ziona*, was born on January 22, 1929. *Ima* made her stay conditional and she told *Aba*: "We'll speak Hebrew to the children, not Yiddish. One day when we go back to our *Yishuv* they must be able to speak and understand Hebrew. Cape Town must not become home. Anyway, English they'll learn at home. Agreed?" *Aba* nodded his agreement but began to wonder when they'd ever get back. When indeed? Arab riots began in earnest in 1929.

"Stay a little longer." Begged *Bobbe*, my father's mother. They stayed a little longer.

In 1932 *Ima* gave birth to her third child, *Herzl*. They stayed a little longer.



**Living dangerously – Ima and family  
Muizenberg, 1935**

In Europe, Hitler was on the march – his anti-Jewish laws ever-more alarming.

In 1934 Zeide Yitzchak Mordukhovitz died unexpectedly while swimming in Muizenberg. *Aba* and *Ima* ‘stayed a little longer’ to shepherd *Bobbe* through her grief.

In 1935 *Ima* gave birth to her fourth child, Yitzchak. They ‘stayed a little longer’!

While *Aba* and *Ima* remained marooned in Cape Town, war clouds gathered over Europe. They lived in rented accommodation, because it was their intention to only buy a home of their own on their return to Eretz Yisrael. Ten years passed before they were able to return in 1946 at the end of World War II. In the meantime they spoke Hebrew at every opportunity.

And while they worked tirelessly to create a Jewish state in Eretz Yisrael, Britain drafted more white papers to slow down immigration of Jews into Palestine – the twice promised land.

*The author, Herzl Marks, retired after many years as joint-managing director of the Family business in Cape Town. Now living in England, he is a photo-journalist and is writing his family history titled In the Cheeks. Visit his website at:*

*[www.photoimagesgallery.com](http://www.photoimagesgallery.com)*

## References

1. The Pale of Settlement was an area in Eastern Russia which The Tsars set aside for Jewish Settlement, beyond which Jews were not permitted to live or work without the express permission of the Russian Authorities.
2. The Balfour Declaration of 1917.
3. The ultra-religious believe that the return to *Eretz Yisrael* would only come about when the Messiah comes.
4. The book written by Hitler whilst in prison in 1924 outlining his plans for world supremacy and ‘ridding the world of Jewish domination.’
5. The Arabs in Palestine had been under Ottoman rule since the 1850’s, and towards the end of the 1800’s a strong Arab nationalism took root in Egypt. The British and French were at war with the Ottomans and used this emerging Arab nationalism to help subvert the Turks. Lawrence of Arabia – a British army officer coordinated this subversion. He promised the Arabs independence at the end of WW1 as a reward for their support. Simultaneously, and quite independently, the Zionists were promised ‘*Palestine as a homeland for the Jews*’. This was later watered down in the final draft of the Balfour Declaration of 1917 to read ‘a homeland for the Jews in Palestine.’ The area during Ottoman rule was one of the four administrative areas which formed the *Pashalik* (Province) of Greater Syria. The Palestine Administrative area at that time comprised the territory from the Mediterranean Sea east across the Jordan River, and further east to what is today the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The whole area was known as Palestine. The other three administrative areas were Syria (as we now know it), Lebanon and Iraq. The reward for the Arabs’ support was independence under the Hashemite Bedouin family. Details and boundary lines were left vague and undefined as was the area designated for a Jewish homeland. After the war, Palestine changed from what it had been under the Ottomans. In 1921, the League of Nations established the following: 1. Syria – as a French mandate; 2. Lebanon – as a French mandate; 3. Iraq – as a British Protectorate; 4. Palestine – now divided into two parts: (a) The part, east of the River Jordan which became under Hashemite rule, the independent state of Transjordan, and (b) the area west of the River Jordan which became a British mandate *in which* the Jews were promised a homeland.



**OUTDSHOORN – JERUSALEM OF  
AFRICA**

***(Yerushalayim B'Drom Africa)***  
**120 Years Anniversary: 1884 – 2004**

*Faye Bourgstein*

*Acknowledgement: Susan Freedman*  
Editor, booklet *Oudtshoorn Jerusalem of Africa*

In 1880, there were three Jews in Oudtshoorn. Four years later, the Jewish population numbered 30. By 1890, approximately 100 Jewish families, mainly from Lithuania, had settled in Oudtshoorn. At its height, the population swelled to approximately 500 families, with immigrants from Poland, Estonia, Latvia, German and England making their homes in Oudtshoorn – the Jerusalem of South Africa.

In 1886 the Jewish community purchased land and built a Synagogue in Queen Street. Prominent Jewish businessmen became feather merchants, farmers, hoteliers, wholesalers, tobacco and cigarette manufacturers, and doctors.

The 1913 slump in the feather industry cost many feather-traders their businesses. With the outbreak of war in 1914, farmers and traders sold out for whatever they could recoup, and many Jewish families left town. By 1918, there were only 1073 Jewish inhabitants in Oudtshoorn, and by 1973 there were fewer than 200 Jews left in the town. In 2004, the Jewish population numbered 18 families.

Oudtshoorn celebrated the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its Jewish community. Approximately 300 ex-Oudtshoornites, local and from abroad, gathered on November 13, 2004 for an amazing unforgettable celebratory weekend. The November heat, the camaraderie, community spirit, renewing friendships, returning to one's birth place and rekindling memories, made the weekend more than a celebration – had one ever left? Cederic Novis, from Sydney, Australia, echoed the phrase "You can take the boy out of Oudtshoorn, but you cannot take Oudtshoorn out of the boy."

The Shul was filled to capacity for the Friday night *Kabbalat* Shabbat Service, followed by an *Oneg Shabbat* at the Civic Center. Saturday's *Shul* service was followed by a *Brocha*/Luncheon at the *Shul*, on Saturday afternoon, a walk, starting at the *Shul*, terminated at the C. P. Nel Museum which houses an extensive collection of Oudtshoorn

Judaica, depicting the once-vibrant life in the town, as well as the *Aron Kodesh*, *Bimah*, benches and other selected contents of the St. John Street Synagogue. On Saturday night, visitors packed the lawns at *Welgeluk* Farm, and were treated to an evening of renewing friendships, *braai* of *boerewors* and lamb chops, and live entertainment. A moving memorial Service was held at the Jewish cemetery. The weekend culminated on Sunday morning, with a farewell tea at the Synagogue.

The Oudtshoorn Jewish community, as of November 2004, consists of the following families:

Mr. & Mrs. I. Barron, Mr. & Mrs. M. Fisch, Mr. & Mrs. G. Fisch, Mr. & Mrs. L. Freedman, Mr. & Mrs. M. J. Freedman, Miss. F. Gellman, Mrs. L. Gellman, Mr. & Mrs. D. Harris, Mr. & Mrs. Ben Herman, Mr. & Mrs. Bernard Herman, Mr. & Mrs. Abie Kaplan, Mr. & Mrs. Jack Klass, Mrs. Lily Kushner, Mr. & Mrs. H. Lipschitz, Mrs. I. Lipschitz, Mr. & Mrs. S. Lipschitz, Mr. & Mrs. M. Markus, Mr. & Mrs. L. Markus, Mr. & Mrs. C. Miller, Mrs. V. Miller, Mr. I. Sussman, Mr. & Mrs. G. Wilck, Mr. & Mrs. R. Wilck, Mr. Elie Wolff, Mr. & Mrs. P. Zwarts, ... and their families.

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**INVITATION TO ROME TO RECEIVE  
RECOGNITION FOR THE  
ACHIEVEMENTS OF NELSON  
MANDELA AND LAZER SIDELSKY**

*Dov Sidelsky*

Last year (2004), my brother Colin Sidelsky received a fax from Alberto Piperno, a Jewish member of Parliament in Rome inviting the Sidelsky family to a ceremony dedicated to Nelson Mandela and the Sidelsky family. My father, Lazar Sidelsky was the Johannesburg lawyer of *Witkin, Sidelsky and Eidelman*, who employed Nelson Mandela as a law clerk in the 1940's when it was uncommon for white South Africans to provide black people with professional opportunities.

The fax received by my brother Colin stated:

In 2000, the Italian Parliament approved the law on the celebration of *Dies Memoriae* (Remembrance Day) for all the victims of the Holocaust. On that occasion, I as a Jew together with a Catholic member of Parliament and the representative for Italian Evangelists, launched a foundation with the task of celebrating (in order not to forget) this yearly event within the Italian Parliament.

Every year we have been honoured by the presence of some of the highest representatives of state, including many ambassadors, ministers and other public figures. Every event has been dedicated to a figure that represents the spirit of brotherhood between people, cultures and religions. This year, we would very much like to dedicate the event to Nelson Mandela and the Sidelsky family, as we believe they epitomize the sentiments behind our celebration....

I look forward to your reply,

Kind regards,

Alberto Piperno

The *Dies Memoriae*, or *Day of Remembrance* which was unanimously approved by the Italian Parliament and voted into law in the year 2000, is held annually on January 27<sup>th</sup> in commemoration of the date of the liberation of Auschwitz. On the occasion of his

visit to *Yad Vashem* on October 12<sup>th</sup> 1999, President Ciampi of Italy stated:

*"The Holocaust is an integral part of our memory: that is a fact, and it must remain so for coming generations; Italy does not and will not forget."*

In 2003 Premier Silvio Berlusconi said that Holocaust Memorial Day *"must be an occasion to cultivate memory in order not to forget, to combat instances of intolerance, racism and anti-Semitism which still appear in many places on earth."*

My wife Naomi and I travelled from Jerusalem to Rome for this auspicious occasion. My brother Colin and his wife Rosalind from Johannesburg, and my sister Ruth and her husband Richard Levy from London, joined us in Rome. We were met by Francesco Mancina who had become a good friend of the Sidelsky family in South Africa. He was the person responsible for relating the Sidelsky/Mandela connection to Alberto Piperno.

We arrived in Rome just after 9:00 a.m. on January 27<sup>th</sup> on a cold but dry winter's morning. We entered the big square facing the imposing and impressive *Montecitorio Palace*, built by Bernini in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century which has housed the Chamber of Deputies, the Lower House of the Italian Parliament, since 1870. We soon discovered that the ceremony and conference would not be held in the grand main parliament building, but rather in the *Sala del Cenacolo* on the Vicolo Valdina alley leading off the main square – a small, unremarkable building from the outside. However, going beyond the entrance hall into the courtyard, we were greeted by a building fronted by delicate arches and a lovely fountain in the centre of the courtyard. Entering the hall itself, we were awestruck by the magnificent Renaissance paintings in the front and back – a very special setting for the ceremony and conference which was to follow.

Alberto Piperno introduced me to some of the V.I.P's – among them, Maria Burani Procaccini, the Parliamentary Coordinator of the *Dies Memoriae*, and Minister Carlo Giovanardi, as well as Ehud Gol, the Israeli Ambassador to Italy.

Finally, around 10.00 a.m., the conference and ceremony of *Remembrance and Reconciliation* commenced with Alberto Piperno opening the conference, and Maria Burani Procaccini addressing the gathered assembly with words of introduction.

Colin addressed the audience relating the relationship between our father, Lazer Sidelsky and Nelson Mandela in colourful fashion with memorable anecdotes.

Among the others who spoke were the Israeli Ambassador, Ehud Gol, and Riccardo Di Segni, Chief Rabbi of Rome. Unfortunately we didn't have the opportunity to speak to him, as he arrived late and left shortly after his address.

A prominent Italian delivered an apology on behalf of the Fascists who persecuted the Jews during the Second World War. Unfortunately other than the addresses by Colin and me, the rest were in Italian which we did not understand. However, I felt it a special privilege to be one of the speakers and was happy to receive compliments from a few people after the ceremony.

Colin and I were interviewed for the history channel of Rome Television and would be interested in acquiring copies of the videos and news reports of this special occasion. Photos were taken of Naomi and me and members of the family took photos of Colin and me while we were addressing the assembled gathering.

In conclusion, what made this occasion so special, was that we could all be together as a family – representing our dear Mother Goldie, and receiving the honours due to our Father, of blessed memory.

Upon returning to Israel I have repeated the address, *Divrei Torah*, that I delivered in Rome on two occasions:

First, when I told our *shul* Rabbi, *Rav* Raphy Feurstein, of my visit to Rome, he requested that I repeat my *Divrei Torah* to the Congregation that Shabbat (*Parshat Mishpatim*).

I told the congregation how Nelson Mandela was articulated to my father Lazer Sidelsky – information known by only three other couples in the congregation. I added two special anecdotes to my *Divrei Torah*. The response of the congregation was overwhelming.

Second, when I told the founder and coordinator of my *Kollel* at *Hechal Shlomo*, Max Weil, about our visit to Rome, he urged me to address the *Kollel*, and on 4 *Adar Aleph* (13<sup>th</sup> February), I related the association of Lazer Sidelsky and Nelson Mandela,

concluding with my address to the Italian Parliamentary Conference. The response again was overwhelming.

The Sidelsky Family prepared and presented the following address to the Italian Parliament:

**ADDRESS TO THE ITALIAN  
PARLIAMENT ON *DIES MEMORIAE*  
27 January 2005 – 17 Shevat 5765**

We, the members of the Sidelsky Family regard this ceremony to honour the achievements of Nelson Mandela, former State President of South Africa, and our late Father, Lazer Sidelsky, as a mark of awesome distinction.

As you will see, it is by no mere coincidence that you have chosen this particular day of this year to bestow your honours. Rather, by heavenly providence, this day has been ordained to pay homage to Nelson Mandela and Lazer Sidelsky, of blessed memory.

Our Father, Lazer Sidelsky, passed away on *Shavuot*, the Feast of Pentecost, three years ago. On that day, we the Jewish people, celebrate *Zman Matan Torateinu, The Giving of the Torah – The Law on Mount Sinai*. The Portion of the Law which we read on that holy day is *Parshat Yitro* – the portion of Jethro. And on this coming Sabbath, it is that very same portion that Jews throughout the world read in Synagogue, *Parshat Yitro* – the portion of Jethro.

Surely it was heavenly providence that Lazer Sidelsky, the lawyer, was called up to join his Maker on the day that we celebrate the Receiving of the Law and today we join you, the people of Italy and the members of the Italian Parliament in celebrating the achievements of Nelson Mandela and Lazer Sidelsky, of blessed memory.

It is remarkable that the *Torah* Portion of the receiving of the Law is not called by the name of Moses, but rather after, *Yitro* – Jethro, the Priest from Midian, his father-in-law. We read in the *Torah* Portion of the Day:

*And Moses told his father-in-law all the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to Egypt ... and how the Lord delivered them... And Jethro rejoiced for all the goodness, which the Lord*

*had done to Israel, whom he had delivered out of the hand of Egypt.*

Later on, we read how Jethro counsels Moses:

*Be thou the link between the people and God, that thou may bring the cases to God; and thou shall teach them the ordinances and the laws and thou shall show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do. Moreover thou shall provide from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth ... and place such over them ...*

It is remarkable that Jethro, the priest of Midian, counsels Moses on the implementation of the law before he ascends Mount Sinai to receive the Law on behalf of the Children of Israel. How appropriate are these verses that precede the story of the receiving of the Law on Mount Sinai to our two heroes – Lazer Sidelsky, the Jewish lawyer, and Nelson Mandela, the young African university graduate from the Transkei, who in their own ways would contribute to the freeing of South Africa from the slavery of *Apartheid*, each contributing to the future creation of a society where all people would be equal before the law of the land and all being able to vote for the Parliament of the land.

Nelson Mandela, in his book, *Long Walk To Freedom*, writes:

*“The fact that Lazer Sidelsky ... would take on a young African as an articulated clerk was something unheard of in those days. Mr Sidelsky, whom I came to respect greatly and who came to treat me with enormous kindness ... took a genuine interest in my welfare and future, preaching the value and importance of education – for me individually and for Africans in general.”*

The pinnacle of the saga of this week’s Reading of the Law is the *Decalogue*, the Ten Commandments – the symbol of every civilized country’s basic constitution and code of law. What is further remarkable about this ceremony taking place here, in the city of Rome, is that Lazer Sidelsky had a great love for Latin, the language of the Ancient Romans and he majored in Latin

for his B.A. degree. He prided himself in knowledge of the Codex Justiniani.

I would like to add two special anecdotes:

\*When Nelson Mandela was in prison on Robben Island I used to say a special prayer for his release. Monday and Thursday morning after the Reading of the Torah, we recite the following words: *As for our brethren, the whole house of Israel (and I would add: including the Righteous Gentiles of the world, among them, Nelson Mandela) who are in distress or in captivity ... may God have mercy on them ... and grant them relief from their distress, bringing them from darkness to light, from servitude to liberty, speedily and very soon, and let us say, Amen.*

My father sent a copy of the prayer to Mandela through his attorney. A few years later, during his last year as a prisoner, Mandela was kept in a prison warden’s house. Our father was given special permission to visit him. During their conversation Mandela asked, “How is your son, Barry?” Dad then reminded him that I was continuing to say a prayer for his release. When he heard this, he was overcome by emotion and tears rolled down his eyes.

\*One of the remarkable features of Nelson Mandela when he rose to power and became the first President of the New South Africa, was that, unlike almost every other leader of “freedom fighters” who came to power and sought to take revenge upon their former oppressors, Nelson Mandela declared a *Policy of Reconciliation* towards those whites who were personally responsible for the oppression and repression of the blacks of South Africa. The Prosecutor at Mandela’s trial, was an observant Jew, Dr Percy Yutar. One would have thought that Dr Yutar and many others would have been sentenced to long periods of imprisonment when Mandela’s government came to power. I recall going to *shul* on a visit to South Africa and seeing there Percy Yutar, a free man. This was one of the many aspects of Mandela’s greatness – his special compassion, his willingness to forgive the terrible wrongs of the past and to aspire to build a united and harmonious society for the future.

Nelson Mandela and Lazer Sidelsky were in their own individual ways modern replicas of Jethro and Moses of old, showing by their own example how to

be dedicated to the pursuit of the laws and ordinances of a free, liberated South Africa where all would be equal before the law.

It is our hope and prayer that through this ceremony to honour the good deeds of Nelson Mandela and Lazer Sidelsky for the benefit of the brotherhood of mankind, there will be ushered in an era of Peace for Italy, South Africa and Israel and all the nations of the world, and may we see the fulfillment of the Psalmist's prayer:

*I will hear what God, the Lord, will speak; for he will speak peace to his people and his pious ones. ... Surely His salvation is near to them that fear him, that glory may dwell in our land. Love and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth will spring out of the earth and righteousness will look down from heaven. (Psalms 85:9-12)*

\* These 2 sections were added when I addressed the *Dati Leumi* Congregation in *Har Nof* and the *Kollel Sinai* in the *Hechal Shlomo* Library.

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**The 25th IAJGS International  
Conference on Jewish Genealogy**

**will be held 10 - 15 July 2005**

**at the**

**Flamingo Hotel**

**In Las Vegas, Nevada**

***For more information about the  
conference, see:***

***<http://www.jgssn.org/>***

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#### **Israel**

##### **The 75th Anniversary Celebrations in Kibbutz Yizrael on the 30th of June 2005**

For more info contact-

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Riwa Lapid (+972) 09 - 7745407 r-lapid@zahav.net.il

Arnie Friedman (+972) 04 - 6598309 arn\_peg@yizrael.org.il

#### **South Africa**

We will be having 3 gala dinners in September

**Durban** - 7th of September 2005

For more info contact:

Cookie Isaacs (+27) 31 564 7176 barryi@mweb.co.za

Lynn Foster (+27) 31 205 1874 foster5@mweb.co.za

**Johannesburg** - 8th of September 2005

For more info contact:

Evelyn Lever (+27) 011 784 3509 lever@telkomsa.net

Wayne Sussman (+27) 011 786 7046 sussman@habo.org.za

**Cape Town** - 11th of September 2005

For more info contact

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Shirley Magid (+27) 21 464 6763 capetown@habo.org.za

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