SHEMOT

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RESEARCHING SA JEWISH GENEALOGY

by Roy Ogus and Saul Issroff

FIRST, some historical background. South Africa lies at the southern tip of the African continent with a population of approximately 43 million. Prior to 1600, the key inhabitants of the region were the Bushmen and Hottentot people in the west and the Bantu tribes who lived in the east, who migrated down from the interior of Africa.

European interest in the Cape of Good Hope, on the southernmost tip of South Africa, arose from its strategic location on the sea route from Europe to the East Indies. In 1652, the first European settlers from the Dutch East India Company set up a supply base at the present site of Cape Town, for its ships on their way to the Far East.

Soon afterwards, some employees left the firm and started independent farming in the surrounding area. They became known as *Boers* [farmers] and were soon joined by French and German settlers. By 1795, the white population had spread some 500 miles from Cape Town and the colony had a total population of 60,000.

Their descendants are Afrikaners (people of Dutch, German and French descent) who speak Afrikaans, which derives from Dutch. Afrikaners now comprise some 60 per cent of the white population, inhabitants of European descent, who number about six million.

The remaining two-fifths are mainly of British descent and speak English as their native language. Their forebears arrived in the 1820s. Jews are included as part of the English group. After France conquered The Netherlands in 1795, the British occupied the Cape Colony to keep it out of French hands and it was formally given to them in 1814.

Boer resentment

The Boers soon came to resent British colonial rule as English was the only official language. In 1834, Britain abolished slavery throughout its empire, ruining a number

The Gardens Synagogue in Cape Town, built in 1863. The Cape Town Hebrew Congregation was founded in 1841, making it the oldest congregation in South Africa

of Boer farmers who depended on slave labour to work their farms. This dissatisfaction came to a head in 1836, when there was a mass exodus of Boers from the Cape Colony into the interior of the country.

This journey, known as "The Great Trek" brought the Boers into direct contact with the Bantu living there which resulted in many clashes and much bloodshed. Eventually, the Boers settled in areas now known as Natal, the Orange Free State (OFS), and the Transvaal.

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

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

In 1902, the war ended with a British victory and the Transvaal and OFS became British colonies. In 1910, Britain allowed the four colonies of the Transvaal, Cape, Natal, and OFS to form the Union of South Africa, a self-governing country within the British Empire.

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

In 1948, the Afrikaner Nationalist Party won the general election for the first time, and its *apartheid* programme [Afr: separation of the races] was instituted. There was strong international opposition to these policies, which suppressed and eventually banned all black opposition parties.

In 1961, South Africa left the Commonwealth and in the ensuing years, economic and other sanctions were continually applied against the country to pressure the government into relaxing or abolishing its *apartheid* policies. Internal unrest was prevalent throughout the country.

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

Jewish migration

Jewish links to South Africa started with the Portuguese voyages of exploration around the Cape of Good Hope in 1452. Jews participated in these early voyages as map makers, navigators, and sailors. However, the Portuguese were not interested in permanent settlement in the Cape, but sailed around it to access the profitable trading areas of Asia.

The first Dutch settlers in 1652 reportedly included two Jews, but they soon converted to Christianity, because the Dutch East Indies Company allowed only Protestant Christians to reside in the Cape.

Although Jewish links to South Africa start quite early in the country's history, legal immigration began only at the beginning of the 19th century when freedom of religion was permitted. About 16 Jews were among the 1820 British settlers, and more followed soon afterwards. In 1841, Benjamin Norden founded the first Jewish Congregation in Cape Town. Most of the early Jewish settler families were totally assimilated and had few Jewish connections.

By 1880, approximately 4,000 Jews lived in South Africa and Jewish immigration increased rapidly thereafter

as the first large wave of Jewish immigration took place. Significant numbers of Jews began to arrive from Lithuania for various reasons. The Russian *pogroms* (1881-1884) and other catastrophes: droughts, floods, deportation, and fires were major factors in the emigration.

South Africa offered strong potential for economic success, particularly following the discovery of diamond fields in Kimberley in 1869 and gold fields in the Transvaal in 1886.

The South African census of 1911 enumerated about 47,000 Jews, almost all of whom were from Lithuania. Jewish immigrants came by ship, most to Cape Town, although a minority entered at Durban, Lourenço Marques (previously Delgoa Bay, now known as Maputo, the capital of Mozambique), and Port Elizabeth.

Mass immigration

Major waves of migration occurred from 1895 onwards and British shipping agents had sub-agents in Lithuanian villages who accepted bookings for passage to South Africa. Many Jews embarked initially at the port of Libau [German]/ Liepāja [Lith.] on the Baltic Sea and were transported on small cargo boats to England. Fewer numbers passed through Hamburg or Bremen.

Many who arrived first in Grimsby or London were taken to the Poor Jews' Temporary Shelter[1] in the East End of London, where they were provided board, lodgings, medical services and travel advice. From November 1902 to November 1903, 3,600 of the 4,500 individuals helped by the Poor Jews' Temporary Shelter went to South Africa, most on the Union Castle Line to Cape Town. Many records of their clients are available, and a searchable database is available.

SOUTHERN AFRICAN JEWISH GENEALOGY SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP (*SA-SIG*)

The *JewishGen SA-SIG*[2] provides a forum for a free exchange of ideas, research tips and information of interest to those researching Jewish family history in the communities of South Africa, Lesotho (Basutoland), Botswana (Bechuanaland), Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia), Zambia (Northern Rhodesia), Swaziland, Mozambique, Kenya, and the former Belgian Congo.

The *SA-SIG* maintains a comprehensive set of web pages that provide a portal to the *SIG*'s extensive collection of information about Southern African genealogical research, as well as access to other resources such as South African-related databases and the SA-related microfilms available in the Mormon Family History Library (FHL).[3]

A concise compilation of the key South African genealogical resources, together with the relevant contact information, can be found on the *SA-SIG* website. The *SA-SIG* web pages should be the first point of reference for anyone who is researching South African Jewish genealogy.
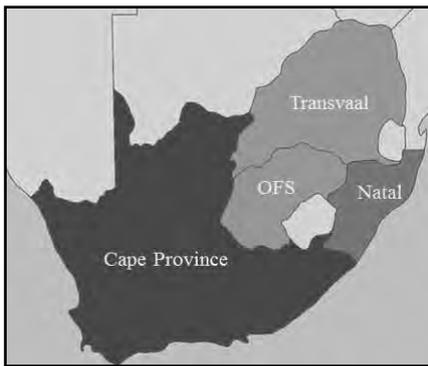
The pre-1994 provinces of South Africa, useful for genealogical research

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

A second wave of Jewish immigration occurred during the 1920s. The majority of these immigrants were also from Lithuania. The deteriorating conditions following World War I and the Russian Revolution, spurred emigration. Restrictions on immigration, imposed in 1921, diverted many to South Africa of those who had intended to emigrate to America.

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

From 1970 to 1992, there was a large exodus of Jews from South Africa due to the deteriorating political situation. About 39,000 left, but 10,000 Israelis emigrated to South Africa during the same period. The peak Jewish population was 120,000, constituting 2.7 per cent of whites with the current population of c. 88,000 representing 1.8 per cent.

Homogeneous community

The contemporary Jewish community in South Africa has some distinctive characteristics. It is predominantly of Lithuanian origin and homogeneous. It is overwhelmingly Ashkenazi with a small Sephardi population in Cape Town.

There is a low level of intermarriage and the community is somewhat socially isolated from the general population, South African Jews are relatively affluent and well educated, and a high value is placed on education with emphasis on traditional and Zionist ideals, and strong support of Israel. Typically, they are not directly involved in national politics but were prominent in the anti-*apartheid* and liberation movements.

About 80 per cent are members of orthodox congregations but these cover much of the conservative view as well with a small reform affiliation. Most Jews originally lived in Johannesburg or Cape Town while smaller, significant communities existed in Durban, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth, and East London. More than 1,000 rural towns and settlements also had a Jewish presence, although most now have few Jews or none at all.

Today, Jews live predominantly in Johannesburg and Cape Town with fewer, much smaller communities elsewhere. The official central body in the community is the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, which represents all major Jewish organisations and congregations to the government.

Genealogical information

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

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

The National Archives of South Africa. Before the formation of the union in 1910, separate archives existed for each of the four colonies. After union, the colonial archives were transferred to the control of the central government under a state archives system named The National Archives of South Africa.[4] The former colonial archives maintained their separate identities as depots of the state archives.

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

A repository of the SA NA system, the Western Cape Provincial Archives and Records Service, in Cape Town

The **National Automated Archival Information Retrieval System** (NAAIRS) serves as a finding aid to assist users to identify and locate archival material that is relevant to their requirements. Searching of the NAAIRS database is available on the Internet.[4]

Example death notice document from Transvaal, 1911

Example naturalisation document from Cape Colony, 1907

NAAIRS contains only information about archival material references and not the texts of the actual documents. Having identified a particular reference of interest, a user would usually arrange to visit the repository concerned to consult the documents or request further information or copies where such services are available.

Some documents have been withdrawn from photocopying due to their fragile condition. In addition, the repository may charge a fee for copying long documents, or recommend that a local researcher be engaged to do so.

As many different types of documents of genealogical interest can be found in the archives, including estate documents, naturalisation papers and legal proceedings, NAAIRS is most useful for genealogical searches.

Copies of vital record certificates (BMD) are available from the **Office of the Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths** in the Department of Home Affairs.[5] This government office will respond to mailed requests for records.

Use of standard forms is suggested when submitting these requests and one should specify that unabridged certificates are needed. One needs to supply a relatively accurate date and place of the event for the requested certificate. Note that birth and marriage certificates contain a significant amount of useful genealogical data, but death notices (see below) contain more useful information than death certificates.

LDS Family History Library microfilms. The Mormon Family History Library (FHL)[3] has a surprisingly large number of South African documents on microfilm. More importantly, these microfilms are available at Family History centres worldwide.

Key categories of documentation that are available in the LDS films include estate/probate documentation, applications for naturalisation and death certificates.

Estate/probate documentation includes death notices, wills and liquidation/distribution accounts. Other documents such as ante-nuptial agreements may be found in some cases. Death notices are particularly useful since they may contain information on the deceased's place of birth, parents' names, details of marriages as well as the names and birth dates of children or siblings, if the deceased had no children. Death certificates do not contain most of this information.

Available FHL microfilm of the indexes and actual estate documentation include

Cape	Estates Estate registers	1834-1950 1950-1989 (only date of death and estate number)
Transvaal	Estates	1873-1950
Natal	Estates	1871-1950
Orange FS	Estates	1853-1950

Applications for naturalisation (Cape Colony only)

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

Death certificates (of limited genealogical value)

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

National coverage	1955-1965
Cape Province	1895-1928
Transvaal	1864-1954

A summary of the key documents in the LDS microfilms of interest to those pursuing Jewish genealogical research in South Africa, together with the applicable microfilm numbers, can be found on the *SA-SIG* website.[3]

The **Offices of the Master of the Supreme Court** contain estate files for the periods subsequent to those housed in the National Archives repositories. There are six offices, including those in Cape Town and Pretoria.

If estate files cannot be found in either the state archives or the FHL microfilms, they can be obtained from one of the Master's offices. Documents may only be viewed during a personal visit; requests by mail are not entertained.

Online archives

Ancestry24[6] is a comprehensive online archive of records about individuals who have lived in South Africa since the late 1600s. The site features an extensive collection of searchable databases containing millions of records, and a growing image library of gravestones and other pictures.

Transcribed from original documents and reliable resources, *Ancestry24* databases include births, baptisms, marriages, death and estate records, burials, passenger lists, military records, government newspaper announcements of deceased persons, family trees, and voter lists.

Numerous Jewish records can be found in the databases, one of which is dedicated specifically to a collection of Jewish burial records. *Ancestry24* offers free searching of their databases but a subscription is needed to access detailed records.

The *South African Jewish Yearbooks* of 1928, 1953-1954 and 1961-1962, have brief biographies of many well-known Jews, including their towns of origin. The library

has microfilmed various publications of the South African Jewish press from the turn of the 20th century.

> Kaplan Centre: The South African Centre for Jewish Migration and Genealogy studies was set up primarily to research the estimated 15,000 core families who migrated to Southern Africa between 1850-1950 mainly from England, Germany, Lithuania, Latvia and Belarus.
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> The centre is under the umbrella of the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Institute for Jewish Studies at the University of Cape Town. Their aims are to map the entire history of Jewish migration and settlement in South Africa and to integrate the genealogical data in multi-disciplinary research.
>
> Extensive records of births, cemeteries, communities and congregations, marriages, military records, naturalizations, passenger arrivals, and shipping manifests have been collected and are incorporated in a searchable master database, the *SA Jewish Rootsbank.*[7]

South African Jewish Board of Deputies. This organisation holds passenger lists documenting the details of Jewish immigrants to South Africa from 1924 to 1929. Other holdings include an extensive collection of at least 60 years of newspaper items referring to individual Jews. These are indexed and include obituaries.

A potentially useful source of genealogical information is several Yiddish newspapers published in the early 1900s. In the 1920s, the newspapers published on a weekly basis listed many people in Eastern Europe looking for relatives who had moved to South Africa.

South African Friends of *Beth Hatefutsoth* (SAFBH). In its *Country Communities* series, the SAFBH has been documenting the history of Jews in the country towns and villages of South Africa.

Five volumes have been published covering the northern and eastern Transvaal areas, the northern and western Cape, the southern and eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and the Free State.

(**Editor**: See article by Rose Norwich on page **18**.)

Jewish burial records. *Chevra Kadisha* records in *JOWBR*. One of the unifying movements within the South African Jewish community was the development of the *Chevra Kadisha* [burial] societies. These societies not only deal with burials but with general aid to the sick and needy.

They exist in all major centres of Jewish population and records from many of the older societies are held at the Jewish Board of Deputies and the Kaplan Centre (in the *Rootsbank* database). The *JewishGen* Online Worldwide Burial Registry database (*JOWBR*)[8] contains all the records, among others, from the Bloemfontein, Johannesburg and Pretoria Jewish cemeteries as well as records from Cape Town, Bulawayo and other South African cemeteries.

The **Cape Town Jewish Cemeteries Maintenance Board** (CMB), with representation from groups such as the United *Chevra Kadisha*, the SA Jewish Board of Deputies, the Progressive Jewish Congregation of Cape Town and the Union of Orthodox Synagogues, has been established as a community-based controlling body of all the Jewish cemeteries in the Cape Peninsula.

The CMB assumed responsibility for the following cemeteries and maintains an online database of burials at these sites. Pinelands 1, Pinelands 2, Muizenberg, Woltemade Gate 8, 7th Avenue Maitland and Albert Road Woodstock.[9]
The Genealogical Society of South Africa (*GSSA*) offers a number of resources including burial records that are accessible from *eGSSA*, its virtual online branch.

These resources include a number of databases which contain a collection of records and images from a wide variety of sources. One collection of particular interest to Jewish researchers is a database of gravestone photographs which contains a significant number of Jewish monuments. One can search the database using the deceased's name information. To identify all the Jewish records, one need only type "Jewish" into the surname field on the search page.

The *eGSSA* also offers a document extraction service in the National Archives, where a *GSSA* researcher will visit a particular National Archives branch and take high-quality photographs of the requested document pages and return the images to the requester for a nominal charge. All resources are available from their home page.[10]

Ancestry24 **burial records.** One of the *Ancestry* databases is dedicated to a collection of Jewish burial records.

Other sources

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

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REFERENCES
1. *http://chrysalis.its.uct.ac.za/cgi/cgi_shelter.exe.*
2. *SA-SIG* maintains a full set of web pages, *www.jewishgen. org/safrica*, containing an extensive collection of information about SA genealogical research. A compilation can be found at *www.jewishgen.org/safrica/conferences/SA-SIG-Resources.pdf.* An extensive bibliography of publications to those researching SA can be found at *www.jewishgen.org/SAfrica/bibliography/index.htm.*
3. *www.jewishgen.org/safrica/mormon-fhc/index.htm.*
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■ An earlier version of this article appeared in *Roots-Key*, the journal of the Los Angeles JGS.