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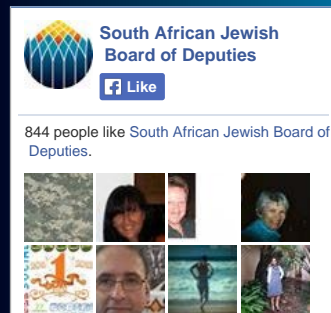


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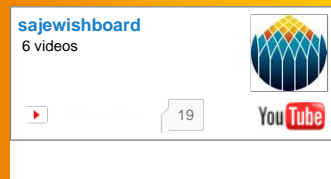
The SAJBD's mission is to work for the betterment of human relations between Jews and all other peoples of South Africa, based on mutual respect, understanding and goodwill, and to protect the civil liberties of South African Jews. It is committed to a South Africa where everyone will enjoy freedom from the evils of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination.

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**JEWISH AFFAIRS PESACH 2014 EDITION**

by THE SAJBD on 10 APRIL 2014  
in JEWISH AFFAIRS

Pesach 2014

This Pesach 2014 issue of Jewish Affairs is divided into two broad themes. The first looks at the legacy of Jewish Lithuania, providing perspectives by those who were born and grew up there, those descendants of Jewish Lithuanians who have returned to visit and from a renowned rabbi and historian on Lithuanian Jewry's enduring spiritual-intellectual heritage. Veronica Belling, Natalie Ginsberg and Joseph Rabie are all descendants of Lithuanian Jews who settled in South Africa. In their accounts of visiting the land of their forebears, they bring their particular family experiences and academic training to bear in describing their thoughts and feelings on confronting the echoes of a culture that was all but obliterated seventy years ago. The Lithuanian boyhood of Solly Per features in a memoir written up by his daughter-in-law, Linda Per, and the editor tells the harrowing yet also inspiring story of Lithuanian Jews who escaped the Nazi killing machine through being sent to a Soviet slave labour camp just days before the German invasion. The opening article by Rabbi Berel Wein is taken from the recent book *The Legacy: Teaching of the Great Lithuanian Rabbis*, co-authored with South African Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein. This stresses the importance of ethical, moral conduct and fitting inter-personal conduct in Jewish philosophy, one of the areas in which Lithuanian Jewry did much to enrich the Jewish world.

Part two of this issue deals more broadly with the themes of identity and culture. Gwynne Schrire's witty and erudite take on Jewish eating habits through the ages provides, as it were, much food for thought on the question of how much diet and Jewish identity are intertwined. Bev May, a new contributor, exams with much sensitivity the complex area of gender in Jewish tradition. The extent to which the British connection has influenced Jewish modes of worship in South Africa is addressed by David Sher, and SAJBD archivist and frequent contributor Naomi Musiker looks back on an invaluable oral history project conducted by the Jewish Historical and Sociological Society in the middle of the last century. Finally, veteran Israeli scholar Dr Aryeh Newman puts the case for a more open and flexible approach to current Halachic challenges.

Book reviews include Ralph Zulman on Robe Rose's take on a local Jewish Ponzi scammer and two new studies focusing on the theme of immigration from Eastern Europe. Hazel Frankel's original Yiddish poem poignantly relates to the opening theme of this Jewish Affairs issue.

On behalf of the Editorial Board of Jewish Affairs, I wish you all a Chag Pesach Kasher v'Sameach.

David Saks  
Editor



About The SAJBD

The SAJBD has written 174 articles on the SAJBD website. The South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) is the central representative institution of the South African Jewish community.

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**Dr Ute Ben Yosef** April 10, 2014 at 18:38

Thank you for this wonderfully enriching edition of "Jewish Affairs"



Ute Ben Yosef



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# JEWISH AFFAIRS

## MISSION

In publishing JEWISH AFFAIRS, the SA Jewish Board of Deputies aims to produce a cultural forum which caters for a wide variety of interests in the community. The journal will be a vehicle for the publication of articles of significant thought and opinion on contemporary Jewish issues, and will aim to encourage constructive debate, in the form of reasoned and researched essays, on all matters of Jewish and general interest.

JEWISH AFFAIRS aims also to publish essays of scholarly research on all subjects of Jewish interest, with special emphasis on aspects of South African Jewish life and thought. Scholarly research papers that make an original contribution to their chosen field of enquiry will be submitted to the normal processes of academic refereeing before being accepted for publication.

JEWISH AFFAIRS will promote Jewish cultural and creative achievement in South Africa, and consider Jewish traditions and heritage within the modern context. It aims to provide future researchers with a window on the community's reaction to societal challenges. In this way the journal hopes critically to explore, and honestly to confront, problems facing the Jewish community both in South Africa and abroad, by examining national and international affairs and their impact on South Africa.

The SA Jewish Board of Deputies is committed to dialogue and free enquiry. It aims to protect human rights and to strive for better relations among peoples of diverse cultural backgrounds in South Africa.

The columns of JEWISH AFFAIRS will therefore be open to all shades of opinion. The views expressed by the contributors will be their own, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Editor, the Editorial Board or the Publishers.

However, in keeping with the provisions of the National Constitution, the freedom of speech exercised in this journal will exclude the dissemination of hate propaganda, personal attacks or invective, or any material which may be regarded as defamatory or malicious. In all such matters, the Editor's decision is final.

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### *Main front cover image*

Telz Yeshiva, Cleveland, circa 1956: From left, Rabbi Chaim Mordecai Katz (Telz), Rabbi Aharon Kotler (Lakewood-Kletz), Rabbi Yaakov Ruderman (Baltimore) and Telz students Avraham Tanzer and Azriel Goldfein. Rabbi Tanzer went on to serve for over fifty years as Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva College in Johannesburg while Rabbi Goldfein founded the Yeshiva Gedolah in Johannesburg.

The accompanying front cover images also appear and are identified in the article by Veronica Belling and Natalie Ginsburg, in this issue.

Original, unpublished essays of between 1 000 and 6 000 words on all subjects are invited, and should be sent to:

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# JEWISH AFFAIRS

VOL. 69 ♦ NO. 1 ♦ PESACH 2014

Editor: David Saks

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# SEEKING PATHS OF PLEASANTNESS



Berel Wein

**Editor's Note:** 2013 saw the appearance of *The Legacy: Teachings for Life from the Great Lithuanian Rabbis*, co-authored by South African Chief Rabbi Dr. Warren Goldstein and the world-renowned historian and lecturer Rabbi Berel Wein. Both authors are students of rebbeim from the Lithuanian tradition. The primary focus of their book is to relay the mussar lessons – that area of Jewish law relating to moral conduct and ethics governing everyday behavior - taught by the Torah giants of Lithuania. In addition, it includes two chapters, both written by Rabbi Wein, relating the history of the Mussar and the Yeshiva movements in pre-war Lithuania and the disproportionate influence these had, and continue to have, throughout the Jewish world.

The following article comprises Chapter One of *The Legacy*, which is hereby reprinted in its entirety with the kind permission of the authors. The book can be obtained at all Jewish bookshops in South Africa, via [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com). or at [www.korenpub.com/EN](http://www.korenpub.com/EN).

The Torah's goal, emphasized by many of the leading Lithuanian rabbis, is to create a deeply sensitive, caring, modest, introspective and pleasant person. Pleasantness is not a surface characteristic, for it is cultivated within the inner recesses of each person.

It is generally accepted that concern for others is the key to being a good person. To the Jew, however, true concern is not expressed in random and sporadic acts of good – no matter how individually noble those acts may be – but in cultivating the governing characteristic and attitude of pleasantness. Good habits and good actions can become habitual, but the platform upon which all of this goodness is built is the individual's inner pleasantness and serenity of soul.

Is pleasantness inborn or the product of environmental or societal training? To answer that question, we must differentiate between politeness and pleasantness. There are many societies in our world that are very polite, but at the same time quite unpleasant. Politeness is only a social norm, not necessarily a true character trait. Pleasantness, on the other hand, involves a deep caring and tolerance to others. Of course, politeness is stressed throughout Jewish and Talmudic works as a necessary and worthy attribute.<sup>1</sup> But to engender a climate of pleasantness, both the society and the individual have to develop a culture that fosters a pleasant outlook on life.

This value was not unique to Lithuanian Jews, of course, for it is deeply rooted in Torah sources. A verse in Proverbs states that the Torah's paths are paths of pleasantness and all of its ways lead to peace.<sup>2</sup> This is not to be understood merely as a pious platitude or an optimistic hope: it is a fundamental value of Judaism. In fact, Judaism can be described as a set of values that govern human behaviour in personal, social, monetary

and ritual matters. Each of these values – in the abstract and isolated – is holy and true and governing. Yet, sometimes they can conflict with one another when applied in the real world of human and social life.

The primary example of this type of conflict is the one of peace versus truth. The Talmud in *Kesubos*<sup>3</sup> raises the question of praise for a bride on her wedding day. The opinion of the House of Shammai was that the truth will be out: words of praise must be accurate and specific to that particular bride. The House of Hillel was of the opinion that the praise should be lavish and standard for all brides, for the idea of peace and harmony should overcome that of absolute truth in such a circumstance. As in most instances, we rule according to the House of Hillel, and discretion wins over what could be hurtful truths.

A resolution of the conflict between these two values can be found in the Torah itself. When an angel told Sarah that she would give birth to a child, she laughed to herself saying, "Now that I am old and withered, will I again become fresh and young? And my master is very old!"<sup>4</sup> But when communicating Sarah's wonder to Avraham, the Lord omits the comment that Sarah made about Avraham being old. The value of absolute truth and accuracy is compromised in favour of domestic harmony and household peace. It is a powerful teaching – an example of the Torah helping us understand its basic values and guiding us in determining which values are paramount when they conflict with each other.

Far from being a vague mandate for cordiality, the "paths of pleasantness" represent an absolute value in Jewish law and thought. We find its presence in *halachic* issues. When discussing the Four Species specified by the Torah to be taken on *Sukkos*, the Talmud determines that certain types of plants of those species may not be used because they are dangerous due to their thorns,

or because they are poisonous – and therefore inconsistent with the value of pleasantness.<sup>5</sup> One does not use threatening or offensive utensils when performing a *Mitzvah*.

Moreover, the Torah does not ordain acts that are inconsistent with pleasantness. The concept of levirate marriage is tempered by dedication to this value.<sup>6</sup> In his seminal work *Meshech Chochmah* the great Lithuanian sage, Rabbi Meir Simchah of Dvinsk, states that the reason women are not included in the commandment to be fruitful and multiply is the danger and pain involved in childbirth.<sup>7</sup> Though maternal instinct urges them to want to have children, the Torah does not command them to do so – for such a mandate would be a violation of the supreme value of pleasantness that underpins all Torah understanding and law.

Though the English term “pleasantness” has a benign tone, the concept is robust in Jewish life, and paramount in Torah law and behaviour. In its broadest sense, it is the basis for many of the particular *mitzvos* and laws of the Torah. The Torah prohibits actions – stealing, murdering, slandering others, for example – that violate the essential principle of pleasantness, while positive commandments – such as hospitality, charity, caring for the sick, and comforting the bereaved – exemplify pleasantness in human affairs. The seven Noahide laws,<sup>8</sup> which Judaism holds to be universal for all humankind, are basically laws of pleasantness that lead to a dignified and just society.

Because of this emphasis, a concept arose in Judaism that took on societal importance, though it was not codified in absolute law: one is prohibited from doing things that are not nice. Public opinion of the probity of person’s behaviour was always to be taken into account.<sup>9</sup> A good Jew was usually defined in Jewish life in terms of pleasantness and goodness toward others and not exclusively in terms of observance and piety. The common response of Lithuanian Jews regarding the *frumkeit* of a person was “*frum iz a galach*,”<sup>10</sup> i.e., that superficial religiosity – exclusively concentrating on personal spirituality and punctilious observances of the law – is not the measure of a good Jew; it belongs to monks. A good Jew lives by the overall values of the Torah, including consideration and pleasantness in human affairs.

In the introduction to his monumental commentary to Torah, *Haamek Davar*, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (known by the acronym, Netziv) describes our ancestors in Genesis as *yesharim*: pleasant, straight, unbiased, righteous people. In a veiled criticism of attitudes that were already apparent in his time in Eastern European Jewish life, he points out that in Second Temple times, even though there was widespread observance of Torah laws, and there were many great *talmidei chachamim* (Torah scholars) within Jewish society, the Temple was destroyed

because if unwarranted hatred, intolerance and false condemnations of one another by different groupings within Jewish society.<sup>11</sup> Anyone who had different ideas or who deviated from what one group thought to be Jewishly correct, politically or socially, was immediately branded as an *apikores* (a non-believer and heretic). In that context, the Netziv points out that God is, so to speak, *Yashar* and therefore cannot abide “righteous” people who are not pleasant, straight and tolerant in their dealings with other humans.<sup>12</sup> He concludes that the requirement of pleasantness, as set forth in the Torah, covers one’s relationship with others, even those with whom one may disagree on the methods of serving God. Our father Avraham even attempted to convince God to save Sodom!

Rabbi Berlin’s attitude was typical of the rabbinic leadership of Lithuania, where the sharp divisions within nineteenth- and twentieth century Eastern European Jewish life were clearly present, but without the venom and violence that often marked these disputes in other places. It was not that the leaders of Lithuanian Orthodoxy were more compromising in their opposition to secularism, Marxism, nationalism and the other panaceas that swept through the streets of Eastern European Jewry. On the contrary, they were the leading opponents, both intellectually and practically, of these false gods. But even in the midst of their struggle to stem the tide of assimilation, they never lost sight of the value of respect and pleasantness in dealing with other people. Observing how they reacted to this challenge, we see continual striving for pleasantness in their personal and communal lives.

Pleasantness is one of the central values of the *Mussar* Movement,<sup>13</sup> founded in Lithuania by Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant. (The unique and far-reaching *Mussar* phenomenon will be discussed in Chapter Four.) Rabbi Salant once described an encounter he experienced on his way to the synagogue on Yom Kippur eve: A well-known, God-fearing man passed near him on the street. The man was weeping and trembling in anticipation of the holy Day of Judgment. Rabbi Yisrael stopped and asked him for some information that he needed. The man completely ignored Rabbi Yisrael and made no response to his request: he simply walked away. Although Rabbi Yisrael forgave the man his rudeness, he nevertheless remarked to his disciple, Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer, “When he hurried away I thought to myself: Why should I be victimized by that person’s fervour to prepare himself for Yom Kippur?”

What does his concern regarding the Day of Judgment have to do with me? He is obligated to answer me courteously, *for that is the way of pleasantness and grace.*<sup>14</sup>

Another example of this rule of pleasantness as developed by the great Lithuanian masters of *Mussar* is found in a letter written by Rabbi Simchah Zissel Ziev, the ‘Alter’ of Kelm. He

writes, “How great is the requirement that a person care about the feelings of others, that they should not be pained by him! We see that the prophet Jeremiah, while in great personal mental agony over the prophecy of the impending destruction of the Temple, nevertheless did not forget to greet and bless others whom he chanced to meet on the way.”<sup>15</sup> In short, the Alter states, “Concern about the welfare of others is in reality the ultimate concern regarding one’s own self and one’s own goal.”<sup>16</sup>

The *Alter* was differentiating between courtesy – manners that are learned and superficial (and often a manifestation of innate smugness and self-aggrandizement) – and sincere concern for others, which is rooted in true pleasantness of character. That trait, in essence, is a characteristic of one’s soul, revealing itself in every venue and interplay with others. It rests upon a feeling about one’s self, about others, about the world generally; and it stems from the recognition that everything God created in our universe is very good. Character traits of appreciation and thankfulness are developed, as well as a sense of satisfaction with one’s lot in life. In that sense, concern for others is a product of one’s own relationship with God, a pleasantness that is nourished by deep spiritual roots.

The renowned spiritual counsellor Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, *Mashgiach* of the Yeshiva of Mir in the 1920s and early 1930s, pointed out that pleasantness is the key to justice. The attitude of two people who enter a case in a rabbinic court should not be “What can I gain from the other person?” but rather “How can I rid myself of the doubt that I may have in my possession wealth or objects that are ‘stolen’ in that they are not really mine?”<sup>17</sup> The key to pleasantness, and hence to justice and fairness in life, is judging one’s own behaviour in the light of how it affects others. Justice is found only in the ability to glimpse the other person’s plight, needs and opinions.

Inner serenity derives from consistent pleasantness in demeanour, behaviour, and character. The prophet Yishayahu stated that “evildoers rage like [the waves of] the sea.”<sup>18</sup> Beset by jealousy of others, unsatiated desires, and overwhelming frustrations, the evildoer is not a pleasant person and therefore will never achieve inner serenity.

Rabbi Levovitz stresses that that this serenity is a spiritual accomplishment, approaching Godliness itself, which is the ultimate goal. “Serenity of the spirit is the crown and sum of all positive traits and accomplishments. The opposite of this, the *lack* of inner serenity, contains all of the character defects of a person. From a lack of serenity, negative traits such as anger and irascibility emerge. It also causes failure in achieving proper intent during prayer and lack of devotion to Torah study.”

The mind-set that the Torah is not a burden on Jews – but rather a privilege and a badge of

honour – permeated Lithuanian Jewry and is found in every vibrant Torah personality and community. Our leaders generally strived to make living a halachic life in the midst of an often hostile non-Jewish society a pleasant and attainable goal. For example, Lithuanian rabbis were in the forefront of finding ways to free women who were *agunos* (women who were trapped in a limbo of distress because their husbands had disappeared and they had no knowledge of their whereabouts, nor a divorce). The learned responsa of the Lithuanian rabbis on this matter always show their compassion and ways of pleasantness as a guiding lodestar in these efforts.<sup>19</sup>

These rabbis did not search out defects in others; and in their rational view of the world, they tolerated different views and approaches to Jewish life. As mentioned previously, traditional Jewry fought and opposed Jewish secularism and the Marxist ideas of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet even in regard to these critical issues, the battle was fought with less personal acrimony and lasting bitterness in Lithuania.<sup>20</sup>

There were historical exceptions to the idea of conducting a “pleasant” struggle between vastly conflicting and opposing streams in Jewish Lithuania society. Many of the bitter struggles regarding eighteenth-century Jewish life in Lithuania were marked by bans, excommunications, betrayal to the Czarist authorities, and even physical violence. Yet after the initial decades of strife, the “way of pleasantness” in Lithuanian Jewry reasserted itself. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the dispute between Chasidim and Misnagdim – though always simmering beneath the surface – was removed from the public life of Lithuanian Jews. In the mid-nineteenth century, Rabbi Yitzchak of Volozhin, the titular head of non-Chasidic Lithuanian Jewry, cooperated openly and sincerely with the Lubavitcher Rebbe of his time on matters of mutual interest and public benefit.

There were strong, though small, pockets of Chasidim scattered throughout Lithuania in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Chasidic life there closely mirrored this way of pleasantness that was the overall direction of both the rabbinic and Chasidic leadership. In general, there was great deal of cooperation and mutual respect between the different Jewish religious groupings in Lita (Lithuania).

The attitude of rabbinic Lithuanian leadership on the whole was moderate and thoughtful, not given to extremism and fanaticism. In the world of ideas and political action in general at that time, there were many competing groups – yeshivas, secularists, Marxists, “enlightened ones,” Zionists and anti-Zionists, followers of *Mussar* and anti-*Mussar* scholars – but their ideological struggles were conducted in the public arena in a much more muted, scholarly, and intellectual fashion than in other countries.



With the rise of Communism in the twentieth century, this began to change slowly. The ruthlessness and violence practiced by the extreme Left victimized the Jewish community in new and shocking ways. Despite their penchant for moderation, rabbinic Lithuanian leaders were forced to take a more militant attitude to counter dire threats.

An age of brutality was ushered in. By the atrocities of Hitler and Stalin, Lithuanian Jewry was destroyed. But its spirit, legacy and values remain vital in Jewish life in Israel and the Diaspora until today.

The great Rav of Ponivezh, Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, told me in 1964, “The Jews of South Africa are in the main Litvaks. Many have forgotten observances and Torah learning. But still they have retained the good character traits and ways of pleasantness which were so characteristic of Lithuanian Jewry. Because of this, the Lord will help them find their way back to Torah observance and study as well.” The Rabbis taught us that “a wise man [in his foresight] is even greater than a pure prophet.”<sup>21</sup> In large measure, the Rav’s prediction has come to fruition in South African Jewry. One should never underestimate the spiritual and historical power of the ways of pleasantness in Jewish society.

**NOTES**

- 1 See, for example, *Berachos* 43b; *Niddah* 14b; *Yerushalmi Kesubos* 11:3; and many other such statements scattered throughout Talmudic and rabbinic writings.
- 2 *Proverbs* 3:17.
- 3 *Kesubos* 16b– 17a.
- 4 *Genesis* 18:12
- 5 *Sukkah* 32a
- 6 *Yevamos* 87b. Also see *Tosafos Yevamos* 14b, the top

- Tosafos* on the page.
- 7 *Genesis* 9:7
- 8 As enumerated in *Sanhedrin* 56a, they are: prohibitions against paganism, blasphemy, stealing, murdering, sexual immorality, the mandate to establish a lawful and just society and the prohibition against eating from an animal while it is still alive.
- 9 See *Avos* 2:1, 2:13–14 and numerous other places in the Talmud.
- 10 My Lithuanian-born teachers in the yeshiva of my youth drummed this phrase into my mind.
- 11 Introduction to *Genesis, Haamek Davar*, Jerusalem, 1959, p.xiii.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 For a thorough review of the *Mussar* Movement, its philosophies and personalities, see *Tnuas Hamussar* by Rabbi Dov Katz. The primary source on the movement and on its founder, Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant, is the book *Ohr Yisrael* by Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer (Peterburger) published in Vilna in 1900.
- 14 *Ohr Yisrael*, p118.
- 15 *Chochmah U’Mussar*, Brooklyn, 1957, p13.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p12.
- 17 *Da’as Chochmah U’Mussar*, vol. 1, Brooklyn, 1966, p254, et al.
- 18 *Isaiah* 57:20.
- 19 See, for example, the response of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, *Chut Hameshulash*, section eight; the responsa of Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor, *Be’er Yitzhak*; Rabbi Isaac Halevy Hertzog in his response on *Even Haezer*; and the works of many other Lithuanian sages over the centuries.
- 20 It is important to note that the Lithuanian rabbinic leadership was almost totally wiped out in the Holocaust. Because of this, those who embodied this idea of pleasantness and its value system – and had been in the forefront of its dissemination in the wider Jewish world – virtually disappeared from the Jewish scene. Certainly, their presence and influence are still sorely missed.
- 21 *Bava Basra* 12a.



The ‘Ponivezh Rav’, Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman (right) during a visit to South Africa, 1962. With him are Rabbi Joseph Bronner and Rabbi Michel Kossowsky, respectively Chairman and Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva College, Johannesburg.



# A VERY PERSONAL JOURNEY

\*

Veronica Belling and Natalie Ginsburg

In August 2013, I visited Lithuania for the first time. I had just finished translating a series of 25 articles on the Lithuanian *shtetlech*, originally published in the South African Yiddish newspaper, the *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung* (African Jewish newspaper) in 1953, relatively soon after the Holocaust. I had long wanted to visit Lithuania, the home of my maternal grandparents and paternal grandfather, but being employed full time at the Jewish Studies Library at the University of Cape Town had never had the time. Having retired at the end of 2012, this seemed to be the ideal moment. My visit was timed to coincide with the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress of the World Union of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, where I was participating in a Judaica Librarianship panel.

Accompanying me was my first cousin, Natalie Ginsburg, originally from the Strand and who has been living in Jerusalem for the past fifty years. Natalie is older than me. Her mother was the oldest in a family of nine, and came to South Africa from Lithuania as a small child. My mother was the second youngest in the family and, like my father, was born in South Africa. Her father came here as a young man and his relatives who stayed behind died in the Holocaust. Natalie therefore felt much closer to the events than I did. This article is a combination of both of our impressions.

We knew that our visit would be somewhat sombre. Proportionately, Lithuania had the highest Jewish victim rate of all the countries invaded by the Germans. It is estimated that 90%, 195 000 out of the community of 210 000 Jews, were killed. Today, Vilna has a community of only 5000 Jews, while Kaunas (Kovno in Yiddish), where our guide came from, has about 200.

Our journey turned out to be one full of unexpected encounters, connections and coincidences. As we passed through immigration at Ben Gurion airport, the airport official who checked my South African passport, with typical Israeli informality, said to me, "You are travelling to Lithuania, Veronica. Did your parents come from there?" It is widely known in Israel that most South African Jews came from Lithuania.

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*Dr. Veronica Belling is the author of Bibliography of South African Jewry (1997), Yiddish Theatre in South Africa (2008), and the translator of Leibl Feldman's The Jews of Johannesburg (2007) and Yakov Azriel Davidson: His Writings in the Yiddish Newspaper, Der Afrikaner, 1911-1913 (2009). This article was written in collaboration with her cousin Natalie Ginsburg, who lives in Israel.*

Our next encounter was in the waiting area for our charter flight to Vilnius where a woman, recognizing Natalie, approached us and introduced herself as Liba. She was a Holocaust survivor. Born in 1940, she was taken from her parents (they were doctors, which helped them to survive), and given to a Baptist woman who, together with a priest, helped to save her. Her sister, who was born underground under the home of the people who rescued them, was also taken from their parents, and given to someone to look after. As a baby, she would have endangered them. Fortunately, after the war the family was reunited and now Liba and her sister, were going to a Lithuania for a holiday. This was not her first return visit; they had been back before to visit the family who had saved them. When asked how she felt about going back, she said that she had mixed feelings. On the one hand they had been saved by such wonderful selfless people, but on the other, thousands were brutally murdered. She told us that she also meets up with old school friends but vets them very carefully. Towards the end of the war, she and the woman who sheltered her were betrayed and they were put in prison; they were released when the Russians came. However, the family who had sheltered them had to flee from the village because the partisans threatened to kill them for having sheltered Jews. On this trip they would be visiting the children of the family as the old couple had died.

Our guide, Simon Davidovich, was born in Kaunas long after the Holocaust. His parents had survived by fleeing into the forest where they were taken in by peasants. Simon, who speaks English and Yiddish, is Director of the Sugihara Museum in Kaunas. Sugihara was a Japanese diplomat who issued thousands of visas for Jews to leave Lithuania during the time of the Holocaust. Simon told me that he had equipped himself with the very latest reference book, *Synagogues in Lithuania: a Catalogue* (2010-2012), compiled by a team of Israeli and Lithuanian scholars that identifies the sites of all of the former synagogues, their history, and a short overview of the communities, to inform our visit to almost twenty cities, towns and villages. I wished to visit as many of the 25 *shtetls* I had written about as could be managed in eight days, while both Natalie and I wished to spend time in Birzai, the home of our mutual grandparents.

Hotel Alexa, where we were staying, was situated on the edge of the old Jewish quarter. The streets there are cobbled and even driving in a car one can feel every bump, making one

realize what travelling in a coach or wagon must have been like. Near to our hotel was a small open market, with old men and women selling produce. Further up the same road was an arch, one of the original entrances leading into the old city, on top of which is built the Church of the Black Madonna, where queues of people were already on their knees reciting the morning mass. Lithuania is predominantly a Catholic country.

Our first tour with Simon was to the old Jewish quarter, where between 1941 and 1943 the Nazis created two ghettos: the large ghetto, liquidated in 1943, and the small ghetto in 1941. It is hard to imagine it today except in some little side streets where, if one peers into old courtyards, the old world poverty can still be seen. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 - when Lithuania regained her independence - there has been a fair amount of memorialising of killing sites, graveyards, former synagogues, *yeshivas* and Jewish schools. The sites of both ghettos are marked with plaques, recording how many Jews were killed:

30 000 from the big ghetto and 11 000 from the small one. The *Judenrat* (Jewish council) that was located in the premises of a Jewish school has a plaque recording that on 3 September 1941, 1200 Jews were selected there to be shot. Natalie captures the feeling of extreme discomfort that we experienced visiting such sites: "When we go into the courtyards where the Jews were gathered to be sent off to their deaths, I found it

very hard to stand there, as I felt as if I was able to see them. I could feel their fear, almost as if I had been amongst them. The feeling never left me the whole day."

Although many Jewish sites are marked, quite a few are not. For example, Simon pointed out the building where the ghetto library was situated. It was organised by Herman Kruk, whose detailed *Togbukh fun Vilna Geto* (Diary of the Vilna Ghetto, 1962) has now become available in English as *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Ghetto and Camps* (2002). Simon also showed us the building that housed the ghetto hospital, as well as that of the famous Rom Press, which in its day printed the most famous Jewish religious books - Talmuds and *siddurim* - in the world. Just opposite this building stands a lifelike statue of the popular Jewish doctor, Tsemach Shabad (1864-1935), the founder of Oze, the Society for the Protection of the Health of the Jews, in Vilna, co-founder of the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, and Senator in the Polish diet.<sup>1</sup>

In its time Vilna, '*Yerushalayim de'Lita*' had the richest Jewish culture in Europe. Not only Holocaust sites have been memorialized but also cultural sites, such as the house where the Vilna Gaon once lived and the apartments of the famous Yiddish poets, Avram Sutzkever (1913-2010) and Moshe Kulbak (1896-1937). Vilna has a *Zydu Gatve* (Jew Street) and a *Gaono Gatve* (Gaon Street). The site of the Great Synagogue

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that was bombed during the war is marked by a large billboard with posters under glass depicting the original synagogue and the damage done to it. An old Soviet style apartment block stands on the original site. We also visited the only active synagogue left in Vilna where there is a *minyan* every morning and every evening, as well as the new Jewish cemetery dating to Soviet times. It contains the mausoleum of the Vilna Gaon as well as graves of Bundist heroes such as Hirsh Lekert (1878-1902), that were transferred from the older cemetery in Snipishok. The more recent graves from Soviet times are engraved only in Cyrillic script, with the face of the deceased carved in relief on the stone.

We visited the Yiddish Department at the University of Vilnius, where every summer a four-week program is conducted. This year there were approximately forty four students from a variety of countries, including Ireland and France, and even an Arab student from Israel. At the office we met 91 year-old Fanya Brantsofsky, who works as the librarian on the program and takes the students on walkabouts through the city. She herself is a Holocaust survivor, the only one of two from her large family, and fought with the partisans.



Fanya Brantsofsky

We also visited the new part of the city which is modern but built in good taste in an old world style that is pleasing to the eye. Both Holocaust museums, the original Green Museum as well as the Museum of Tolerance, are situated in the newer section of the city. The Green Museum, the first State Holocaust Museum originally created by Rachel Margolis, is directed by Rachel Constantian (who has visited South Africa). Said Natalie: "Although I have been to many Holocaust museums, the one thing that stands out over there is the killing that the Lithuanians perpetrated even before the Nazis started directing them". The second Holocaust Museum, the Museum of

Tolerance, is very modern by contrast. It has a large section devoted to child survivors, whose stories are related on panels, with the aid of live video clips. In the centre of this exhibit is a small booth devoted to the children who did not survive and whose pictures displayed on the wall were found lying at the side of the road along which they and their parents travelled to their deaths. In the background, poet and partisan, Shmerke Kaczerginski's poignant lullaby, *Shtiler, Shtiler* (Quieter, Quieter), one of the most popular songs composed in the Vilna Ghetto, plays over and over again.

Food in Lithuania included many of the old favourites with which we were so familiar. Lunch in the Old Quarter was cold borsht with smetana and *kvas*, a fomented beverage made out of grain. Borsht, herring (salted not pickled) and potatoes and dumplings done in any number of ways are staples on menus in Lithuania.

### Ponar – Paneriu forest: killing site

The following day we drove to Ponar, the Panerui forest, the largest killing site in Lithuania, located about seven miles outside Vilnius. Whereas in Soviet times the memorials at the killing sites simply mentioned that 'Lithuanian inhabitants' were killed, not mentioning that Jews as a category suffered the most, this has now changed. At Ponar the memorial, inscribed in Lithuanian and Yiddish, clearly indicates that of the 100 000 people who were massacred there, 70 000 were Jews. There is also a separate Jewish memorial, where Israeli President Shimon Peres - who had visited only a few days before us - had placed a blue and white wreath alongside the wreath in the red, green and yellow colours of the Lithuanian flag.

Next to the memorials are the pits where the bodies were buried, today grassed over and encircled with low, neat stone borders. The surrounding forests are quite beautiful. They are the jewel in the crown of Lithuania. A train line runs through the Ponar forest. The location of the mass killing sites was generally due to their accessibility by train, which made the transportation of the victims easier.

Whereas I, numbed by the horrors of Ponar, shied away from examining anything too closely,



Ponar forest: One of the pits where the bodies were buried.



Natalie spent a long time studying the exhibits in the local museum and as a result was far more affected. The following is taken from a letter she circulated to our families:

I keep avoiding writing about this morning. My mind seems to close down as I try to find the words. It is so hard to convey. Words seem to trivialise what one wants to say. I started off by looking at the forests and thinking how beautiful they were. But then the picture in my mind changed and I thought of people running and hiding in the forests and I wondered if somehow their fear is still embedded in the bark of the trees. I thought of the partisans and where they would have hidden. As I alighted from the car I heard the whistle of a train and my throat constricted and then I heard the train coming closer and closer and the noise on the tracks and could see it racing past and I could not control myself and had to walk away. The whole time we were there we could hear the trains.

We went to the pits. You look at the high slope on which the people stood and it as if you cannot draw your gaze away. I felt as if I stood there long enough I would see the family I never knew. I wish that I knew that there was truly an afterlife that I could think of their looking down on us and knowing that we were there, remembering, part of them living on.

We saw the pit where prisoners were kept in shackles and in freezing conditions and those who had survived were brought out to burn the bodies of the dead in other pits so as to hide the evidence of the massacres. It is unbelievable that twelve of them were able to dig a tunnel with only spoons and to escape in this way. I found it all so overwhelming that I wonder how the survivors have the courage and the strength to come back...

One picture in the museum was of a little boy. He was found one morning playing in a sand pit and without even trying to find out if he was a local child they shot him. Four years old. You ask yourself who had the heart to photograph the child and then see him shot and how did the photograph survive.

There are so many harrowing descriptions. We all know that soldiers were changed often at the killing fields for fear of what their own actions would do to them psychologically and given vodka in large quantities. When you read that children were sometimes killed not by being shot but with their heads dashed against trees so as to save bullets you cannot understand where these people have come from... The child who was buried alive and when climbing out of the pit found her neighbor who was critically wounded and who begged her to smother him. When she asked with what he said to take the body of

the dead child next to him and smother him with that. The girl survived. What terrible memories to carry with you for the rest of your life.

### Ukmerge - Vilkomir

The following day we left for Ukmerge (Yiddish: Vilkomir), located 78 kilometres northwest of Vilnius. We first visited the killing site, located outside the town deep in the incredibly beautiful Pivonija forest. The white stone memorial, inscribed in Lithuanian, Yiddish and Hebrew reads: "On this place Hitler's murderers and their local helpers killed 10 239 Jews, men women and children." This acknowledgement of local participation in the killing is common to the Jewish memorial sites today.

I was more moved by that site than by Ponar, where there was a bus load of tourists. When we arrived it was deserted and you could hear the wind whispering through the trees. I thought of the Yiddish poem, *Mayn Heym*, by Chaya Fedler, where while dreaming of her former home, she writes: "During the nights the green leaves moan/ The wind in the branches says *kaddish*."<sup>2</sup>

The actual city of Ukmerge is situated on two levels. The lower level is situated on the banks of the river, Shventa. In the main part of the town on the upper level, we found two plaques. One was a map indicating where the Jews used to live and a second was dedicated to the Hebrew, Yiddish and Russian writer and Zionist publicist, Moshe Leib Lilienblum (1843-1910), who had lived in Vilkomir. The Jewish cemetery, situated in the heart of the town, has been converted into a park. It has a memorial stone indicating that a Jewish cemetery was once there.



*The stone and single grave marking the former Jewish cemetery in the centre of Ukmerge - Vilkomir*

In some places when we have been photographing local people have stopped to watch us. Unlike in other countries, however, seldom did they ask us who we were. I got the feeling that possibly they were embarrassed by their own history but that might well have been my imagination. On one occasion in Ukmerge, someone enquired as to whether I was "*Russki*" and pointed me in the direction of the memorial for the Jewish graveyard. I was not sure if "*Russki*" was a euphemism or synonym for "*Zydu*" – Jew.

**Kedainiai - Keidan**

Not far from Ukmerge, is one of the best preserved of the former *shtetlach* – Keidan, famous for the fact that the Vilna Gaon married a girl from that *shtetl* and studied for some years at the *yeshiva* there. We visited a synagogue that had been converted into a Museum celebrating diversity. The bottom section was restored as a synagogue but without the Ark, and upstairs in the former Ladies section was an exhibition and an office. The large old market square adjacent to the synagogue has been left intact and is resplendent with its presumably original cobble stones.



*Former synagogue, now a Museum of Diversity Keidan*

Afterwards, we visited the killing site outside Kedainiai. Its unusual memorial is made of metal in which names have been cut out. Natalie’s heart stopped as the first name her eyes alighted on was that of her family: ‘Ginzburgas Natanas’. The memorial stands at the side of a clearing in the forest where the actual killing took place.

Besides the killing sites, we visited many of the old graveyards. Some, as in Vilnius and Kedainiai, are very well cared for, but many are old and neglected. The stones are weathered, broken, falling down. Some are close to the road (Kupiskis and Joniskis) and one wonders what will become of them. Although it is also very close to the road, the cemetery at Rakiskis is amazingly large and also evidently cared for as there were several bags of rubbish standing alongside some of the graves. Apparently, the government sometimes gives the unemployed the job of cleaning them up. Other cemeteries, such as in the larger towns of Panevezys, Ukmerge and Siauliai, were completely destroyed, with parks built over them. The only consolation is that there is are memorials indicating that they used to be Jewish graveyards.

Similarly, old disused synagogues are marked with plaques. Generally, the plaque simply reads in Lithuanian and Yiddish: *Do iz geven a Besmedresh* (Here was a Synagogue). However the plaque on the synagogue in the small village

of Pusalotas has a more extensive inscription: “In memory of Pushelat Jews who lived and worked for centuries in peace with their neighbours, and those who were uprooted and murdered by the Nazi murderers and their accomplices in 1941. May their memory be for a blessing.”



*Quaint former synagogue in the village of Krakenava (Krakinova). The section of its plaque reads *Do iz geven der Besmedresh* – ‘Here was the synagogue’.*

Other former synagogues, such as one in Birzhai (Birzh), have been converted into apartment blocks with no indication that they were ever Jewish places of worship.

I was keen to get a feel of what were once tiny villages when our grandparents lived there. However many, such as Rakiskis and Kupiskis (where the Penkins came from), have grown tremendously. At best there are roads where some of the small houses remain. We did visit several really tiny villages - Skopiskis, Krekenava (Krakinova), Vaskai (Vashki), and Zeimelas (Zheimel). These are still full of the original houses and their market squares have not been built up.

Simon told us that in the small villages, one can tell which houses were those of Jews and which were those of Christians. The Jews always had a front door, as they were generally shopkeepers. When the Lithuanians took their houses over they boarded up the front door as they believed that having the door at the back of the house was more secure.



*Former Jewish home, with boarded front door, Pushelat*

## Panevezys - Ponevezh

We spent our first night outside of Vilnius in Panevezys, the fifth largest city in Lithuania, with a population of 99 690 in 2011.<sup>3</sup> We stayed at the Romantic Hotel, probably our most upmarket accommodation with a wonderful view over the city. In the morning we managed to locate the building that housed the famous Ponevezh *yeshiva* of Rabbi Kahaneman. Now a bakery, it has a plaque in Yiddish and Lithuanian to identify it. As in Ukmerge, the large Jewish cemetery has been replaced by a beautiful park. In it is a memorial statue of a woman covering her face and crying up to heaven, with a menorah and an inscription in Hebrew from the first chapter of the Book of Lamentations: “For those I weep...”



*The former Ponevezh yeshiva, today a bakery*



*Memorial at the former Jewish graveyard in Ponevezh, today a city park*

## Kupiskis - Kupishok, Skopiskis – Skopishok and Rakiskis- Rakishok

From Panevezys we made our way via Kupiskis, Skopiskis and Rakiskis to Birzai. In Kupiskis the old synagogue is today used as a library and community centre. There is a plaque in the entrance that includes many well-known South African surnames and dedications. An unusual cemetery was that for Free Thinkers; it was the place chosen to kill the Jews. The memorial to the “1000 murdered inhabitants of Kupeshok – most of who were Jews” - was rededicated by a group of their descendants in July 2004.

From Kupiskis we went on to Skopiskis, ancestral home of Natalie’s father’s family, where we stopped briefly to visit the graveyard. In Rakiskis we went directly to the killing site where Natalie believed that her family on her father’s side must be buried. It is located in a forest just off the road surrounded by a green fence. Straight mounds mark the graves. The memorial in rough grey cement stone has an inscription in Russian, Lithuanian and Yiddish that is unusual in that it specifically names the Lithuanians: “Here rest the Jews murdered by Lithuanian German nationalists, 15-16 August 1941.”

Natalie was extremely moved: “It was so hard in the end to walk away. I kept going towards the car and walking back again. You walk there and wonder how many bodies may have lain beneath your feet. I asked Simon if they were killed just in that field. He said that it is said that the Jews were killed in the forest itself. But then of course that was 70 years ago and the forest has grown up around the mounds. The trees were nourished with their blood.”

Our fifth night was spent in Birzai, the home of our grandparents. Even though, with a population of 14 565 in 2011<sup>4</sup>, it is not one of the smaller towns, it is nonetheless very provincial. In the morning we went down to the lake around which the town, situated at the confluence of two rivers, is built. My mother had told me that *Bobbe* used to speak about it and it is truly beautiful. We crossed a walkway where people were fishing and it was very peaceful. I have never seen so many houses with apple trees. Everywhere you go the apples just lie on the ground.

We visited the Jewish and Karaite cemetery, where thirty Jews were massacred by the Germans at the beginning of the war. We then went to the memorial at the killing site, where there must have been an official gathering recently as there were two bouquets in the colors of Israel and Lithuania. 14 200 Jews were killed there and about 90 Lithuanians. Everywhere you see the words: *un zeyere ortike bahelfers* - “and their local helpers”. Natalie wondered how they felt when they killed their fellow Christians and not only the Jews. And when the church bells rang on Sunday morning she asked herself: did the church bells ring while the Germans and Lithuanians



killed their victims? Did they maybe stop to cross themselves? How did they go to church in the morning after they had shot thousands in cold blood? Did they confess to the priests.....at any rate to those whom they had not also sent to their death? And when they confessed to the priest, did he give them absolution time and again?

**Siauliai - Shavli**

Towards evening we arrived in Siauliai, the fourth largest city with a population of 109 328 in 2011<sup>5</sup>, where we were to spend our sixth night. We went directly to a large shopping mall to a restaurant adjacent to an indoor ice rink, where we could watch the people skating while we ate. All so normal.

In the morning, we first went to visit the Frenkel Villa. Chaim Frenkel was the richest Jew in Lithuania who made his money from leather manufacturing. His house, a virtual palace, has been converted into a Lithuanian museum with one room devoted to the Jews. His vast estate contains his former factories, parks and its own red brick synagogue built specifically for his workers and which still stands today. Afterwards, we went to the Jewish cemetery which was destroyed, but marked with a memorial stone, inscribed in the Soviet Yiddish orthography. We photographed some of the dilapidated houses in the ghetto area, the entrance to which is marked with a memorial stone inscribed in Lithuanian only.



*Home of Chaim Frenkel in Shavli, today a museum*

Outside Siauliai there is another of the very large Jewish mass killing sites – over 8000 dead. It is located in the Lupaniai forest - nine pits. We went to three. Not all are accessible and it was muddy following recent rains. Besides, there is only so much a person can bear. Natalie asked Simon how he feels bringing people here all the time, particularly the survivors who come with their own pain and agonizing memories. He says that he has not become immune and that it still hits him every time, especially when he sees how his visitors are affected.

From Siauliai we made our way up north to the town of Joniskis (Yanishok), on our way to Zagare on the Latvian border. At that point the weather, which had been hot and humid, changed

suddenly and we were caught in a driving rain that put paid to the rest of our touring that day. This is typical of Lithuania, where the weather can change in the blink of an eye. Nonetheless, we managed to visit the complex of two synagogues, built in 1823 and 1865. They are being renovated by the government, despite the fact that there are no Jews left there.

We drove through Zagare (Zhagar), a town on the Latvian border, about which much has been written by South African authors in Yiddish and in English: Solomon Fedler’s *Shalechet* (1969),<sup>6</sup> Chaya Fedler’s two collections of poetry (1951, 1954)<sup>7</sup> and Rose Zvi’s *Last Walk in Naryshkin Park* (1997).<sup>8</sup> It was raining so heavily that we did not stop but drove over the border into Latvia and then back again on our way to our last destination of the day and the furthest to the east of our itinerary: Plunge (Plungian). On our way we took a detour to Telsiai (Telz), to view the building that housed the famous yeshiva. It is today very run down and heavily boarded up but is apparently used by a business. Unlike the Ponevezh yeshiva, there are no plaques to indicate its former glory.

The memorial site outside Plunge is very impressive with the series of wooden statues carved by Jacob Bunka, the only Jew in his village to have survived. There are plaques there, some of which are filled with the names of whole families who perished there. Our visit was unfortunately



*The former Telz Yeshiva*



*One of Jacob Bunka’s carvings at Plungian*

cut short by the rain and we drove back south east to Kaunus where we would be spending the night and where Simon, our guide, could enjoy the luxury of going home to sleep in his own bed.

**Kaunus** (Kovno), the second largest city with a population today of 315 993 in 2011,<sup>9</sup> and the former capital of independent Lithuania (1919-1939) contains one of the worst of the killing sites and where the horrors are not relieved by the natural surroundings. This is the Ninth Fort, which was used as a prison by the Germans for Lithuanians, Jews and other nationalities. There are several museums for all the various peoples who were killed. The large memorial site is set in cement fashioned along the contours of the hillside that is overlooked by a gigantic brooding Soviet statue. Built in 1984, it is 32 metres in height, abstract, but with faces of the victims carved into it. Inside the fort, which is very grim with life like statues of prisoners and guards, there is a special section on the Jews, recreating the way they lived as well as the way they died.



*The Ninth Fort, Kovno, looking towards the Soviet statue in the distance, with the walls of the fort to the right.*

Later we visited the area of the Kovno ghetto where a memorial stone inscribed in Lithuanian only, marks the entrance. We also stopped very briefly to photograph the gracious building that until 22 June 1941 (according to the plaque) was the home of the world-famous Slobodka yeshiva.

### Homeward bound

In the afternoon we were both relieved to be on our way back to Vilnius from where we would be returning to Israel early the following morning. We would be flying Polish Air changing flights to El Al in Warsaw. While struggling to find the El Al 'Check in' in Warsaw, we had another chance encounter, when an elderly couple, recognising that we were in the same predicament, hailed us, asking if we spoke Yiddish. She was the only survivor in her family, rescued by a German soldier, placed in an orphanage and eventually sent to Israel.

Safely back in Israel and now in South Africa, I look back on our trip as a very grim and sobering experience but very inspiring nonetheless. It

transformed my identity as a Jew, seeing the humble way in which our ancestors lived, not to mention how they died. If anyone still wonders whether the Jews really need a country of their own, this experience would dispel any doubts. And in Natalie's words: "I never had any desire to go to Lithuania but it has been an experience which I would not have missed however hard it was at times. I did the right thing in going but thank goodness it is over now."

### NOTES

- 1 Zemach Shabad, Guide to the Jewish Archives, <http://www.yivoarchives.org/?p=collections/controlcard&id=32510>
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- 6 Solomon Fedler, *Shalechet*. S. Fedler, Johannesburg, 1969.
- 7 Chaya Fedler, *Shtile Gezangen*, S. Fedler, Johannesburg, 1951; *Bleter Fal*, S. Fedler, Johannesburg, 1954.
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# LANDSCAPES OF MY FATHERS

\*

Joseph Rabie

At the end of September 2013, this writer participated in an arts symposium taking place at the Jewish Culture and Information Centre in Vilnius, Lithuania. Held under the patronage of the European Parliament and titled “A Virtual Memorial Vilnius 2013”, this presented the Shoah Film Collection, a selection of works brought together by the German curator Wilfried Agricola de Cologne. I presented a work of interactive photography called “Dachau: the Prototype”.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the opportunity to show my work, this voyage to Vilnius was important to me, as is any voyage, since my ongoing research deals with the notion of place. The overriding significance of the journey, however, came from something much more profound: I have always waited for the moment when I might in some way *return* to Lithuania, as, with so many Jews born and raised in South Africa, it is the land of my forefathers.

*Place* is the subject of much of my art; my current doctoral research in urban studies (conducted at the Paris Est Créteil University<sup>2</sup>) is about “What makes place” (“*Ce qui fait lieu*”). To this end I have been engaged by the Atelier International du Grand Paris to make a *sensitive cartography of the places of Greater Paris made by its inhabitants*.

I have always been deeply moved by the beauty of the earth. This may be readily understood by the fact that I grew up in Cape Town, an incomparable city in so many ways and one of the most beautiful places I know. And yet, a beautiful place where terrible things happened - the destiny of so many places, Lithuania itself being such a telling example. What counts in the long ongoing narrative of the places we inhabit is how one acknowledges the past in order to heal the present.

So it is that place is a human construct upon a natural core, where a multiple complexity of factors come together to determine how we *dwelt* upon the earth. For the French geographer Denis Retaillé, who has developed the idea of *nomadic space* in his study of the Sahel region, a *place* is that somewhere where circumstances, the crossing of paths for example, instigate a human presence<sup>3</sup>. He gives an example of an ephemeral market which will appear and disappear in the

desert sands, describing how these places are being devastated as the local population is dislocated by the AQMI<sup>4</sup> Al-Qaeda terrorists.

## Dachau: the Prototype

In March 1933, Dachau was a small town on the outskirts of Munich. It is probable that the surrounding farmlands supplied the city markets with foodstuffs. Why was Dachau chosen as the place where the Nazi terror machine would be inaugurated? Munich had been one of the strongholds of the rise of the regime and perhaps the decision to build the camp close by was due to the availability of a well-trained and motivated political cadre ready to take on the task of policing the camp. It is noteworthy that Heinrich Himmler, future *Reichsführer* of the SS, was at that time Munich Chief of Police and instrumental in the setting up of the camp. Thus did Dachau - the camp, not the town, (although today the town's identity, if one excepts local inhabitants, is inseparable from that of the camp) - become a *place* which would be the *locus* for the engineering of barbarism.

Immediately after Hitler's accession to power at the end of January 1933, the institutional framework for the Nazi project was put in place, starting with the abrogation of large sections of the constitution. Individual freedoms, and the right to freedom of speech, press and assembly could now be proscribed; communications could be monitored, house searches undertaken, property confiscated; all those who opposed the regime could be incarcerated<sup>5</sup>.

The creation of the first concentration camp at Dachau followed upon this immediately, with the express purpose of imprisoning all communists as well as left-wing functionaries “...who endanger state security (...) [and] cannot be released because attempts have shown that they persist in their efforts to agitate and organize as soon as they are released”, according to a statement by Chief of Police Himmler. Later that year the SS issued their “Disciplinary and Penal Code for the Prison Camp”, which stated that anyone who “engages in subversive politics, holds provocative speeches, congregates with others for this purpose...”, followed by a whole litany of proscribed actions including smuggling information out of the camp “to be used in our enemies horror propaganda”, or who “in order to incite rebellion climbs onto the roof of the huts or up trees” or in any other way tries to make contact with the outside “will be hanged as a subversive instigator under the

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terms of the revolutionary law”<sup>6</sup>.

This was the planned destruction of the living being, the annihilation of the soul followed by the extinction of the body. Thus it was that Dachau was the first prototypical *place*, where the methodology of a society founded upon terror would be conceived, experimented upon, refined and perfected, prior to being exported to a network of camps throughout Europe. And outside the camps, in all the cities and towns, fields and forests, the regime would put into practice its ideology of terror in what has undoubtedly been Europe’s darkest age. One visits the camp as a memorial, as a *place* which commemorates what happened within its barbed wire boundaries, and which as a microcosm commemorates what happened in Europe as a whole, a continentally defined *place*. When one faces the reconstructed camp as memorial, in its utter bleakness, its curatorial orderliness, with the absence of the clamour of the dead, one asks: How does one give back to those who were annihilated here their proper *place*, so that though obliterated they might be *visible* forever?

In “Dachau: the Prototype” I looked at the manufactured artefacts that constituted the environment of the concentration camp. Before people were brought to Dachau to die, engineers and artisans, tradespeople and sub-contractors came there to assemble its component parts - ordinary objects, beds, doors, latrines; and less ordinary ones, iron bars, locks, ovens... The presentation sought to contemplate upon this arrangement/derangement of ordinary things in a functionalism of death. *These are the very objects that were seen by the eyes of those who are gone...*

The work is made up from three main sequences of images, each representing one of the primordial places of existence and death in the concentration camp. These are the barracks, where the prisoners, who were generally subjected to slave labour, lived; the bunker, a prison in the prison where they were held and tortured by the SS; the crematoria, where the bodies of those either murdered, or dead from disease or exhaustion, were disposed of. Their memory is symbolised by the heartbeat that rhythms the work. Thus the present-time “peaceful”, empty spaces of Dachau as memorial, so desperately bereft of those who were nullified, might in some way resonate with their absence<sup>7</sup>.

### **The Land[scapes] of my Fathers**

When I was about ten years old, my mother introduced me to our collective memory. I was shown a book of horrifying pictures, documenting the camps at their liberation by the Allied forces. In this way, the Shoah came to be part of my life. In reality, as young Jews growing up in South Africa, we were more preoccupied with the survival of Israel during the period before and after the Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars. We were, after all,

the *ones who survived*, the progeny of European Jews who, in their millions, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, looking for a better life, left Europe and founded new communities in the New World. We were proud of the prescience of our forebears, the ones “*who had known to get out in time*”. It was only after I came to live in Europe (*returned* to live in Europe?) and became part of a French family that the Shoah became a much more material reality, through the incorporation of their experiences into my own narrative.

Now I was being given the opportunity to visit Lithuania, and being in Lithuania would mean far more than solely presenting “Dachau: the prototype”. *An act of return*, something that has been a potentiality accosting me throughout my adult life, for this is where my family came from, both my parents’ families having their origins in Lithuania. For some reason, South Africa was a favourite destination for Lithuanian Jews, and a large part of the Jewish population (much reduced now, as many emigrated during the Apartheid years) came from that country. The pioneers had found a land that might nurture them; they sent back letters encouraging their brethren to join them in transplanting an old community in a new place, establishing *minyanim* in far-flung country *dorps*, as this wandering people had done on so many previous occasions.

My desire to create some sort of dialogue with my family roots had to face the reality that my family’s collective memory of Lithuania is hopelessly scant. It was generally the men, the generation of my great-grandparents, who left first. It took a good few years of hard work for them to raise enough money to bring out their families. My four grandparents and their siblings arrived as children at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. My mother tells me that her parents spoke little of the old country. Perhaps their preoccupation with the present and future left them with little inclination to dwell on the past.

As someone who is very sensitive to place and landscape, I have always conjectured upon the dramatic encounter these people will have experienced between the radically different realities of northern Europe and southern Africa. They had left a territory dominated by the Russian Empire to find themselves immersed in the affairs of a vast country divided by Anglo-Afrikaner rivalries coupled with the repression of the indigenous black population. For these generally devout, Yiddish-speaking Jews from their *shtetls*, the cultural shock must have been considerable. With the resourcefulness born of self-reliance, however, they acclimatised rapidly. I can only speculate upon this by using landscape as both a *material* and *metaphorical measure* of that confrontation between two worlds so strange to one another.

Lithuania is a generally flat country; from a low coastal plain it rises gradually to a region of muted hills rising no more than 300 meters in its

easternmost part. It is amply watered, covered with forests and with a dense network of rivers and lakes. Much of the land has been transformed for agriculture, mechanised on a large scale. One must imagine that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the landscape would have been quite different - a finer grain in the layout of the fields, more forest cover. However, despite these differences, one should still be able to recognise the landscapes that met the eyes of my forebears: A *mild* landscape, an alternation of field and wood, openness and closeness, a constant, slightly undulating horizon, running water and resting water, a plenitude that characterises much of northern Europe all the way across from the Netherlands to Russia. It is a landscape that is more vegetal than mineral, with tonalities of blues and greens that would glow yellow at harvest time. But winters would be dark and cold, deep snow muffling all, wolves and bears on the prowl.

Lithuania has been covered by Google Street View, and this allowed me, before I ever set foot there, to construe an impression of its landscape<sup>8</sup>. It would appear that most members of my family came from Vilnius or the surrounding area. My paternal grandfather came from Biržai, a rural centre in the northeast of the country. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the town had a population of over 4000, more than half of whom were Jews<sup>9</sup>. I have no idea of my family's profession: our surname was "Rebe" which suggests that at some point there was a rabbi in our ancestry. A customs official in Cape Town changed Rebe to Rabie, a local Afrikaans name, which has always created some confusion. How many relatives stayed behind? According to the partial records available in the LitvakSIG database<sup>10</sup>, it was a large family.

On my mother's side, a snippet of clear memory: my uncle recalls their father and his brother reminiscing upon the poverty of their existence in Lithuania. He remembers them "commenting wryly, while hugely enjoying the material pleasures of a South African braaivleis, that it was exactly the same as they had experienced in Kavarsk"<sup>11</sup>. Kavarskas is a small village north of Vilnius. One can only wonder if some family member walked those village streets... Their family name, originally Koven, might have come from Kovno, the old name of the city of Kaunas<sup>12</sup>.

One arrived in Cape Town by boat in those days. From a great distance could be seen Table Mountain, a vast mountain mass 1000 meters high rising directly out of the ocean, standing in splendid isolation over the low flats barely above sea-level that separate it and with the city at its feet. One can only wonder about the impression it must have made and the feelings it aroused in the spirits of weary immigrants at the end of a long ocean voyage from their flat, low-lying, well-watered country and now about to disembark into the absolute unknown. Here was

a new empire of forms and colours, of textures and materials, a dry, mineral-rich country with riotous, colourful, exotic vegetation and flowers, rising up in successive mountain layers to the arid inland plateaus of southern Africa.

I was born under that ocean-fraught mountain, a concatenation of landscapes that impregnated my consciousness. The settlement of Cape Town had been established by the Dutch, a halfway station and garden to feed the crews making the long journey from Holland to the East Indies. It is interesting that the Dutch, inhabitants of another flat country, chose this mountain and its bay as their base: was it for the protective shelter, real or psychological that it accorded along this desolate coast? Or was it some form of esthetical subjugation that pushed them to take possession of so remarkable a geographical landmark?

My great-grandparents, like so many other Jews arriving from Lithuania and elsewhere in Europe, took the route going deep into the interior, looking for opportunities to eke out a living as pedlars - or *smouse*, the Afrikaans term. They would take long journeys from one remote farm or settlement to another with their wagons, plying goods brought from the city. They would buy skins from farmers and sell them in the cities, saving up for the fare to bring their families to South Africa.

This period is richer in souvenirs. My maternal great-grandfather went far north, settling with his family near Bulawayo in what was then Southern Rhodesia. It is told that he was returning from work on his bicycle one day and came face to face with a lion. Not a hungry lion, it would appear... according to legend, the following day his hair had gone entirely grey. He lived to the age of 92. My paternal grandfather's brother, Joseph Rabie (a namesake, though I am not named after him) enrolled as a volunteer in the British army at the age of 17 during the Anglo-Boer War. Captured, he was brought before the Boer general Manie Maritz, who greeted him with "*Joodjie, wat maak jy hier?*" and shot him in the head at point blank range.

In time, the new immigrants would settle down in some small town, set up shop or buy land and farm. They would also go about constituting Jewish communities - building synagogues and establishing welfare, Zionist and cultural institutions, their East European cultural substructure gradually undergoing a synthesis in its contact with local life. My maternal grandparents, whom I visited as a child, lived in Upton on the Orange (Gariiep) River - a narrow belt of fertile farming land on either side of the river, at the edge of the Kalahari Desert. How much further from Lithuania could one get? Ultimately, most of these country Jews gravitated to the larger cities, either inland to Johannesburg or returning to Cape Town, setting up businesses and taking great care to have their children educated in the best schools.

These people did not, however, forget their European roots. On the outbreak of the Second World War, many volunteered to serve in the Allied forces, so much so, that when local antisemites accused the Jews of shirking “from fighting in a war that was, after all, their own”, statistics could show that a greater proportion of Jews than any other group had volunteered. In this way, through the stories my father told, my early childhood imagination *was* engaged with European landscapes - though not *any* landscapes: Tuscany, over the Apennines and the Po Valley - my father, Monty Rabie,<sup>13</sup> and his regiment participated in the liberation of Florence. And many of these Jews also honoured their newly adopted African heritage, taking up the fight against Apartheid. One remembers the names of Joe Slovo and Helen Suzman, who with courage accompanied Nelson Mandela in the fight for equal rights.

To finish this geographical reminiscence, I wish to recall a place that has great meaning for me, the sublime Cape of Good Hope, or Cape of Storms, jutting southward into two oceans, being near to where the cold, polar Atlantic meets the warm, equatorial Indian. A narrow split of land rises up before it falls into the sea. One goes up a steep hill, whipped by the windy sea air; a grandiose view spreads out over the sea in all directions, northwards to the back of Table Mountain, eastwards across the vast, luminous bay<sup>14</sup> to the first ranges of mountains that hint at the interior. As already observed, a beautiful place where terrible things happened. There is a need to commemorate Dulcie September, born in Cape Town and ANC representative in France. Living in exile, she would say how much she wished to return to this particular, splendid place<sup>15</sup>, looking out upon the ocean from the Cape of Good Hope. She was assassinated in Paris by South African agents on 29 March 1988.<sup>16</sup>

## Vilnius

Vilnius is a charming, picturesque city which cultivates with assiduity an atmosphere of romantic folklore. Its winding, medieval streets with their lovely shops selling artisanal goods, the speciality being amber and linen, are punctuated with numerous baroque churches whose ornate, colourful ornamentations rise up crescendo to high domes which rhythm the skyline. One might be in Italy, though the Baltic countries have nothing of the Mediterranean. It was Bona Sforza, member of the Sforza family of Milan, who became Queen of Poland and Grand Duchess of Lithuania and thereafter initiated Vilnius to Italian architecture. It was, however, the Jewish presence in Vilnius which contributed much to the city's brilliance, as a centre of Jewish intellectual and spiritual life renowned internationally for its places of learning and its scholars, of whom the greatest was the Vilnius Gaon Eliyahu. According to the

researcher Leizer Ran, there were at one time or another 250 synagogues in the city<sup>17</sup>, which was known far and wide as the Jerusalem of the North.

Monday, 23 September 2013, was the 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilnius Ghetto, the date chosen for the official national commemoration of the genocide of Lithuanian Jewry. A ceremony, featuring the reading of the Vilnius Ghetto prisoner list, was held in the Vilnius Choral Synagogue on Pylimo Street, the city's only remaining active synagogue. My wife Sylvie and I were present, having arrived the previous evening. People went up one by one to the lectern in front of the ark and read excerpts from the two volumes of names. I looked through them, found lists of Gordons and Swerskis, the surnames of two of my grandparents. But what was so upsetting, compounding these most distraught of circumstances, was how few people there were - a mere handful scattered through an empty interior, emphasising how so few are left to commemorate the multitude of absentees.

Immediately after the Nazi invasion in June 1941, the mass murder of the Jewish population began at a site in the forest at Paneriai, a suburb of Vilnius. A total of 70 000 Lithuanian and Polish Jews perished there, shot and buried in mass graves. All in all, nearly 95% of a population of approximately 210 000 were murdered, making Lithuania one of the countries where the Final Solution was most effectively implemented.



*Interior of the Vilnius Choral Synagogue*

Right after the invasion, Lithuanian nationalists who had been fighting the Soviet regime that preceded the German occupation, swung into action, and goaded on by intensive antisemitic propaganda commenced mass pogroms throughout the country. Known as the White Armbands and piloted by the SS, these “self-cleansing movements”, as they were called in a secret Reich report by the *Einsatzgruppe A*, were part of a concerted effort to make believe that “as unshakable and provable facts for the future that it was the liberated population itself which took the most severe measures, on its own initiative, against the Bolshevik and Jewish enemy, without any German instructions being evident”<sup>18</sup>. Subsequently, German *Sonderkommandos* took over, assisted by Lithuanian units. Lithuanian local authorities did not, however, necessarily



cooperate: the same report notes that “in some places there has been considerable resistance by offices of the Civil Administration against large-scale executions”. At the end of 1941 nearly three quarters of the Jewish population had been murdered<sup>19</sup>. By the *Einsatzgruppe A* report’s own admission “the total elimination of the Jews is not possible (...) at the present time, (as) a large part of the skilled trades (are) in Jewish hands” and were needed for reconstruction and the war effort. At this time the ghettos in Vilnius, Kaunas, and other cities were set up to confine the remaining Jewish population, and the mass murder resumed in mid-1943.

According to Faina Kukliansky, chairperson of the Lithuanian Jewish community<sup>20</sup>, Lithuania’s current Jewish population is officially 5000, though there may be as many as 8000. Most of them came from Soviet Russia during the post-war period: there are only 200 people who, like her, are original Lithuanian Jews. It is an aging population, with many young people leaving the country.

The Vilnius Tourist Information Centre provides the usual documents that any tourist infrastructure provides: maps, pamphlets and brochures. A look at these provides a view of how Vilnius’s illustrious Jewish past and its tragic termination are presented to visitors to the city. A pamphlet titled “Jewish Cultural Heritage in Vilnius” presents different sites, including, of course, those related to the Shoah such as the Small and Big Ghettos. On the ground, however, apart from several plaques with plans of the two ghettos, there is no way of knowing its limits or its extent, whether one is inside or outside it as one goes through the city.

Indeed, apart from this pamphlet, the general documentation on the city is glaringly parsimonious and misleading in its presentation of Vilnius’s Jewish past. Another pamphlet proposing a “Vilnius in 3 days” visit, has only one mention of the city’s Jewish past, the Stiklių Street area which manifestly has the “authenticity” that tourists find irresistible:

“Stiklių and the small streets around it were famous as a trade and craft centre. During World War II these streets were included in the medieval Jewish quarter”... The ghetto, where Jewish craftsmen were kept alive just long enough to repair the city before being liquidated, is thus obscured behind an image that is romantically medieval.

The official city map of Vilnius highlights a “top 10 places of interest” list. The 9<sup>th</sup> item is the Museum of Genocide Victims “set up in the former KGB headquarters where Soviet crimes were planned and committed in the course of fifty years”. When I saw this association being made between genocide and the Soviet occupation of Lithuania with no mention of the Shoah, I

was filled with unease. On questioning Fania Kukliansky about this, she expressed her rage at how the Jewish Community had to fight to have a place for the Shoah made in the museum, one “*small space* (that) tells about the Nazi occupation, Gestapo prisons and prisoners, the history of the Vilnius ghetto” by the admission of the museum’s web site itself<sup>21</sup>. That this part of the exhibit is a forced afterthought is confirmed on the “Museums of Lithuania” web site where it is shown as being “New!”<sup>22</sup> The doctrine that a double genocide occurred in Lithuania, by the Nazis on the one hand and the Soviets on the other, is used to somehow equalise the suffering of the Lithuanian population as a whole with that of the Jews and to relativize the Lithuanian involvement in the latter<sup>23</sup>. Genocide has a precise meaning, and that carried out in Lithuania upon the Jewish population was particularly vicious and efficient; Soviet political oppression did wreak a reign of terror upon Lithuania, with many being deported to Siberia, but calling that genocide, in its intentions or its effects, is false. Thus it is that despite their lip service to tolerance, the Lithuanian authorities are deliberately perpetuating an act of collective amnesia.

What is so dismaying in Vilnius is that the German project succeeded doubly, not only in exterminating the vast majority of the population, but in extirpating the Jewish past, Jewish memory and all the brilliance of Jewish culture from the city. Vilnius will never again be the Jerusalem of the North; all the city might do is *symbolize* that loss. What is thus dismaying is that instead of commemorating that memory, incorporating that absence into the narrative of the city, everything is done to obfuscate it. What one feels when one walks in the charming, sanitised, tourist-friendly streets of Vilnius is a terrible impression of amputation.

## Kaunas

On 24 September, we embarked upon a daylong journey that would take us halfway across Lithuania. Our first destination was the 9<sup>th</sup> Fort in Kaunas. From Vilnius to Kaunas is 100 km; the highway runs through gently undulating countryside, roughly parallel to the Neris River which flows between the present and the old capital of Lithuania. We arrived at midday. Despite the fort being visible at the side of the highway, once we entered the city we had great difficulty finding it; there were no signposts and the local inhabitants were incapable of giving us directions.

The 9<sup>th</sup> Fort was used as a prison by the Germans, as it had been before the war. The vast grounds of the fort, however, were put to the same sinister use as the Paneriai forest, the mass murder of the Jews of the Kaunas ghetto. Some 30 000 people were shot and thrown into enormous pits.

In May 1944 a train, the Convoy 73 carrying 878 French Jewish men from the camp in Drancy in the Paris suburbs, arrived at the 9<sup>th</sup> Fort. Two thirds of their number were imprisoned in the fort; none survived. The remaining third were taken to Tallinn in Estonia, and finally to the Stutthoff concentration camp in Poland, of whom 22 survived. The prison in the 9<sup>th</sup> Fort is now a museum<sup>24</sup>. One of the cells where these Frenchmen were held contains a commemoration of the convoy. There is a plaque listing every one of them, and photographs provided by surviving family members show their erstwhile lives in France. Most poignant, however, is a last physical trace of their passing, a section of wall where several among them scratched their names in the plaster, and the inscription *Nous sommes 900 Français* - "We are 900 Frenchmen". The mystery which always surrounded the Convoy 73 was why it was headed for the Baltic countries and not Auschwitz-Birkenau as was generally the case. The men embarking on that train were led to believe that they were "volunteers" who would be doing construction work for the Todt Organisation, a way of avoiding a worse fate.



*Engraving by Jewish prisoners in the Ninth Fort in Kaunas: "We are 900 Frenchmen".*

The historian Ève Line Blum-Cherchevsky, whose father was deported on Convoy 73, has devoted many years to collecting the testimony of relatives of those on the train<sup>25</sup>. Her hypothesis is that they were taken to the Baltic countries as part of the German effort to erase the evidence of the mass murders<sup>26</sup>, carried out by the top secret *Sonderaktion 1005*<sup>27</sup>. They were to be forced to dig up the bodies of their brethren, incinerate them and make their ashes disappear. Blum-Cherchevsky bases her assertion on the fact that this grim task was already being undertaken at the 9<sup>th</sup> Fort in Kaunas, but at the end of 1943, the 64 Jewish prisoners being forced to do so succeeded in escaping. The Germans, in her view, decided to bring in foreign prisoners, making escape far more difficult.

My wife's grandfather Haïm Blum, born in Ryglie, Poland, and who immigrated to France, perished somewhere along the path taken by the Convoy 73.

## Biržai

From Kaunas to Biržai is a 180 km drive that takes one past Panevėžys. The countryside is startlingly flat, perturbed only once by a mine dump to the east of Kėdainiai. Biržai is a small town on the edge of lovely, calm Širvėna Lake, set into the lowlands and forests which surround it. Two meandering rivers flow through it into the lake, on either side of the centre. There is one Jew left in Biržai, Sheftel Melamed. Born in 1926, he survived the war because his brother, who was in the Russian army, took him out just before the German invasion<sup>28</sup>.

East of the centre and across the river is a neighbourhood of older wooden and more recent brick houses with luscious gardens full of flowers and fruit trees, facing the lake. Perhaps this in former times was home to some of the town's many Jews, as the ancient Jewish cemetery of Biržai is to be found at its extremity, on a headland extending out into the lake. The many gravestones there have been worn away by time and the elements. In August 2013, a field school was held in Jewish Ethnography and Epigraphy by SEFER, the Moscow Centre for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization<sup>29</sup>, and inscriptions on the gravestones were recorded. An image comes to mind of my grandfather as a child playing along the lakeshore, revelling in the beauty of the place; he spent his last years living in a house on Queen's Road in Sea Point, a road perpendicular to the sea, similar to the way the roads in this neighbourhood run down to the lake. It made me wonder if any connection ever entered his mind, given the difference in magnitude between the Atlantic Ocean and little Širvėna Lake.



*The old Jewish cemetery in Biržai.*

The persecutions started in Biržai right after the arrival of the Germans on 26 June 1941, the White Armbands being organised by a local lawyer. After a period of indiscriminate killings, the Jewish population were moved into an ad hoc ghetto at the end of July<sup>30</sup>. On 8 August, the entire Jewish population of 2400 - 900 children, 780 women, 720 men - were taken around the lake to a clearing in the Pakamponys forest not far from the northern shore and shot. Their bodies

were thrown into two pits which the men had been forced to dig<sup>31</sup>. The massacre lasted from 11am to 7pm. In all, some 80 White Armbands and policemen took part, returning to the town singing when the killing was done. 90 Lithuanians were murdered and thrown into a pit close by.

A large, paved platform covers the site of the massacre, with a monument bearing the inscription, in Yiddish and Lithuanian, "At this place, Hitler's executioners and their helpers murdered about 2400 Jews - men, women and children - on August 8, 1941, and about 90 Lithuanians". The day before our visit, the national day of remembrance, there must have been a ceremony, for many, many river pebbles had been arranged around the monument with the names of victims freshly painted, apparently by school children, onto them. Mendel, Levitas, Izrael, Simka - and Rebe, my family name in Lithuania. Holding that pebble, I was dizzy with the feeling that at that instant my entire universe was pivoting around it, as if my living self was being radically dislocated and relocated.



*Rabie family name on commemorative stone, Biržai monument.*

80 Lithuanian perpetrators versus 90 Lithuanian dead might be an absurd, impossible measure of responsibility. One might take refuge in the innocence of childhood. How traumatic an experience was it for the children of Biržai when the town was amputated of a third of its population? In all likelihood, they heard the gunfire resonate across the calm waters of the lake from inside the forest on the far side, throughout the whole, long summer afternoon. Those *others* had been children with whom they might have played or maybe ganged up against, children they certainly *knew*, within the confined social space of a small country town. Now they were *gone* in the most abrupt of circumstances and the most atrocious violence. The explanations they may have received from their parents would depend upon the degree of humanity or barbarity reigning in each particular household. Did this mark them for life? The ethnographers from the SEFER field school conducted interviews with Biržai's inhabitants, questioning them about the now virtually extinct Jewish presence in the town. But their experience could in no way

ever be equated with the final moments of terror suffered by those 900 children and their parents facing their executioners.

There is a Tolerance Education Centre at the Aušros Secondary School in Biržai. Over the past three years the school children have been taking care of the Jewish cemetery<sup>32</sup> which is particularly well looked after. The municipality appears to be engaged in activities related to the memory of the town's Jewish past<sup>33</sup>. On the other hand, the Biržai Tourism Information Centre web page that presents the area's memorials and statues, commemorating a whole series of public figures and heroes, including fighters who resisted the Soviets, makes no mention of the *place* in the forest where one third of the town's population was exterminated.

### Postscript

In the course of the "Virtual Memorial Vilnius 2013" symposium, works from the Agricola de Cologne Shoah Film Collection<sup>34</sup> were presented and discussed. Cristiano Berti (Italy) presented a film, *Lety*, documenting the journey made by two Roma musicians to the memorial to the Roma genocide in the Czech Republic; the former camp has been turned into a pig farm. Doron Polak (Israel) made a performance at the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, exploring the humiliation of the naked human body by the atrocities inflicted upon it. Ariel Yannai-Shani (Israel) presented a photographic installation at the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum in northern Israel, which meditates upon the forest which has grown up on the remains of the Treblinka Concentration Camp. Jacob Podber (United States) showed a two-minute short film that brought home with great pain his father's inability to speak of his seeing, before his very eyes, the annihilation of his family.

Marcantonio Lunardi (Italy) presented a film commemorating the massacre of entire Tuscan villages by the retreating Germans in 1944. A map showed the advance of the Allied forces. In my presentation that followed his own, I was able to bring the counterpoint of the South African forces that took part in the liberation of Italy, of which my father had been a part.

### NOTES

- 1 The author thanks Wilfried Agricola de Cologne, the Jewish Culture and Information Centre, and the Institut Français in Vilnius for their kind invitation.
- 2 Institut d'Urbanisme de Paris, Lab'Urba Laboratory.
- 3 Retailé, Denis (2012), *Cartographie & Participation, séminaire GRANIT*, Université de Bordeaux III - UMR ADES, 22-23 octobre 2012.
- 4 *Al-Qaida au Maghreb islamique*.
- 5 Presidential order published in the *Reichsgesetzblatt Nr. 17* (Legal Bulletin of the Reich N° 17) 28 February 1933. Signed by President von Hindenburg, Minister of the Interior Frick, Minister of Justice Dr Gürtner, and




- Chancellor Adolf Hitler. Quoted by Mazal, Harry W. OBE, *The Dachau Gas Chambers*.
- 6 Ibid.
  - 7 For more information about this work see [http://www.joetopia.org/photo\\_interactive/e/dachau/index.htm](http://www.joetopia.org/photo_interactive/e/dachau/index.htm). The images shown are screenshots: the work is in a constant state of flux and interacts with the viewer - to be experienced correctly it has to be seen on computer.
  - 8 See photographs taken from Google Streetview, in file JRabie\_from Kavarsk to Upington.pdf.
  - 9 Rosin, Yosef, *Birzh (Birzai), Lithuania*, <http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/Birzh/birzh1.html>
  - 10 <http://www.litvaksig.org/>
  - 11 Kowen, Julius (2001), *The Scribe of the Tribe, Julius Kowen's Memory Jogs*, family memoir.
  - 12 Grandparents on one side named for a profession, on the other side for a place?
  - 13 24/1/1921-29/4/2013. Served in armoured corps, Natal Mounted Rifles, attached to the American Fifth Army.
  - 14 False Bay
  - 15 She told this to Jean-Pierre Brard, ex-mayor of Montreuil-sous-Bois.
  - 16 Outside the ANC offices, 28 Rue des Petites-Ecuries.
  - 17 Alperavičius, Simonas, Lempertas, Izraelis (1999), *Jewish Community of Lithuania on the 10th anniversary of the revival*.
  - 18 Jewish Virtual Library, *Extracts from a Report by Einsatzgruppe a in the Baltic Countries*, 15 October 1941, [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Holocaust/Einsatz\\_Baltic.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Holocaust/Einsatz_Baltic.html). Source: Nuremberg Documents, L-180.
  - 19 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Holocaust\\_in\\_Lithuania](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Holocaust_in_Lithuania).
  - 20 Speaking at the presentation (during the "A Virtual Memorial Vilnius 2013" symposium) of the film *The Pit of Life and Torment*, directed by Lilia Kopac, produced by the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum. The film describes how Faina Kukliansky's family survived, managing to stay one step ahead of the Nazis, and were hidden during the last part of the war in a pit dug in the forest. They were helped by many, local country people, who have been recognized as "Righteous among the Nations". See <http://sfc.engad.org/video/?p=506>.
  - 21 <http://www.genocid.lt/muziejus/en/1896/a/>. Our italics.
  - 22 [http://www.muziejai.lt/vilnius/genocido\\_auku\\_muziejus.en.htm](http://www.muziejai.lt/vilnius/genocido_auku_muziejus.en.htm). See photograph and text in the column on right hand side of the page. Their exclamation mark.
  - 23 <http://defendinghistory.com/mission-statement>. My thanks go to Dr Saul Issroff for bringing the issue of double genocide to my attention.
  - 24 [http://www.muziejai.lt/kaunas/forto\\_muziejus.en.htm](http://www.muziejai.lt/kaunas/forto_muziejus.en.htm).
  - 25 Blum-Cherchevsky, Ève Line (1999-2006), *Nous sommes 900 Français : à la mémoire des déportés du convoi n° 73 ayant quitté Drancy le 15 mai 1944*, Besançon, 7 vols., published by the author.
  - 26 Ibid. *Pourquoi les pays baltes?*, vol. 7.
  - 27 *Why 1005?* Blum-Cherchevsky explains that this was a code name, part of the top secret German attempt to cover up their crimes. 1005 had been the registration number of an anonymous letter from a German national living in annexed Poland complaining about the reappearance of Jewish corpses that had been hastily buried in a mass grave.
  - 28 My thanks to Mark Melamed for this information. He met and interviewed Sheftel Melamed in 2003. The latter was unable to provide detailed information on his forebears, apart from the "tantalizing bit of information that (...) as a child, his father told him that all Birzai Melameds are related!". Rabies and Melameds have been getting married for more than a century, both in Biržai and Cape Town.
  - 29 [http://sefer.ru/eng/education/educational\\_programmes/Summer/expedition\\_birzhai2013.php](http://sefer.ru/eng/education/educational_programmes/Summer/expedition_birzhai2013.php). My thanks to Rūta Anulytė of MACEVA for bringing this to my attention.
  - 30 Rosin, Yosef, Op cit., <http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/Birzh/birzh3.html>.
  - 31 [http://www.holocaustatlas.lt/EN/#a\\_atlas/search//page/1/item/149/](http://www.holocaustatlas.lt/EN/#a_atlas/search//page/1/item/149/).
  - 32 <http://www.komisija.lt/en/naujiena.php?id=1363354049>.
  - 33 As the SEFER field school attests.
  - 34 <http://sfc.engad.org/video/>.

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# SOVIET SLAVERY AND HOW SOME LITHUANIAN JEWS WERE SAVED BY IT

\*

David Saks

Nathan Marcus, father of future South African Reserve Bank Governor Gill Marcus and a devoted communist, once had a fierce argument with Mordechai Perlov, a survivor of a Soviet forced labour camp. According to Perlov, when he described himself as a victim of communism, Marcus responded angrily, "You little bastard! If it wasn't for communism, you wouldn't be here today!" Perlov no doubt would have pointed out that his mother and father were no longer there. Along with countless others, they had not survived the inhumane conditions which they were forced to endure following their deportation from their Lithuanian homeland.

In one respect, Marcus was probably correct. Had the Perlov family not been deported during the brief period when Lithuania was under Soviet rule, the likelihood is that none of its members would have survived once the Nazis took over. In the second half of 1941, an estimated 85% of the Jews of Lithuania were massacred by the occupying German forces and their Lithuanian collaborators; of the 40 000 or so who remained, four out of five suffered the same fate in the years that followed. For all the cruel hardships they endured, Mordechai Perlov and his brother and sister were at least still alive when the war was over, as were a fair number of other Jewish exiles who had shared their captivity. Such hindsight, however, does not lessen to even the slightest degree the culpability of the Soviet regime in deporting and enslaving them in the first place. Nathan Marcus' reaction to Perlov's comment only reveals how much he, along with so many other fellow communists, remained in denial about the true nature of the Soviet Union during the Stalin years, and indeed thereafter.

On 10 July 1941, the occupying Soviet forces began rounding up tens of thousands of Lithuanians for deportation. These supposed 'enemies of the state' included intellectuals, businessmen, teachers, Lithuanian nationalists and former state officials. Their 're-education' was to take the form of working as slave labourers for the Soviet empire, which was looking to develop the vast, under-populated regions of northern and eastern Russia. Wealthy non-Jewish Lithuanians were also arrested, and in general antisemitism

does not seem to have been a factor in deciding who should be deported. Lithuanian antisemites in fact alleged that the deportations were an act of Jewish revenge carried out by 'Jewish' security officers in charge of the deportations.<sup>1</sup> Entire families rather than just individuals were deported. Each family was allowed one hour to pack belongings not exceeding 100 kilograms and sufficient food for a month's journey. What they could not take with them was confiscated and their homes ransacked. They were then loaded onto cattle trucks and transported to labour camps in areas so remote and inhospitable as to make escape all but impossible.

Amongst the many Jews deported were Leibe and Malka Perlov and their three children, Mordechai, 15, Yaakov, 11, and Tova, 7. Leibe's brother Lazer, his wife Rosa and two of their children, Matla and Bertha, were likewise seized (a third child, Luta, was considered to be 'psychologically unfit' for deportation, the result of his being recently tortured, interrogated



*Leibe and Malka Perlov, with their two younger children Yaakov and Tova.*

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and imprisoned for five months as a suspected subversive).

The Perlovs had been a wealthy family. Leibe and Lazer were partners in a thriving timber and flour milling business in Raseiniai (Yiddish: 'Rasein'), a medium-sized town located mid-way between the larger urban centres of Kaunas/Kovno and Siauliai/Shavli. The business employed some 100 workers, and it was generally believed that one or more of these, to settle personal grievances, were responsible for denouncing the Perlovs as 'capitalist exploiters'.

Raseiniai was one of the oldest towns in Lithuania, and Jews had lived since the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. In 1897, Jews constituted as much as 90% of the population. These numbers declined sharply over the next four decades, but on the eve of World War II, there were still 2000 living there, making up around 40% of the total. On 23 June 1941, a mere nine days after the commencement of the Soviet deportations, the invading German forces captured the town. Over the next two months, virtually all its Jewish residents had been annihilated by the *Einsatzgruppen* and their Lithuanian supporters.

The prisoners were under the impression that they were being sent to 'Siberia', the all-purposes term for a place of punishment and exile. In reality, their destination was the Komi Republic, a vast, barely populated area west of the Ural Mountains and lying partially within the Arctic Circle. There was no incentive for people to migrate to the area, where winter temperatures ranged from just below zero to as low as minus 50C for six months each year, where 85% of the land was covered by forests and swamps and which had virtually no infrastructure or amenities. During the preceding decade, as part of Stalin's ruthless drive to modernise Russia and exploit and develop its natural resources, tens of thousands of prisoners had already been sent to Komi under the pretence of 're-educating' supposed enemies of the state. It is estimated that around a million people were ultimately forced to work there, in mines, oilfields and other development projects, during the Soviet era.

Leibe and Lazer Perlov and their families, comprising nine individuals in total, ultimately ended up in the dreary settlement-cum-labour camp of Ust-Lokchim, about a day's journey by barge up the Vychegda River from the Komian capital Syktyvkar further south. The two families were assigned to a single room in a four-room barracks; their first job was to erect two wide communal beds out of planks and straw mattresses. In the centre of the room was a stove with a plate for keeping food warm. In the room opposite were the Ziv brothers and their families, including Mordechai's childhood friend, Yitzhak.

There was an ethnic mix in the camp, including around 50 Jewish families. Those over the age of fifteen were immediately put to work, cutting down trees and dispatching rafts of logs down

the river to the ports of Kotlas and Syktyvkar. Mordechai, although not quite fifteen, was amongst them. His brother Yaakov, eleven when he arrived at the camp, went to work as soon as he was able to so as to receive the extra 200 grams of bread each day. Each worker received 600 grams of bread per day, plus three allocations of thin cabbage soup on arising, at midday and in the evenings. The average work day began at around 4am. After a twelve or thirteen hour day of exhausting labour, in the summer months amidst clouds of mosquitos and in sub-zero temperatures in winter, people queued for their bread (which was invariably eaten on the spot lest it be stolen), and went immediately to sleep.



*Floating logs down the river in the Komi Republic (from memoirs of Moshe David Chayat, Israel, 2004)*

Within a month or two, elderly people in particular began dying, both from the cruel work regime and from sickness and malnutrition. There was no medical attention available, and few of the deportees – who back in Lithuania, they had been clerks, housewives, shopkeepers and the like – had any experience of physical labour. Lazer Perlov, Mordechai's uncle, was amongst those who died at an early stage. The death toll escalated as the war progressed and shortages led to rations being progressively cut.

With the coming of winter, Mordechai and others were sent further into the forest to work. It took them five days to reach the barracks, where men, women and children slept. It took another four hours of walking each day to reach their place of work. Each person was provided with



a saw and axe. Some cut down trees, working in pairs, while others worked with horses and sledge to pull the felled logs to the riverside. In the spring, these would be floated down the river, to be tied together by special machines and then rafted down to the main ports.

Escape from the logging camp was constantly on people's minds, but very few attempted it. It would mean a five-day walk through deep snow, without adequate clothing and with no more food than could be somehow saved from their small daily ration. One day, Mordechai awoke with a strong premonition of disaster. That night he and Yaakov, who had since joined him in the camp, made their escape. They were accompanied by two non-Jewish Polish friends, Arthur Pilsudski and one Pakalchuk. They were known to the Perlovs as their families had owned land near Rasein. Arthur's father was a cousin of the renowned Marshall Jozeph Pilsudski, former Prime Minister of Poland and a renowned fighter for Polish independence.

Walking day and night, the four managed to reach Ust'Lokchim. It was night-time when they arrived. Mordechai and Yaakov tentatively entered the room where their families were still living, but there was no father or mother to greet them. They had died that same day, of illness and slow starvation, Leiba first and Malka a few hours later. Between them on the bed lay their daughter, Tova. Before she died, her mother had taken her in her arms, held her close and murmured, "I'm sorry for you, my dearest child, to leave you alone at such a tender age".<sup>2</sup> It took Mordechai and Yaakov nearly three days to hack a double grave out of the frozen ground.

Around this time, Mordechai received a letter from his friend Yitzchak Ziv, who earlier on had succeeded in escaping from Ustlokchim to Syktyvkar and now urged Mordechai to try to join him. Mordechai, along with Pilsudski and Pakalchuk, decided to risk it, even though it meant another harrowing journey without food or shelter and the ever-present danger of being caught. His Aunt Rosa angrily opposed his plans, believing he would never survive the journey and afraid that his escape would endanger the family members left behind. She did not betray him to the authorities, however, although he had feared that she might.

Yaakov Perlov was by then working in a distant forest. When he eventually returned, it was to find that both Mordechai and Tova were gone. It was only in 1991, during a visit to Israel, that he saw them again. Yaakov remained in Ust'Lokchim, initially living with his Aunt Rosa and cousins Matla and Bertha until they likewise moved to Syktyvkar and left him quite alone. He then met Maria, a Komi native likewise far from home, and they married and started a large family. In addition to working, they were able to grow vegetables for themselves, and while desperately poor at least did not go hungry.

Mordechai and his companions, sheltering in barns when too exhausted to continue and cadging or stealing food whenever they could, reached Syktyvar after two days and nights. Being so small and under-nourished, they looked much younger than they were, and those they encountered assumed they were children from one of the other settlements rather than runaways. This was some time in 1944, three years since they had first passed through the town en route to Ust'Lokchim.

For Mordechai, while many hardships and dangers still lay ahead, the worst of his experiences lay behind him. He and his two companions were now taken in by two Jewish families, who had managed to keep out of the labour camps and establish a reasonably secure life for themselves in Syktyvar. They were able to register for food rations, and because they could pass as children did not need to produce identification documents. It was now learned that the Soviet Union and Poland had concluded an agreement to repatriate imprisoned Poles. Before going to the Polish Consulate, Arthur Pilsudski and Pakalchuk gave Mordechai and Yitzchak Ziv a crash course in basic Polish to enable them to pass as Poles. To this end, they identified as their supposed place of origin the city of Grodno, now part of Poland but formerly part of Lithuania and where people spoke with Lithuanian accents. It would not be necessary to hide the fact that they were Jewish. The four boys also began a train stoker's course at a Russian trade school.

When it finally took place, the interview with the Consulate went better than any of them had hoped. Once it was learned that Arthur was related to the famed Marshall Jozeph Pilsudski, he and his companions were accorded every kindness. They left the stoker's course and moved into the Consulate, where they worked as clerks and were provided with clothing, food and accommodation. Their job was to organise clothing, food and other material aid for Polish citizens seeking repatriation. They were also able to make a good living by selling small quantities of food on the black market. Through this, Mordechai was able to hire a man with a motorised boat to bring his siblings, aunt and cousins in Ust'Lokchim to Syktyvar. His Aunt Rosa, however, decided to remain where she was, unwilling to take the considerable risks that she, as an adult, would face. Yaakov could not come either, as he was again working deep in the forest. In the end, only Tova was returned on the boat, but her reunion with Mordechai after more than three years was short-lived. Things at the Consulate were winding down, and Mordechai and his friends were scheduled to be relocated to the Ukraine in just two days. Mordechai made the painful decision to place his sister in the local orphanage for Polish children, promising to find her again after the war was over. Shortly afterwards he, Yitzhak, Arthur Pilsudski and Pakalchuk were taken from

Sykytvar to a sugar beet *Sovchoz* (government farm) between Kursk and Voronezh.

The first months in the orphanage were a traumatic time for Tova; living conditions were harsh, and she was unkindly treated by the other children and caregivers. Unable to speak Polish and afraid to reveal herself as being Lithuanian, she stopped speaking altogether. Later, she and the other orphans were transferred to Kursk in the Ukraine, where life was a little easier. They remained there until the end of the war, and then were moved to Lodz, Poland.

On the *Sovchoz*, Mordechai and his companions enjoyed a period of relative tranquillity. The work was not arduous and they were kindly treated by the other residents. At last, they were not thinking of food all the time and, as Yitzchak put it, 'for the first time in years began to live again'. After about four months, they were transferred to a sugar factory about twenty miles away. Sugar being so rare, it sold well on the black market, and the boys, as did virtually all their fellow workers, took advantage of this. On weekends, they would walk to the farm to visit their friends. In March 1946, after eighteen months in the Ukraine and long after the conclusion of the war in Europe, they were finally 'repatriated', arriving in Lodz with other Polish exiles. Their arrival preceded that of Tova by a month or two. On learning of the orphanage's whereabouts Mordechai, together with Yitzchak and a Raseiniai *landsleit* called Abke, stole into the building one night and spirited her away.

There was no thought of returning to Lithuania. With the near total annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry, there was nothing to return to. In any case, going back was not safe. A sister of Yitzchak Ziv who tried to return to Raseiniai was deported back to Komi.

Mordechai, with Yitzchak had by then joined a temporary kibbutz established by Zionist groups working to bring Jewish survivors to Palestine. In due course, they were taken from there to Hochland, a small settlement near Munich that ironically had been built for the Hitler Youth but was now a Jewish youth camp under the administration of mainly Palestinian Jews charged with preparing the inmates to make *aliyah*. There, Mordechai in due course was appointed as a *madrich* and became proficient in Hebrew, which he taught to young children who could only speak Russian or Polish. Tova was able to go to Palestine during this time, but the ship on which Mordechai was trying to arrive illegally was intercepted by the British, and its passengers interned on Cyprus for a lengthy period.

In mid-1946, Mordechai was finally allowed to immigrate to Palestine. For a time, he lived with his cousins, the Pearlman family, who had arrived in the 1920s, and then joined the nascent Israeli defence force. During the 1948 War of Independence, by which time he held the rank of sergeant, he saw action near Petach



*Yitzchak Ziv (left), Tova and Mordechai, Germany, 1946.*

Tikva and was severely wounded in the knee. On his recovery, he served in the elite Givati unit until the end of the war. Availing himself of the opportunity of studying provided to ex-servicemen, he successfully completed a course in engineering at Haifa University, but in the end did not remain in Israel. In 1953 Meishel Zwi, the elder brother of Malka Perlov, brought him out to Johannesburg to attend the wedding of his son Saul. Mordechai, who spoke no English, initially decided against taking up his offer to remain, but following an unhappy return visit to Israel, decided to move to South Africa permanently. There, at least, he had some family; he was treated like a fourth son by Meishel and his wife, Toby, and his three cousins, Wolf, Charles and Saul, were like brothers to him.

In his thirties, Mordechai married Millie Faivish, who was a bookkeeper at Crystal Bakeries where he was then working. They had three children, Ari, Roni and Carmella, and five grandchildren. Mordechai had a successful business career, eventually running the sock production and distribution department of the textile company Safnit Mills. At one time, this was the largest sock producer in the country. Now retired, and still in excellent health as he

approaches his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, he lives with Millie in Melrose, Johannesburg.

Tova remained in Israel, where she qualified as a nurse. She married Yossi Keret, whom she had met on a kibbutz, and they had a son and a daughter. She maintained contact with Yaakov throughout the nearly fifty years in which they were separated. Now widowed, she lives in Kiryat Bialik. Her son and daughter, respectively an IT specialist and a banker, have likewise remained in Israel.

In 1996, a year after his wife, Maria's death, Yaakov Perlov and seven of his ten children made *aliyah*. Yaakov's more than twenty grandchildren have since integrated well into Israel society, and several have converted to Judaism and married Jewish Israelis. Yaakov died in October 2008 and was buried in Ashkelon. Despite the tragedy of his early years and subsequent life of poverty and hard labour, he was not embittered by his experiences. His had been a hard life, he would say, but it had been a good one; if his family had been very poor, they at least never had to go hungry.<sup>3</sup>

Mordechai's cousin Bertha immigrated to Israel around the same time as Yaakov. She had been married, unhappily, to a Russian carpenter, with whom she had three children, Tanya, Grisha and Olga. Grisha and his family immigrated with her; her daughters remained in Syktyvkar. Now living in Hadera, she celebrated her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2014.

In addition to the interviews conducted with Mordechai Perlov himself, this account of his life and that of his family has drawn heavily on *Once Were Slaves: A Journey through the Circles of Hell* by the South African-born author and novelist Rose Zwi. Published in 2010, this weaves the recollections of Mordechai, Yaakov

and Tova Perlov, as well as of those like Yitzchak Ziv who largely shared their experiences, into the broader historical narrative of the Soviet labour camps, World War II and the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel. Rose was married to Mordechai's cousin and close friend, Wolf, who died in Sydney in May 2013. It is fitting to end this article with her book's concluding lines, which stress not just the tragedy of the story that had been related, but also the quiet heroism, self-sacrifice and essential decency displayed throughout by its young protagonists:

Since I started researching and writing this book, the siblings have learned a great deal about one another's 'lost lives' in exile. As I write, new questions arise, some of which are answered differently by Tova and by Mordechai. Because of the inscrutable working of memory, some aspects of their separate experiences are remembered differently, or not at all.<sup>4</sup> Some memories have been too painful to dredge up, others have faded with time. That too is part of their story. What shines through those years of suffering is the indomitable human spirit that overcame almost insuperable odds.<sup>5</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 [http://www.holocaustrevealed.org/\\_domain/holocaustrevealed.org/lithuania/lithuanian\\_history.htm](http://www.holocaustrevealed.org/_domain/holocaustrevealed.org/lithuania/lithuanian_history.htm)
- 2 Zwi, Rose, *Once Were Slaves – A Journey through the Circles of Hell*, Sydney Jewish Museum, 2010, p56.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p188.
- 4 Mordechai, for example, cannot recall rescuing Tova from the orphanage in Lodz; Tova remembers it well.
- 5 Zwi, *Once Were Slaves*, p202.



Yaakov, Tova and Mordechai Perlov, Israel, 2006

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# A LITHUANIAN BOYHOOD

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Solly Per

**Editor's Note:** *The following is taken from the memoirs of Solly Per, a Lithuanian immigrant who arrived in South Africa in 1929, as compiled by his daughter-in-law, Lindy Per in 1992. It takes the narrator's story from his birth in Pasvertin through to his departure for South Africa. Per went on to become Director of Light Metal Engineering and various companies and was Chairman of the Industrial Council (Light Metal Engineering Industry) from 1966-7. In the Jewish communal service field, he served as Co-Treasurer of the S.A. Jewish Appeal, as an Honorary Officer of the Israel United Appeal and as member of its Migrants' Committee.*



*Solly Per, circa 1967*

I was born in 1911 in Pasvertin, Lithuania. The birth certificate was made out in Joniskis - maybe because Joniskis was a bigger place. Pasvertin was too small to get certificates in. Immediately after birth, I was placed next to an open window. Being May, I suppose it was cool but not too chilly outside. Apparently I turned blue. My poor mother became very distressed, but my father responded in a strictly pragmatic way. I must be left to make up my own mind, he said - either I would stay or I would go.

I was named Zundel Avraham after my two grandfathers. Zundel was my father's father. I don't know much about him. He came from Pasvertin, as did my father. My father's mother was Peshah. A woman of outstanding generosity, I know a story about her. My grandfather had two sets of underclothes, one for during the week, the other for the Sabbath. Came one Friday night, he couldn't find his second set of underclothes. Peshah had given them away to a poor man. "Where are my underclothes?" he said. "I can't find them, they must have been stolen." "So what of it!" said my grandmother, "the thief must have needed them." This generosity was a fault in my father as well. The only argument my parents ever had was over his giving away his money.

About my mother's family, the Blochs, I know more. They came from an area on the border of Latvia and Germany, later moving to Shavil

because it was a bigger town. My mother's father was Avraham. He is buried in Braamfontein, in the first Jewish cemetery. He came to South Africa to try and make a living as a teacher of Hebrew. He couldn't make a living as a teacher, so he opened a shop, but this didn't work either because he was not prepared to keep open on the Sabbath. He died here a relatively young man in his fifties. My mother remained behind in Shavil with her mother and three sisters.

My father - Herz - was born in Pasvertin in 1875. He had two brothers, one older called Oray, and a younger brother, Yisroel, a Hebrew teacher who died in Port Elizabeth. He had two sisters, Hinde and Mary. My father dealt, traded, in provisions, agricultural goods, in the markets of the small towns like Pasvertin and Shavil. He traded in flax, which he bought from the local farmers. He met my mother, Hannah, in Shavil. When they discussed marriage, my father said he would first go to Africa. He was there for seven years, so for seven years they were betrothed.

At the turn of the century people didn't talk of South Africa - they just referred to it as 'Africa'. My father arrived in Cape Town and went to the docks to seek work. He was always a heavy smoker. Because he was smoking while waiting in the hiring queue the overseer told him to step out of the line. "Any man who has money for cigarettes does not need a job" he said. Unable

to find work, he decided to go to Johannesburg to seek his fortune, making the journey there by ox-wagon. In the beginning he had a stall in Market Street. He traded with the Portuguese Government, selling wares to the country farmer, and would go into the country to trade by ox-wagon. Of the Afrikaners he said he always had a good reception. As a Jew they welcomed him as being a man of the Book. This was not true of the English. My father did well, and returned to Lithuania with a £1000 (a fortune - Herz the Millionaire!) He married my mother and bought a farm near Joniskis. As well as this, he owned a house in the town. My sister, Sarah, was born a year later. Four years after this, I was born.

My mother was a lovely woman - cultivated. She loved to sing, and spoke a very good German. My earliest memory was of her holding me aloft in her arms to look at the 'big silver bird' in the sky. In those days, the planes were small and flew quite low. It must have been a German plane. It was 1914 [World War I], and the Germans had moved into Lithuania. They requisitioned our farm, house and all our livestock - my father was left with nothing. They told us we were refugees, and as refugees they put us on a train. We were taken to Russia and stayed in Romney in the Ukraine, near Kiev, staying there for four years. At the end of that time I spoke pretty good Russian. My father worked as a night-watchman at an oil factory. He wasn't paid wages but in kind, in cooking-oil, which he had to barter for our daily provisions. My sister and I went to Cheder. I still have a memory of my father carrying me there on his shoulders, because the streets were so muddy.

The war came to an end, the Russian Revolution began. We returned to Lithuania, to Joniskis. Things were bad - it was so very hard on my father. The first year [1918] the Germans still occupied Lithuania. Instead of the many cows and oxen we had had previously on our farm, we had only one cow. My mother was milking it to give a little milk to us, her children, when a German officer came past. She had not declared the cow to the Germans, so he took out his whip and hit her - her arm was all swollen. There was so little to eat. My mother could not get food, except for a type of barley, coarse millet; it tasted bad. I had no clothes. My mother made me a suit out of the uniform of a German soldier which was left behind after the occupation. That is how she turned her hand to things.

My father opened a kind of bottle store/bar. In the next town was a brewery which gave him credit. He sold beer, vodka, and brandy to the peasants. He did not like this trade and so later turned to ironmongery, selling steel. But the peasants were so very poor - there was much unemployment.

Joniskis was not a big town, but there was a direct connection to Latvia - it was on the main rail-line from Germany to Russia. The population consisted of about three hundred families. Ninety

percent of the Jewish population lived in the town itself. Jews and Gentiles tolerated each other. Certainly, when I was older, I remember street-fights between Jewish and Gentile youths, but these outbreaks - involving throwing things, hurling insults - were more typical of teenagers than representative of deep racial hatred.

People who remember the town will remember a particularly nice church in the middle of it. In the town square was not just an ordinary well with bucket for drawing water, but a pump. This was very modern, so everybody wanted nice, cool fresh water from the pump. Every Monday, there was an open-air market in the square. I remember vividly how the Jews of the town would sell pots, pans and calico-lining to the peasants from the farms, who in turn would bring their hens, turkeys and wooden pegs to market. Jews needed chickens for their pots. Peasants needed pots for their chickens. Poultry was expensive - more expensive than meat. It was a special treat, perhaps for a Friday night, so having bought the chicken on Monday (it was not put into the deep-freeze - there were no deep-freezes), it was kept alive in the yard till Friday, whereupon we, the children, would take it to the *Shochet* for kosher-killing, and bring it back - dead, but hardly ready to eat - for plucking.

Surrounding the square, were shops. There was a hardware-shop, a men's-outfitter, a haberdashery where women bought the materials to make their clothes and, of course, a chemist (a pharmacist, rather, a Gentile by the name of Zastaskis). Joniskis was a town of shuls, rabbis and traders. One or two Jews were reasonably prosperous; the rest, like ourselves, managed somehow. For example there was Dr. Abrahamson, believe it or not, a lady-doctor, who had built the very building we lived in when we first returned to Joniskis. There was also a fairly well-established advocate by the name of Per - no relation, strangely enough, since even then, back home, it was an uncommon name. Our apartment block consisted of two flats and a shop in which my father worked with his partner, Segal, who had been a Rabbi back in Romney. A very well-to-do Jew, one of a small minority, who lived in our building had a gramophone. This was a source of amazement to my childish mind. I was convinced that there was a very small person sitting inside the machine making the music.

There were three shuls in Joniskis. My father went to service every morning. I, at home, was expected to put on my *tallis*, and lay *tefillin*. I was not very keen. "If I come back and see that the *tefillin* have not been used:" my father would say, there will be no breakfast for you". I had to have breakfast, so I cheated, disturbing the packing of the *tefillin* without actually using them. We would break from school to come home for lunch, which generally would be chicken soup with farfel, and maybe some liver or herring. When school was over in the afternoon, we would enjoy ourselves

- the boys played football, of which I was very fond. For supper, we might have fish for a very special treat, potatoes were often on the menu - we were, after all, in potato-country - and milk, cheese and bread.

On Friday, school closed earlier for the Shabbath. We were just four at home, but invariably one or two alms-collectors would be invited as well - in fact there would often be a fight with neighbours over who would have this honour of feeding the poor. I only remember that they were not very clean, and that the ritual washing of their hands made little impression on the dirt and grime of their fingers. This is why it became custom to cut rather than break the bread. I certainly did not fancy eating bread pawed by filthy hands. After service on Saturday, we would rest, and then sometimes walk in the nearby forests. It was so beautiful there - fresh, quiet and still, the only noise, just the beautiful singing of the birds. Sometimes, my mother, sister and I would visit my granny and my mother's sisters in Shavil, which was always enjoyable.

My parents were gentle people, non-aggressive. They didn't believe for instance, in physical punishment. Like most young boys I had mischief in me. Once this mischief focussed upon forbidden fruit, on the tree on the other side of the wall. It was not that I desperately needed the fruit - it was the risk, the adventure. As I got to the fruit, I heard the voice of the owner - a priest. A kindly man, he told me that if I was so desperate for the fruit, I could have asked, but I should not steal.

When I was ten, a younger sister - Peshah - was born. I did not like the arrival of Peshah. If there was going to be another baby, then it should have been a boy - I already had a sister and wanted a brother. At this time, my mother must have already been suffering from the cancer that killed her two years later. She and my father made a journey to Konigsberg to consult a specialist. They were gone for a month. Little did I know the reason for this sudden journey. Like most young children, I thought mainly of myself, and in fact nagged my father to bring me back a football from Konigsberg. My poor father hardly had the inclination to deal with such a project, even if he had had the money, which he did not - the money he had was being used up by my poor mother's treatment. My older sister Sarah looked after us.

My mother became bedridden. She must have suffered for at least eighteen months, but she never complained. Sometimes, I would go to the spring outside the town, fill a jug with fresh cool water, and bring it home for her. My sister took over the house, looking after Peshah and myself. Shortly before she died my mother spoke to us. She said she was going and that we must not visit her grave more than once a year - visiting the cemetery too often would upset us. She died when I was twelve. Out of respect, the town was draped in black and the shops were closed.

I followed her coffin, feeling sad and lost. I was drawing attention as an object of sympathy, but I hated this kind of attention. Soon after this I had my barmitzvah - no celebration, I just went up and read my part. I felt my loss, my deprivation, and angry against a G-d who could take away my dear, good mother.

I had lessons until I was fifteen. There were high schools - in fact there was one near our house - but Jews were not admitted. In any event, Christian religious education was compulsory, and we could not have participated. To take my exams for the high school certificate, I had to be tutored in Hebrew and other subjects. For German, I didn't need a tutor, as my mother had taught me. My mother really wanted me to study Talmud. Her grandfather had been a rabbi and I suppose she wanted me to follow in his footsteps. To please her, I took special instruction for about six months, but actually I had other plans.

After my mother died we got our old house back, - the one taken from my father by the Germans when I was a small child. In fact, they had improved it for us. When we left it, it was a fine house in the town with a thatched roof. When we got it back the thatch had been replaced with shingles. When you entered the house - No. 34 Daukanto G-ve Joniskis - there was an entrance hall with an earthen floor. As you entered there was a container, which if you pressed the bottom, would fill with water. There were three bedrooms. One was let to an old and childless couple, who were devoted to one another, one was for my sister and the last for my father and step-mother - he had remarried by then. I slept on a divan in the hall. I always got on well with my stepmother. She was always nice to me, and in time I came to have a half-brother and sister. The house was very cosy; a stove or furnace would heat up the tiles. I think we had about three acres, really quite a huge garden, with fruit, vegetables and, of course in those days, an outside toilet.

When I was about fifteen or sixteen, it became a matter of necessity that I begin to work. I suppose that I had got about half way through school by then, standard five or six. My father suggested a trade, something useful for my future. I was apprenticed to a carpenter, for a day or two that is. I had little aptitude for carpentry, in fact for any work with my hands. I worked for the Men's Outfitter - the shop on the square. They were very happy with me, but when I was sixteen I decided that a better opportunity lay in working at the *Yiddischevolksbank*, as one of my tutors was a manager there. I worked at the bank for two years, doing mainly filing and clerical work, and earning the princely sum of £3 a month. All of this I gave to my sister, and then would 'borrow' back some of it to go to the Kino, the Cinema, to watch silent comedies like Charlie Chaplin.

Young Jews in those times were very taken with the idea of being pioneers - going to Palestine. My sister belonged to Hashomer Hatzair - the

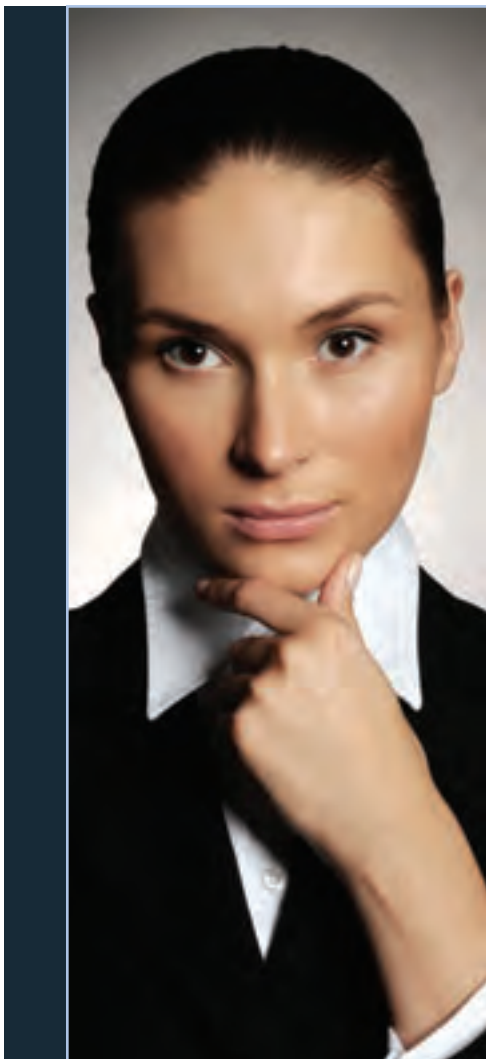


Young Guard. I did not belong. I did not know much about Palestine. What I did know a great deal about though, was Africa - "Wilde Africa" as my mother used to call it. My father was always talking about Africa. So did my aunts - after all my grandfather had been there, I had cousins there. I heard that compared to my £3 a month, somebody who earned £10 a month. I could help everyone I knew with such a sum. My father's talk of Africa always fascinated me. It was a nice warm country, a land of opportunity.

I worked hard, but we had good times as well. In a much more innocent way than today, we young people partied a great deal, pooling our resources - each would contribute something and we would gather in someone's home. We would sing, hold hands, play games, go on outings, even cuddle-up - a bit. One Friday night, I was visiting home of a young girl who quite fancied me. We were cuddling up - so much so, that the Friday night candlesticks got knocked over. More than the actual cuddling, did the knocking over of the candles earn the stern disapproval of her mother. I was in love. Not with anyone in Joniskis, or

anyone else in Lithuania, but with 'Monica'. At sixteen, Monica had everything I could ever want in a woman. She was beautiful, vivacious, good-looking and clever. I idolised her. If only she could be with me and not remain a character in a book.

My father started corresponding with relatives in South Africa, the Segals, who were cousins. To get to South Africa, one had to sail from Hamburg, but first one had to get to Hamburg, so one caught a train to Kaunas, previously the capital of Lithuania before Vilnius. The cost of the journey was £39, a fortune. My father didn't have such money, so borrowed it from a non-Jew, in fact from the village chemist. It was such a lot of money, but I suppose it was like an investment for the family to send me somewhere where things might be better. I had exactly £5 spending money to get me from Lithuania to South Africa and to get me started there, but I was young, full of energy and ready for adventure. Our boat was a ten thousand-tonne German passenger and cargo boat called the Watusi, and the journey to Cape Town took thirty days.



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# THE LITTLE BLACK DRESS: GENDER, JUDAISM AND THE SYMBOLISM OF DRESS

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Bev May

*La mode n'est pas quelque chose qui existe dans les robes seulement. La mode est dans le ciel, dans la rue, la mode a à voir avec les idées, notre façon de vivre, ce qui se passe.*

"Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky, in the street, fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening".

*Coco Chanel*

Throughout history, fashion and style icons have reflected prevailing societal views of women's roles. The Little Black Dress (LBD) is one example and since its birth in 1926 has accompanied women on their journey from traditional, home-based roles, to active roles in the economy.

Using the symbol of the LBD as a visual marker of the emergence of the feminist movement in the early 1900s, this article will also examine the theory that views of gender equality in traditional Jewish religious practice and those of secular society result in confusing choices for women. Do women, as a result, acknowledge models of womanhood provided by their religious custom while participating in divergent roles presented by secular society?

It is not the intention to examine a woman's role from a Jewish religious perspective, but rather to focus on the relationship between secular society and religion, and to discuss the results of their intersection with respect to the equality of women. This article will present the theory that in this respect, religion and society have both moved in synchronisation with each other and have also taken divergent paths through the course of history.

## The birth of the LBD

During the First World War, when large numbers of men were serving in the armed forces, women had to step forward to take their places in

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the factories and farms; after the war, they had to do so for those men who never came back. Men could see that the 'weak' Victorian women whose role had been in the home were fully capable and responsible enough to do work previously thought to be the preserve of the stronger sex. Not only did women feel empowered, but their dress needs had to change. Full-length, wide sweeping skirts with leg-of-mutton sleeves, voluminous material, corsets and girdles tightened to create small waists which restricted movement were impractical and dangerous amongst factory machines and farm tools. Women also needed to dress practically in order to have freedom of movement to work. In addition, a reduction in the amount of material and the use of black dye saved on the cost of dresses.<sup>1</sup>

In paintings of women wearing this style of clothing before World War I, it is not uncommon to see a vial of smelling salts, often attached to a tie at the waist, for purposes of reviving women who fainted (probably caused by an inability to breathe properly due to their restricted rib-cages). This propensity to faint further inculcated the notion that women were physically weak. Writes Prof. Rachel Elior, "when women no longer had to wear corsets and clothing which immobilised them, women realised that they could do anything!"<sup>2</sup> In addition to this change brought about by fashion, she continues, women's ability to choose also added to the progress of their emancipation.

The design of the LBD was embraced as it met the functional and economic requirements of women who were entering the work place as a result of the dire economic straits that prevailed in the US and Europe during the early 1900s. These economic hardships were also felt in South Africa, and led to liberated women's wear at the University of the Witwatersrand; a letter dated 15 October 1942 addressed to all Heads of Departments dealt with the problem presented by a shortage of stockings (nylon tights), by giving certain categories of female students and all female members of staff permission to wear slacks or dungarees at lectures. The students were, however, cautioned to ensure that these items should be of a "quiet and business-like, tailored cut".<sup>3</sup>

This incident is also illustrative of the prevailing view of women's roles. Pertinent to this discussion, the evolution of women has undergone change to such an extent that this permission and caution with respect to dress, if dispensed to women in a South African university in 2014,

would be regarded as outrageous.

### Women excluded from religious and secular history

Is it possible to theorise that at some point in history, some religions excluded women from their narrative and from participation in leadership and religious practice, and societies followed suit so that women also disappeared from the pages of secular history?

Although works of fiction cannot be given serious credence in this type of discussion, some of the ideas about the position of women in the early Christian church presented in Dan Brown's book, *The Da Vinci Code*, are nevertheless interesting, as are those in Reza Aslan's *The Zealot* and Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino's *Search for the Jesus Family Tomb*. These hypothesize that women were deliberately excluded from the history of early Christianity. These ideas are not new and are supported in the writings of biblical historians.

A la Da Vinci Code, is it possible that the painting of the Last Supper (a Pesach *Seder*) holds clues about the status of women in early Christianity – could the figure on Jesus' right be Mary? With no evidence that Leonardo Da Vinci deliberately painted a woman at the right hand of Jesus, it is nevertheless an interesting notion. There is also speculation about the hand close to "Mary's" throat and a barely concealed knife, both of which represent a veiled threat to her person.

Bernice Kaplan discussed the exclusion of women in both Biblical and secular history.<sup>4</sup> She observes that "the few women who appear in the Biblical narrative are females whose identity has largely been lost because males controlled the canonical process" and that in order to be 'noticed' their achievements had to be particularly compelling. Hagith Sivan points out that: "Eve's daughters obediently continue to fulfil their original function of procreation but .... their identity remains unknown".<sup>5</sup>

One female figure who did survive in the Biblical narrative, although not without ambiguity, is Deborah. She was a judge, successful military leader and a prophetess. She was also a decisive, courageous leader who displayed initiative and 'perfect faith'. Writes Shulamith Kagan, "Deborah was chosen by God to fulfil a mission. This she did with talent, enthusiasm and faithfulness. She led her people to great victory. In the annals of the Hebrew nation she must surely rank second only to Joshua himself".<sup>6</sup> The image of Deborah, however, has not come down the ages unscathed; "the glaring contradiction embodied by Deborah", presented a problem for a patriarchal view of the world and "they change her from a legislator and issuer of verdicts to a nurturing educator".<sup>7</sup>

Another female figure who survives is Miriam. However, although she is called a prophet and is one of the three leaders of the Exodus, she is

mentioned in only five passages in the Torah.<sup>8</sup>

The pattern of feminine diminution is different in secular history, which documents strong women leaders from approximately 1000 BCE, e.g. Queen Zenobia of Palmyra, Queen Cleopatra of Egypt, the Queen of Sheba, Boadicea of the Iceni. These strong women are acknowledged in the historical record at a time when the biblical narrative is almost silent in this regard. Thereafter, however, there is a relative historical silence about strong women until the birth of the LBD and the feminist movement in the early 1900s, when religion and society take on opposing views on female empowerment.

### Women enter professions, business and politics

*"You can't be shining lights at the Bar because you are too kind. You can never be corporation lawyers because you are not cold-blooded. You have not a high grade of intellect. I doubt you could ever make a living."*

(Clarence Darrow to a group of women lawyers, 1895)<sup>9</sup>.

By the early 1900s, men were forced to recognize the necessity of the entry of women, accompanied by the LBD, into professions, politics and business.

In 1872, the United States Supreme Court affirmed the Supreme Court of Illinois' decision that had denied Myra Bradwell admission to the state bar. In its judgement, the Court noted: "The paramount destiny and mission of woman are to fulfil the noble and benign offices of wife and mother. This is the law of the Creator. And the rules of civil society must be adapted to the general constitution of things, and cannot be based upon exceptional cases".<sup>10</sup> In 1873, a time when society was prepared to a large extent to be guided by religion, invoking the 'law of the Creator' provided authority enough.

As late as 1930 these views prevailed in South Africa, where the Dutch Reformed Church believed that the enfranchisement of women was in direct conflict with the word of God. It was argued in a 1930 Parliamentary debate that scientific evidence proved what every man knew – that women had smaller brains.<sup>11</sup>

Clara Shortridge Foltz, the mother of five children, eventually became the first woman admitted to the bar in the United States in 1878. In South Africa the first woman admitted to the bar was Irene Antoinette Geffen, in May 1923.<sup>12</sup> Some early Jewish women lawyers were Bertha Solomon, Feodora Clouts, Maggie Oblowitz and Ruth Hayman.

After twenty-seven years of lobbying for women's rights in South Africa Bertha Solomon, during her tenure as a Member of Parliament, was instrumental in the passing of the Matrimonial Affairs Act (1953) which, for the first time, gave women legal rights to their property, their income



and their children in civil courts. It is interesting to note that one of those who spoke in support of the Bill was newly elected MP Helen Suzman during her maiden speech. Bertha “then turned her attention in 1963 to the equality of women under Jewish law. Here she was not successful and the battle continues.”<sup>13</sup>

The present day scenario is a very different one; the legal landscape has seen an increase of women lawyers, advocates and judges. At the time of writing there are six women Supreme Court of Appeals judges in South Africa. The same could be said about international female leadership as there are many examples of women who have led nations since the arrival of the LBD. They include Angela Merkel (Germany), Julia Gillard (Australia), Golda Meir (Israel), Margaret Thatcher (United Kingdom), Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan) and Indira Gandhi (India).

The world’s financial sectors are generously populated with women leaders. The Reserve Banks of South Africa and Israel and the Federal Reserve Bank of the United States are currently headed by Jewish women (Gill Marcus, Karnit Flug and Janet Yellen respectively). In fact, Israel leads the world with respect to feminine control and management in the financial arena. In addition to Flug, women lead three of the top five Israeli banks, the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange and the Treasury. Lilach Asher-Topilisky is the CEO of Discount Bank, Smadar Berber-Tzadik heads First International and Rakefet Russak-Aminoach is the CEO of Leumi. Ester Levanon is the outgoing CEO of the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange (as at November 2013) and Yael Andorn is the Director General of Israel’s Finance Ministry (the Treasury).<sup>14</sup>

Business too, is replete with women leaders, including Marissa Meyer (Yahoo!), Sheryl Sandberg (Facebook), Zhang Xin (SOHO China) and Meg Whitman (Hewlett-Packard, previously eBay) to name a few.

Close to home, our community has produced many women business leaders. Examples include Kate Jowell who was the first woman to be appointed Director of the University of Cape Town’s Graduate School of Business (Surour, 2010). and Dr Hannah-Reeve Sanders who was the first woman CEO of Groote Schuur Hospital (1976 – 1986) and then Chief Director, Hospital and Health Services in the Western Cape; the highest post held by a woman in the Public Service at the time (1986 – 1992) <sup>15</sup>.

### The status of women in religion

If the LBD is a symbol of the emancipation of women, then it is also a stark reminder that some religions find themselves trailing secular society; women still may not vote in the Vatican City.

Within the realms of Jewish religious practice and Jewish law, two poles of gender equality for women exist. In Breslau in 1846, long before the

appearance of the LBD, Progressive scholars and rabbis declared women to be the “religious equal of the male” with respect to obligations and rights.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the juxtaposition of the thoughtfulness and intellectual characteristics of Judaism, together with the determination to find the humanity in our religion, resulted in this anachronistic change, a change that preceded the rise of the secular feminist movement by more than fifty years.

In the modern era, Orthodoxy has also made strides towards gender equality. In 1917 the Bais Yaakov school for girls was opened in Poland, giving girls a formalized Torah education for the first time. In America, in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century under the authority of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik of the Maimonides School near Boston, Orthodox schools began offering girls the same Jewish education that was offered to boys. Before this, only boys were allowed to study Talmud.<sup>17</sup> However, in 2013, orthodox Jewish religious practice still does not allow the equal participation of both genders; for example, women may not be counted in a *minyan* (quorum required for spiritual obligations) nor may they participate in mixed shul services, touch the Torah or read from the Torah during their batmitzvah.<sup>18</sup>

With respect to the administration of Jewish law, women may not serve as judges on an orthodox Beth Din. Witnesses to a Beth Din case must be free people who are not too young, deaf, mentally or morally unsuitable or – female.<sup>19 20 21</sup>

The dissolution of a Jewish marriage is another source of inequity since the consequences of get-refusal are different for husbands and wives; a man who has not received a get from his spouse can have legitimate children with a new partner. This is not the case for a wife whose husband does not or cannot, give her a get. In this position of being unable to re-marry in a synagogue, with the accompanying negative implications, or to have legitimate children from a subsequent relationship, she finds herself a ‘chained woman’ - *agunah*.

### The Gilded Cage

*“Taught from infancy that beauty is woman’s sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison”,* Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 -1797).

Secular society has seen the diffusion of the power of a woman’s sexuality. Opinion on how a woman’s body should be covered has been relaxed – it is now accepted practice for ankles, knees and wrists to be exposed. This is another point of divergence; if beauty could be described as sceptre and a gilded cage for women in the secular world in the 1700s, then perhaps in Judaism, a woman’s sexuality is her gilded cage. Women are separated from men so that

they are not distracted from their prayers by her physical presence and the various female sexual enticements - her singing voice or uncovered hair, are silenced and covered respectively.

### **The status of women in Jewish cultural organisations**

If the above confirms that religion and society parted ways at some point in history, then it can also be argued that the Jewish religion and Jewish cultural organizations also took divergent positions on feminine empowerment around the advent of the LBD and in line with changes in society. The success of feminism also found expression within these organizations and the leadership and organisational abilities of Jewish women have been accessed and utilised for the benefit of the community throughout the last century.

Cape Town Jewish women in the early 1900s were almost invisible. Writes Gwynne Schrire ('Women and Welfare in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Cape Town', *Jewish Affairs*, Vol. 48, 1993), "An examination of history books including Jewish history books reveals the (same) invisibility of women. ....Apart from sepia wedding photos, not much concrete evidence of their activities survives. Their views did not matter. Their role in society was considered too insignificant to be recorded." Poignantly (continues Schrire), "there must have been some Jewish women because there was a Jewish wedding in 1844".

The Union of Jewish Women (UJW) provided a place at this time, where women could operate within the parameters of the Jewish community with which they identified, and yet outside of the male dominated conservative religious establishment. In its early history, this organisation challenged the male domination of religion, including the issue of women's rights in the synagogue. The first constitution of the UJW included the promotion of the social, educational, spiritual and moral welfare of the Jewish woman, the reform of discriminatory Jewish laws and the equality of status between men and women in the Jewish community. Previously, women were not allowed to vote, attend meetings or be eligible for election to any synagogue committee but by October 1932, the Cape Town Hebrew congregation was admitting them to full membership (albeit not to executive office). By September 1933, Jewish women were able to record their votes in all Jewish communal institutions.<sup>22</sup> The UJW also worked for the equality of women outside of shul walls, obtaining representation for women on local communal organisations as well as addressing the discrimination of women in Jewish law.

In 2013 the SA Jewish Board of Deputies was headed by a woman (Mary Kluk) as was the Cape Board (Li Boiskin) and the Board of KwaZulu Natal Jewry (Linda Nathan), while the National Director was Wendy Kahn.

### **In defence of gender inequality in Judaism**

It is becoming increasingly difficult for the unequal treatment of women in traditional Judaism to have resonance as secular culture has provided opportunities for women to explore their full potential as a result of the rise of the feminist movement. The arguments that women are spiritually more pure and, as a result, do not require the same level of liturgical participation, and/or that they do not require the obligation to perform time-based mitzvot (either as a result of their role in the family or because their spirituality is greater than that of men) are examples of this. On this, Rabbi S R Hirsch writes:

Clearly, women's exemption from positive, time-bound mitzvot is not a consequence of their diminished worth; nor is it because the Torah found them unfit, as it were, to fulfil these mitzvot. Rather, it seems to me, it is because the Torah understood that women are not in need of these mitzvot. The Torah affirms that our women are imbued with a great love and a holy enthusiasm for their role in divine worship, exceeding that of man. The trials men undergo in their professional activities jeopardize their fidelity to Torah, and therefore they require from time to time reminders and warnings in the form of time-bound mitzvot. Women, whose lifestyle does not subject them to comparable trials and hazards, have no need for such periodic reminders".<sup>23 24</sup>

Commenting on this, Rabbi David Hartman notes that the "ultimate intent is clearly to justify Halacha in light of the egalitarian critique, not to transform it."

This requirement for a woman to be released from time-based obligations is also proffered as an explanation for the prayer "Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the Universe, for not having made me a woman".<sup>25</sup> In this prayer, men thank their creator for blessing them with obligations to perform time-based mitzvot – if they were women, these obligations would not be required.

These defences of gender-based inequity can only add to the confusion for a woman who lives in the modern world where both men and women have similar time-based obligations and where women are faced with the same "trials and hazards" that accompany their professional activities.

The *halachic* gender-ethos that says that any action that may compromise a woman's role in the home as wife and mother, should be prohibited is another argument for gender inequity. This was advanced by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Israel's first Chief Rabbi, in the 1920s, as a reason why women should not be allowed to vote.<sup>26</sup> His responsum on the matter expresses concern that

women's suffrage would pose a threat to family harmony; "through the tempest of opinions and their divisions, the status of home peace is destroyed."

"It's too complicated" – there is no logic in this argument for a community that values intellectual pursuits, revels in analysis and has produced more Nobel Prize winners per capita than any other. The problem presented by *agunot*, for example, is surely not larger than our ability to solve it.

"But it's always been this way." This defence is commonly presented; as custodians of ancient traditions that have served to protect our communities through the ages, we should not tamper with our heritage lest we are responsible for some alteration which (it then follows) could have negative consequences. This reasoning needs to be balanced against the negative consequences of maintaining the gender inequity against women.

In the South African context, our great concern about how to preserve our Jewish identity as fears of the blurring of boundaries that define us, drives us to maintain the status quo and to remain insular. The reasons for this may include the microcosm created by our country's political isolation that also served to isolate and insulate our culture as well as our response to South Africa's transformation. Our new, open, democracy has not resulted in our willingness to examine to new possibilities but has rather resulted in the community becoming more insular.<sup>27</sup>

Within Orthodox circles the feminism debate rages; Rabbi David Hartman explains that "Halachically, the exemption of women from Torah study segregates them into what might almost be considered a separate spiritual caste. It is not only that lacking direct access to the mechanisms of culture (i.e., the sacred tradition), women within traditional Judaism may never become active creators of culture. There is also the internal religious dimension, being deprived of exposure to the vehicles of personal and collective spiritual growth. Women within this framework cannot be initiators, conquerors, or builders – even of themselves".

### A way forward?

There is evidence that when necessary, Jewish laws have been changed to adapt to evolving times and *takkanot* are regularly issued for this purpose.

*Takkanot* that specifically apply to the position of women in Jewish society include the abolishment of polygamy in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century by decree of Rabbenu Gershom. This decree was precipitated by the changing position of women at the time. In Germany at that time, women became active in the economy while their husbands devoted themselves to the study of Torah. As their roles as breadwinners increased, their esteem was raised in the eyes of the Jewish community. In addition women themselves became conscious of their improved stature and began to agitate for

more rights. "The easiest way to cow a woman into continuous submission to her husband's will was by threatening to introduce a rival into the house".<sup>28</sup>

In the Babylonian Talmud, a *takkanah* was issued in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century CE that ensured that if a woman was abducted and married against her will, a rabbi could annul the marriage.<sup>29 30 31 32</sup> Another was issued in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century CE, in Troyes, France, to ensure that property brought into a marriage by a woman could revert to the original owners on her death and not automatically be inherited by her husband.

A more recent example was a *takkanah* issued in 1944 in by the Chief Rabbinate in Mandatory Palestine that a man must maintain the widow of his brother until her release by means of *chalitza*. Previously if a brother-in-law did not perform *chalitza* (by design or default), his sister-in-law remained in limbo, unsupported and unable to re-marry.<sup>33</sup> Civil society has also sought to redress gender inequality that results from religious law. The South African Divorce Act requires the removal of religious impediments to the re-marriage of either spouse (Divorce Act 70 of 1979). As a result a civil divorce can only be granted in South Africa when both spouses have provided a get which prevents the potential for get-extortion or get-recalcitrance. Similar legislation exists in Israel, Canada and some states in the US. In 2013, Rabbinic courts in Israel were given leave to imprison men for get-recalcitrance indefinitely.<sup>34</sup>

In June 2013, it was reported that Beit Hillel in Israel, headed by a woman, Rav Oshra Koren, issued a new halachic ruling that allows women to recite prayer in memory of their deceased parents (Brackman, 2013). The question of women saying Kaddish was first discussed in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and although this complex issue has been reviewed several times in the last 300 years, there are few Orthodox communities which permit women to say Kaddish today.

The picture of gender equality in Israel reflects the gap between secular society and the Jewish religion under discussion here. Israel's Declaration of Independence (14 May 1948) was one of the earliest constitutional documents in the world to include gender within a guarantee of equality in social and political rights. "The message was clear – Israel's pre-state experience of discrimination and persecution had produced in the founders of the state a heightened sensitivity to the issue of group discrimination".<sup>35</sup> Subsequently, however, the principles of gender equity were not included in the Basic Laws of Israel as a constitutional right because religious political parties opposed the freedom of conscience and equality as it would undermine religious power over marriage and divorce. In 1951, the Women's Equal Rights Law was passed, but neither this law nor the Declaration of Independence bestowed constitutional authority on the courts to cancel



subsequent primary legislation, enacted by the Knesset.

In the Knesset, every legislative proposal for a constitutional bill of rights was obstructed by the Jewish religious political parties, largely on the grounds that the principle of equality for women must be subordinated to the predicates of Judaism in all matters of personal status. On this, Professor Frances Raday, Chair of Labor Law, Hebrew University, writes, "The Israeli legal system is marked by a deep dichotomy between traditionalist preservation of patriarchy in matters related to religion, on the one hand, and progressive and even radical legislative and judicial policy on matters of gender equality not related to religious norms, on the other. This dichotomy is also apparent in the gap between the high level of women's education and their high level of representation in professional life, especially in the legal system itself as lawyers and judges, and the comparatively low level of women's political representation, as ministers in the government or members of Knesset".

### Conclusion

Both secular society and religion have embraced modernity - appliances that free us from boredom and drudgery or information technology that improves our lives. If the aim is to prevent the evils that accompany modernity from bleeding into our culture, there are probably more deserving candidates than feminism for stringent Halachic attention. Many modern inventions, such as the Internet, have the potential to be an unrestricted portal of subversive, immoral material and yet have escaped rigorous religious legislation while laws pertaining to the unequal treatment of women, enshrined thousands of years ago, persist.

As time separates us from ancient legislation instituted in different circumstances and shaped by a view of women characterized by subservience, at a time when many women would not even be entitled to an education, younger generations of both men and women will find it more and more difficult to align religious views of women and those of secular society. Cognitive dissonance results as experiences in synagogue and daily life become irreconcilable. The gap between daily life in a secular world that has removed boundaries for women, and a religious world that applies restrictions to their spiritual and daily lives, can only widen as the modern age moves inexorably forwards and the genie that is feminism remains firmly outside the bottle.

It may be possible to stretch the argument and find empirical evidence in our local community that young people are not finding relevance in their heritage by, for example, joining communal organisations. Dan Brotman asks where the young people in our community are: "There are too few young adults sitting around Cape Town Jewish community board room tables and attending

communal functions".<sup>36</sup>

However, contrary to this assumption, are the results of a recent independent survey of American Jews conducted by the Pew Research Centre (2013). With respect to Orthodox retention by age (among those raised Orthodox Jews by religion), the survey found that Orthodoxy in the US experiences the highest retention rate for young people – in the age group 18 to 29 years old, the retention rate is 83% while only 22% for age group 65 years and older. Denominational affiliation by age for Orthodoxy returned the same pattern – 11% for 18 to 29 year olds and 6% for Jews older than 65. For the purpose of this discussion, Jewish denominations in the United States who embrace gender equality, i.e. Reform and Conservative streams, demonstrate the reverse pattern: 29% of Reform Jews and 11% of Conservative Jews are between 18 and 29 years of age and 38% and 24% respectively for Jews older than 65.

A survey conducted in South Africa in 2005 found that in Cape Town, 5% of Jews identified as strictly Orthodox and in Johannesburg, 17%. As in the Pew figures, the total figure for both Cape Town and Johannesburg is higher for younger people (28%), aged between 25 and 34 years. These figures notwithstanding, it is difficult to assess how many Jewish women who identify as Orthodox accept the gender imbalance inherent in their religion. Evidence of the involvement of women in Jewish cultural organisations as discussed, together with empirical evidence from our communities suggests that a silent majority of women have quietly shrugged off the patriarchal ethos of their religion while still claiming their Orthodox heritage.

The longevity of the Little Black Dress attests to the empowerment of women in modern society and the continued divergence of religion and society throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Perhaps it will also accompany women as they seek similar empowerment within their religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> but patriarchal control in religious structures ensures that only men have the power to give women spiritual and legal equality within Judaism.

For those women who chose the tradition of gender-segregated religious and Jewish legal practice, this choice should be respected and protected. For those however, who may find themselves being treated unfairly by Jewish law, and/or would like to participate in religious ritual to the same extent as their male counterparts, let's speak truth to power - we should be able to redress the gender imbalance. Justifications for gender inequity may only serve to ensure that religious equality for women remains illusory and while the belief exists that this state of affairs can be rationalised, it will also remain elusive.

Pivotal to any discussion on Jewish feminism should also be the consideration of the effect of a patriarchal ethos on the outcome of or daughters' lives. Are the options for our girl children limited

by the inherent gender inequality of our traditional culture? Are our young women still encouraged to be lawyers in civil society, knowing that they can never serve as judges in a religious court? The smallest limitation to our girls achieving their fullest potential should be eradicated from their thinking. There should not even be a whisper of doubt as to their ability to explore any avenue of life that they choose. Let's cheer them on to greatness and then benefit from their contributions to our community and to the wider world.

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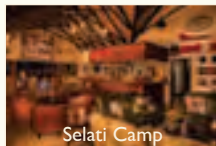
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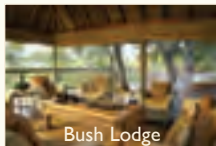
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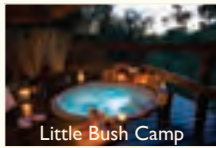
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# TALMUDIC NORMS: USE AND ABUSE

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Aryeh Newman

By Israeli law the validity of Jewish marriage, divorce and Orthodox conversion is governed by *halacha* as determined by the country's chief rabbinate. In recent years, however, the Israeli chief rabbinate has become increasingly dominated by *dayanim* (religious judges) hailing from Haredi circles who follow an extreme literalistic interpretation of *halacha*. This has had the effect of feeding the existing widely spread hostility of those striving to delegitimize the State of Israel. In light of this, it is extremely important to correct this one-sided perspective and place on record the authentic *halacha* which guided the chief rabbinate from the days of its distinguished founder Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook and his religious Zionist successors, among them Chief Rabbis Uziel, Herzog and Goren.

The following citations from those medieval Torah scholars whom not even our most diehard religious extremist would dare to challenge are still surprisingly relevant:

The Jewish people may be subdivided into three separate groups as far as their respective approaches to the words of our Sages. The first group, who are by far the majority, will take them literally, however far-fetched the implication. For them, true faith means to accept even the impossible – a result of their shunning scientific and secular studies. Their foolishness is deplorable since they imagine that in this way they are exalting our Sages whereas it actually demeans them. This group discredits our faith and dims its radiance, the very opposite of the aim of the Divine laws. Their wisdom, God has assured us, will arouse the admiration of the nations of the world: 'when they hear of them will say what a wise and understanding people is this great nation' (Deut. 4,6). But when the civilized nations hear the literalistic interpretations of this group they will say, 'What an ignorant and foolish people is this small-minded nation! The second group, which is also numerous, ridicules the words of our Sages by taking them literally too...The third group,

very few indeed, [are those] whose deeper understanding of their underlying meaning confirm their conviction of the greatness and goodness of our Sages.

Maimonides, Introduction to Mishnah 7

Talmudic laws penalizing non-Jews only applied to those peoples not bound by recognised moral and religious norms. But it is absolutely forbidden in any way to discriminate against those who observe the Seven Laws of Noah and to favor ourselves. The same laws are applicable to all. This is obviously the case with the civilized nations, who are similarly disciplined by their religion and culture.

Meiri (1249-1316)

## Circumstances Alter Cases

We are faced today with the literal application of Talmudic statements regarding the female voice, hair and parts of the arms and legs. All are considered *ervah*, i.e. sexually provocative, and therefore forbidden to the gaze and hearing of the Orthodox Jewish male. Just two examples of impeccable Orthodox practice down the ages will suffice to disqualify this literal approach, condemned in no uncertain terms by Maimonides (the Rambam, to use his traditional Jewish title). The interpretation of the statement obligating the covering of a women's hair plainly applies in the Talmud, Maimonides' Code and the *Shulchan Aruch* to all females, married or single. Yet it became acceptable from medieval times in Europe to limit hair covering to married women, as is the Haredi practice today. When questioned about its legitimacy, the renowned Torah authority Rabbenu Hananel (990--1055) replied that all these prohibitions were based on whether they aroused unchaste thoughts (*hirhur*). Since the Jewish communities were living in the Christian world where all decent unmarried women did not cover their hair, the sight of their hair no longer excited impure thoughts. Similarly, it has been the practice in non-Hassidic families for girls to sing Shabbat hymns, as noted by the renowned Torah authority Rabbi Weinberg in a well known *responsum* permitting the mixed activities of the Ezra Haredi Zionist youth movement. During my time in the Israeli army, there were a few Haredi soldiers, and none declined to be present

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during the official ceremonies, which included the female singing of the army entertainment troupe. As Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef has intimated, the unity of the people, irrespective of their standards of observance, takes precedence.

Last but not least, the citation from Meiri renders the work of the compilers of *Torat Hamelech* ruling that the lives of non-Jews are worth less in certain situations than that of Jews both obnoxious and totally irrelevant in this day and age.

**Accentuate the Positive**

It is asserted that the contemporary radicalization of the religious world is justified as a defense mechanism against the increasing permissiveness of postmodern society. The latter phenomenon has reinforced Haredi insularity and their calls for separation from the rest of a Jewish community tainted by its failure to observe their behavioral norms. Its members are unwelcome and regarded as a moral danger to the survival of their way of life which, in their view, alone exemplifies that of the authentic Jew.

I wish to suggest a positive approach, one that finds its expression in the following citations from Maimonides and Rabbi Kook, respectively:

We should not ostracise those who desecrate the Sabbath, nor hold them in contempt. On the contrary, we should welcome them and strive to endear Jewish observance to them. Indeed, our Sages have urged us to show them every courtesy whenever they are prompted to participate in the synagogue service and never to treat them with disrespect. Our Sages found support for this approach in the words of King Solomon (Proverbs 6.30): “Do not despise a thief if he steals”, implying too that we should not despise the transgressors of Israel when they are prompted to steal into the synagogue to pray - to ‘steal’ *mitzvot*.  
*(Iggeret Hashemad)*

The genuinely good people do not deplore wickedness but spread good; do not deplore heresy but spread faith; do not deplore ignorance but spread wisdom.  
 (Rav A I Kook)



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## GASTRONOMIC JUDAISM, TRADITION AND CHANGES IN TASTE:

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Gwynne Schrire

Jewish identity can be shown in different ways, of which one is Gastronomic Judaism - defined as 'unattached Jews with an attachment to Jewish foods'. A good example is the poet Heinrich Heine who, having converted (without conviction) to Christianity in the hope of obtaining an academic post in Germany, did not lose his enjoyment of Jewish food.<sup>1</sup> In 1840 he wrote in a tribute to another converted Jew, Ludwig Börne:

Börne invited me... to dine... with a friend, because the latter, in persistent loyalty to Jewish customs, would set before me the *cholent* stew; and indeed I enjoyed there the dish that is perhaps of Egyptian origin and as old as the Pyramids. I am surprised that Börne ...has never told in his writings with what appetite, with what enthusiasm, with what devotion I once devoured the ancient Jewish *cholent* meal! ...This dish is indeed quite excellent, and it is most painfully to be regretted that the Christian church, which has borrowed so many good things from ancient Judaism, has not adopted *cholent* as well... At least the Jews will then join Christianity with conviction, for... it is only *cholent* that keeps them in their old covenant. Börne even assured me that the apostates who had gone over to the new covenant had only to smell *cholent* in order to feel a certain nostalgia for the synagogue.<sup>2</sup>

But what makes foods Jewish and do these dishes form an unchanging part of our heritage? "The Jewish heritage", wrote Heine, "was love of freedom and of good cooking." One translation to a poem he wrote to *cholent* reads: "God devised and God delivered/ Unto Moses from on high,/ And commanded us to savour/ *cholent* for eternity."

The concept of *cholent* – or other Jewish foods - for eternity will be examined in this article because food choices are subject to changes in taste, fashion, history and geography and because what is 'yummy' to one generation may be 'yucky' to the next.

Israel Abrahams, in *Jewish Life in the Middle*

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*Ages*, discussed traditional foods, quoting the 14<sup>th</sup> Century sage Kalonymos on Purim dishes. The latter included pies, chestnuts, turtledoves, pancakes, small tarts, gingerbread, ragouts, venison, roast goose, chicken, stuffed pigeons, ducks, pheasants, partridges, quails, macaroons, and salad. Beef was too ordinary a thing for a *chag*. No mention of *hamentaschen*! Abrahams added that goose, especially goose liver, was popular in Germany in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century as well as "what Poles called *lokshen*" and cheese for Chanukah.<sup>3</sup> No mention of potato latkes!

Some years ago I was approached by a non-Jewish schoolboy attending a classmate's barmitzvah. "Which is the raw fish?" he asked. "Jews eat raw fish and I don't want to." It took me some time to realise that he was talking about herring. Today, however, sushi is frequently served at barmitzvahs, and that boy, now adult, probably eats it. Yet who had heard of sushi a few decades ago, let alone seen it at a barmitzvah? If sushi is not a Jewish dish, neither is herring – ask the Sephardim. Here is a 1948 description of an illegal immigrant's arrival in Israel: "Men in blue shirts were waiting to greet them. They gave the newcomers blankets and hot tea. They also gave them pickled herring, an Eastern European delicacy, and must have thought they were being kind. Bahiyeh, raised on the cheese and spices of (Aleppo), thought it was vile."<sup>4</sup>

Although herring stocks are suffering from over-fishing and ecological changes, it remains a cheap and popular dish - not in Syria, but in Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Germany and Poland, as it was for Jews who had lived there. A friend's mother, from Poland, refused to eat herring. She had come from a wealthy family and herring, she believed, was for poor Jews.

Among the papers belonging to the old Jewish Museum are a number of menus for communal functions.<sup>5</sup> The oldest, from 6 September 1910, is for a banquet given by the Cape Town Jewish community to honour Dr Solomon Schechter, former lecturer in Rabbinics and Talmud at Cambridge, discoverer of the Cairo Geniza and President of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Schechter was then visiting his daughter Ruth, who had married Adv. Morris Alexander, M.P., a founder of the Cape Jewish Board of Deputies. The banquet started with asparagus and fried soles, then continued with hot pigeon pie or hot giblet pie, roast turkey or roast chicken, corned tongue, smoked beef, corned beef, salads,

vegetables, fruit tarts, stewed fruit, jellies, fresh fruits, dessert and coffee. No herring or *cholent*.

Another menu is for a luncheon given on 23 May 1924 by the Dordrecht Hebrew Congregation in honour of the Rt Hon Gen JC Smuts.<sup>6</sup> Cyril Cohen,<sup>7</sup> the caterer, served tomato soup, fillet of sole, asparagus and butter sauce, chicken pie, roast turkey, sausage, roast goose, roast sirloin of beef and horse radish, roast hind quarter of lamb and mint sauce, trifle, steamed plum pudding, fresh fruit and cheese.

The farewell dinner for Mr Herman Lichtenstein held at the Masonic Hotel, Indwe,<sup>8</sup> on 5 May 1925 included soup, fillet of sole, roast turkey, York ham, roast duckling, spring chicken, chicken in aspic, roast sirloin of beef, roast hind quarter of lamb, corned silverside of beef, ox tongue, salads, trifle, royal cream, *vol au vent* and cheese.

French terms replaced the plain English of former menus as can be seen in an undated menu from a dinner addressed by Adv. Alexander. The menu boasted *hors d'oeuvres riches*, *lockschen* [sic] soup, fillet rock cod *muniere*, lamb cutlet *clamart*, *pommes croquettes*, *petit pois*, roast chicken *parmentiere*, vegetables in season, peach melba, black coffee and cheese.

Several things are noticeable from these meat and potatoes banquets attended by Jewish leaders. The menus followed the European custom that the grander the meal, the more courses there were. There is an over-abundance of meat dishes - in earlier generations meat was a rarity in Jewish households except perhaps on the Sabbath. Moving to Africa has affected their diet and their standard of living. Other noticeable things about these menus are the plainness of the dishes - roasts and more roasts - the lack of vegetarian options, no pasta, no fancy desserts AND the lack of observance of laws of *kashrut*.

Twenty years on and the menu was simpler and without cheese. This was a 3 May 1949 banquet given by the SA Zionist Federation in the Cape Town City Hall in honour of Field Marshal the Rt Honourable JC Smuts, to celebrate the first anniversary of the proclamation of the State of Israel. In the chair was its Vice-chairman, the Hon Mr. Justice Joseph Herstein, who went on aliyah, becoming Telfed Chairman.<sup>9</sup> The cover was in English and Afrikaans, the menu in Hebrew, English and menu-French. The guests ate *hors d'oeuvres*, *consommé* of *lockshen*, fried sole, *pate de foie gras* (in Hebrew "chopped goose liver"), roast chicken (baby chicken in Hebrew) and turkey, vegetables and *compote* of fruit ("pickled fruit" in Hebrew).<sup>10</sup>

Looking at these celebratory banquets one is struck by the absence of gastronomic Judaism over which descendants might wax sentimental. Yes, *lokshen consommé* was served at two of the meals; perhaps the *hors d'oeuvres* included herring, but there was nothing else associated with Jewish food. As far as the *lockshen/ lockschen* soup is concerned, although Abrahams mentioned

that in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Germany Jews ate what Poles called "*lokshen*", the word is of Turkic origin; people living in that part of the Russian empire probably picked up the noodles from their Uigur and Kazan Tatar neighbours along with their word *lakča* for noodle. Gil Marks claims that Italian Jews introduced *lokshen* to the Franco-German Jews, and chicken soup with egg noodles, became standard.<sup>11</sup> As with the adoption of *lokshen*, assimilation to the current fashions of the outside world is more noticeable in these menus than adherence to traditions. Even when Rev Schechter was the guest with the Gardens shul's minister AP Bender presiding, there is no mention of *benching*, not even at the banquet for the State of Israel which started with a prayer by Chief Rabbi Israel Abrahams. Instead there were toasts, to the King, to the Governor General, to Dordrecht, to South Africa, to the State of Israel, to the guests.

Skipping a half century, menus become less cholesterol-laden, more health conscious. Fish replaces meat, gone are the soups, with or without *lokshen*. The seven or eight courses have been replaced by three. The stodgy fattening North European dishes heavy on carbohydrates and animal protein have morphed into *nouvelle cuisine* with greater simplicity and elegance. The emphasis is on healthier eating, imaginatively

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presented vegetables, herbs, salads, more elaborate puddings and fewer pretentious French names.

A celebratory dinner given in 2005 by the SA Zionist Council and the Bnoth Zion Wizo on 28 July 2005<sup>12</sup> followed a selection of hors d'oeuvres and sushi, with Norwegian salmon with its high omega-3 fatty acids and high vitamin D content, with roasted vegetables on wasabi mash and a *beurre blanc* sauce and a dessert buffet.

Four menus of the United Jewish Campaign<sup>13</sup> for dinners with international speakers in the first decade of this century show a similar concentration on simpler food, high-end fashionable dishes with the fish grilled or poached, not fried. The *hors d'oeuvres* for the three meals include a trio of salmon with saffron, orange and ginger with a filo basket filled with fresh garden salad; gravad Norwegian salmon with dill potato salad and mustard dressing; three kinds of salmon with a seafood dressing. The main courses for these events were grilled kabejrou on a bed of wild mushroom risotto together with fresh asparagus with a basil *verblanc* dressing; *delice* of sole with fondant potatoes, haricots *vert* and tomato butter sauce; baked line fish with coriander and cashew nut pesto served with spring onion, crushed new potatoes and roasted vegetables. The final menu offered sesame crusted salmon, steamed asparagus spinach tart and potato gratin. It is when one comes to the desserts that the differences are most marked - gone the fruit *compote*, trifle or baked pud. Enter the chocolate mousse, the poached pears on a chocolate tart with vanilla *creme fraiche*, the cheese soufflé.

Where in Jewish gastronomy does one find cashew nut pesto, wild mushroom risotto, filo baskets? These meals are cosmopolitan, showing modern trends and tastes. Japanese sushi and wasabi, Italian pesto and risotto, Greek filo, French mousse and soufflé - but with Beth Din supervision. But this is what Jewish food has always done - adopted the tastes of the people amongst whom the Jewish community was living while adapting their preparation to conform to the laws of *kashrut*.

"What is known as traditional Jewish dishes vary with each place of Jewish sojourn and a comprehensive history of Jewish cooking would require a map of the Jewish dispersion," explains Chaim Bermant, adding that many of the better-known Jewish dishes are but a means to making a little go a long way, with gefilte fish symbolising this.<sup>14</sup> When one adopts a new food or recipe, one usually takes on board the name it came with, so by identifying the origin of the word, one can identify the source.

Using this knowledge, let us now examine the roots of other foods traditionally eaten by Jewish people - *latkes*, *kugel*, *kichel*, *kneidlach*, *blintzes*, *bagels*, *borsht* - the list is long. Is there any validity to the concept of Gastronomic Judaism?

What about potato *latkes* and potato *kugel*?

So popular and traditional were these staples of the Jewish diet that when a character in Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar* wants to mock her attempt to sound less Jewish, he taunts: "Those overtones of potato pancakes, Friday-night candles, gefilte fish - that's what you don't like."<sup>15</sup> But the Maccabees never ate potato *latkes* at Chanukah. Nor did they make potato *kugel*. Not even the words are Jewish. *Latke* is Slavic for pancake<sup>16</sup> as *kugel* is German for ball (as in the Afrikaans *koëel* - bullet). There is a Yiddish saying that if a woman cannot make a *kugel* - divorce her.<sup>17</sup> Which reminds one of the adapted nursery rhyme: "Can she bake a cherry pie, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?".....She can bake a cherry pie,/ But I cannot tell a lie,/ Twas her father gave me acid indigestion."

Well if she can't bake a *kugel*, maybe it is her husband who is the problem! Although many regard a *kugel* made with *lokshen* and raisins as a traditional Jewish dish, Romanians claim the baked noodle and raisin dish as their culinary patrimony.

Even as late as 425 years ago, no Jew would have made potato *kugel* or potato *latkes*. Nor would the Slavs or the Germans. None of them would have ever seen a potato. Italian Jews were supposed to be the first to serve *latkes* at Chanukah, but made with ricotta cheese, not potatoes. This vegetable was only introduced into Western Europe in 1588, and it took another 200 years before potatoes became a familiar European food. Potato recipes first appeared in a Swiss cookbook in 1598<sup>18</sup>, filtering into Eastern Europe's pantries to reappear hallowed by tradition for Chanukah or Passover. Poverty plagued the *shtetl* storerooms. Potatoes were cheap and traditional recipes made economic use of the cheaper foods available. There was even a popular Yiddish song *Bulves* (potatoes), celebrating its ubiquity: "Sunday, potatoes, Monday potatoes, Tuesday and Wednesday potatoes, Thursday and Friday potatoes, but on Saturday for a change - a potato *kugel*! Sunday, potatoes... Must one only eat meat and have a fat belly? In time of poverty potatoes are also a delicacy."<sup>19</sup>

The Maccabees did not bake *challah*, meaning 'loaf', the traditional braided bread we eat on Shabbat. According to John Cooper, the first mention of *challah* occurred among 15<sup>th</sup> Century Jews in southern Germany and Austria.<sup>20</sup> Only South African Jews refer to *challah* as *kitke*, but *kitke*, from the Polish for 'twisted' or the German for 'putty', just refers to the braids or decorations attached before baking to the *challah*, not to the whole loaf. Isaac Reznik believes that the word comes from the Khoisan '*kitkoi*', meaning twisted, which referred to the twisted plaits of hair of many Jewish women and children. Jews who had been attracted to the Kimberley diamond fields and then moved on to the Witwatersrand gold fields, settling in Ferreirasdorp, often took with them their Khoisan and Griqua employees,

who would be asked to take loaves on Shabbat to neighbouring Jewish families, and would say that they were delivering *kitkes*.<sup>21</sup>

Is *challah* an authentic Jewish recipe? Friday honors the Scandinavian goddess Freyja, Odin's wife, goddess of love and fertility, patron of marriage and motherhood, who assisted in childbirth. Her name meant "beloved one", from the Proto-Indo-European root meaning "to love" as in the word "friend". It is not surprising that on Friday, her name day, housewives in central Europe and the Slavic countries would bake braided loaves, representing the goddess's long plaits, in her honor. Nor is it surprising that Jews moving into pagan Europe saw and copied these with their Friday loaves.

We do not have recipe books from Biblical or Talmudic times, but the ingredients would have been limited: Bread made from wheat, millet or lentils was a staple food, along with cooked grains, and legumes as well as birds, eggs, fish, locusts, with occasionally meat from goats or sheep, grapes, dates, pomegranates, nuts wine, and olive oil.<sup>22</sup> No rice, no sugar. No potatoes, tomatoes, maize, avocados, chilli peppers, lima, string or runner beans, red and green peppers, peanuts, vanilla, chocolate, turkey<sup>23</sup> - these all came from America many centuries later. When Jews were entering Europe after the destruction of the Temple, when they were fleeing into Eastern Europe one thousand years later after the massacres of the Crusades, they were celebrating Pesach and Chanukah, but were doing so without any of these foods. The diets in Eastern Europe were far more limited - onions, cabbage, peas, broad beans, rye or wheat flour. One immigrant interviewed by the Kaplan Centre in Cape Town recalled her mother-in-law visiting her in Lithuania and refusing to let her put a new-fangled tomato in the stew as she was convinced it was poisonous. Another, also from Lithuania, recalled their belief that the top of the tomatoes caused cancer.

Are the *kneidlach* eaten at Pesach authentically Jewish? It is true that only Jews make their dumplings out of matza meal. However, cooked dough balls/ dumplings form part of the cuisine of most people, whether these are Czech *knedlík* or Slovakian *knedliček*, South German *kneidlach* or Austrian *knödel*, *nockerl* or *knöpfle*, or what, with different names, are eaten by people living in Japan, Poland, Hungary, Britain, Ireland, Norway, Ghana, Chile, Jamaica and the Caribbean. There is even a potato dumpling museum, Thüringer Kloßmuseum, in Heichelheim near Weimar, Germany.

In one of Shalom Aleichem's stories,<sup>24</sup> Tevya narrates how he tempted a young man to spend Shavuot with them by his description of Golda's *blintzes* - "Such *blintzes* as your 'blessed ancestors never ate in Egypt' ... plump and juicy and as sweet as the life-giving manna from heaven." So, are *blintzes* Jewish food?

Wikipedia claims that *blintzes* were popularised in America by Jewish immigrants who used them in Jewish cuisine<sup>25</sup> but before taking the credit, it must be accepted that *blintzes* (or pancakes / *pannekoek* / *blini* / *crepes*) are cooked everywhere and that even the word *blintze* is Ukrainian, from old Slavic. As *blintzes* were round, the Slavic people in pre-Christian times regarded them as a symbol for the sun and prepared them at the end of winter to honor the rebirth of the new sun. So can we claim them as Jewish cuisine?

What about *perogen* served in chicken soup on Rosh Hashana? Jack Shapiro, memorialising life in Doornfontein, recalled that his "(Bobba) loved making *perogen* the *heimishe* way... I cried bitter tears when I found out that my favourite Jewish dish was really a Polish dish, the peasant's favourite dish *paragi* and *kiske*"<sup>26</sup> Similarly an article on changes in Poland as a result of the temptations of Western consumerism quoted a Pole saying "*pirogen* is not a noble dish."<sup>27</sup>

So Jews must have picked up *pirogen* while living in Poland along with *kishka*. Both are mentioned in a popular 1950s polka tune *Who Stole the Kishka?* by Polish American Walter Solek: "Someone stole the *kishka*/ Someone stole the *kishka*/ Who stole the *kishka*/ from the butcher's shop? Who stole the *kishka*?/Who stole the *kishka*?/Who stole the *kishka*?/ Someone call the cops!/Fat and round and firmly packed /It was hanging on the rack/Someone stole the *kishka*/ When I turned my back/Take my sweet *kruszyki* [biscuits]/Take my plump *pirogen*/You can even have my *chernika* [blueberries]/Take my long *kielbasa* [sausage]/ But give me back my *kishka* etc. etc". Fortunately, the song ends happily: "Yusef found the *kishka* etc.... And he hung it on the rack."<sup>28</sup>

Then there are the *kreplach* served in soup before Yom Kippur. One school believes that the word *Kreppel* or *kreplach* is derived from the Old High German *kraepfo* meaning grape (as in the Middle English word *grapple* from a grape vine hook), while another school believes that the word entered Yiddish from the Old French word *crepe* meaning 'pancake' or 'filled pastry' or any wrinkled, crapy material (like *crepe de chine*) or *crepes suzette* via the Latin *crispum*.<sup>29</sup> It is intriguing to think that the Yiddish word could be related to so many other things, but there is nothing especially Jewish about *kreplach* - Italians call them tortellini, the Chinese call them *wontons*. Nor is *borsh* Jewish even though the Catskill Mountains, a popular holiday spot for mostly Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants and their families from the 1940s to the 1960s, was nicknamed the 'Borscht Belt' (a play on the name Bible Belt). It is a Ukrainian beetroot soup.

Ah, but what about the *hamentaschen* at Purim?<sup>30</sup> *Hamentaschen* is German for Haman's pocket or bag and the pastries are filled pockets, often with poppy seed (*mohn* in German and Yiddish). They were called *mohn taschen*, or

poppy seed pockets, but as *mohntaschen* sounded like *Hamentaschen*, *hamentaschen* they became<sup>31</sup> (except in Italy where they were called Haman's ears because they believed Haman had donkey's ears and elongate their *hamentaschen* to look like ears). Bohemian Jews<sup>32</sup> filled theirs with prune sauce to celebrate the release of the family of David Brandeis, plum merchants, after being falsely accused of killing gentiles with poisoned plum jam in the 1731 Brandeis Purim – the 'Plum Jam Purim.'<sup>33</sup> So who knows what the original *hamentaschen* looked like or when they were first prepared?

We do know that bagels were the first Jewish food to go into space.<sup>34</sup> In America lox and bagels (brought there by Polish Jews) are regarded as a typically Jewish dish and Jewish astronaut Dr Gregory Chamitoff, an engineer whose cousin owns Montreal's Fairmount Bagels, took 18 sesame seed bagels with him as part of his personal allowance. He spent 198 days in space from May to November 2008, travelling to the International Space Station, and the bagels must have made a nice change from space food.<sup>35</sup>

It was thought that bagels were first made when King John Sobieski of Poland drove off the Turks attacking Vienna in 1683. One soldier took as booty sacks of unfamiliar coffee beans left behind by the Turks and when he found out what to do with these indigestible beans, he started the first Viennese coffee house, serving the drink with crescent shaped rolls. When Sobieski entered Vienna with the grateful citizens clinging to his stirrups (*beugel* being German for stirrups<sup>36</sup>), the baker redesigned the Muslim crescents into stirrup shapes - and the Jews moved into Poland bringing their bagels with them. Webster's New World College Dictionary derivation agrees with the story, as it says that the word comes from Middle High German via the Austrian German *beugel*, a kind of croissant, similar to the German *bügel*, a stirrup or ring.

The stirrup derivation is, however, contested by Merriam-Webster's dictionary, which claims that the word comes from the Middle High German *böugel* or ring. Poles say they were the ones who invented bagels, for Lent in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Krakow – they became a staple of the Polish and Slavic national diet. The first record of bagels is supposed to be found in a decree in the 1610 Krakow Community Regulations<sup>37</sup> granting a gift of bagels to every woman in childbirth. Bagels could be seen in London in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, often displayed in baker's windows on vertical wooden dowels up to a metre in length.

What about *gefilte* (a German word) fish, known on Russian and Polish hotel menus as 'Jewish fish'.<sup>38</sup> Maybe this is a genuine Jewish invention of the frugal and impoverished Jewish mother. It is believed to have originated in Holland to where the Jews fled after the 1492 expulsion from Spain. In Rumania and the Balkans, Jews would serve whole fish stuffed between the skin

and backbone. In America and South Africa, these became minced fish balls.

However, one genuine Jewish invention seldom credited as being a Jewish innovation is the typically English fish and chips! Sephardi Jews when they came to England as refugees in the sixteenth century were not going to fry their fish in lard - they used olive oil. In 1544 Manuel Brudo, a Portuguese Marrano, wrote that the favorite dish of Marrano refugees in England was fried fish, which they sprinkled with flour and dipped in egg and bread crumbs. When Thomas Jefferson, later US president, visited England in 1786 he wrote that he ate "fried fish in the Jewish fashion". When his granddaughter, Virginia, put together a collection of his favorite recipes, she included a recipe for fried fish in the Jewish manner using oil.<sup>39</sup> The first British Jewish cookbook, published in 1846, included a recipe for it.<sup>40</sup> Joseph Malin, a Jewish immigrant, opened the first fish and chip shop in London's East End in 1860 and the first fish restaurant, serving fish and chips, bread and butter, and tea for nine pence was opened by Samuel Isaacs in London in 1896.<sup>41</sup> Malin's of Bow was presented with a commemorative plaque by the National Federation of Fish Fryers in 1968 to recognise its founding role in the chip business. Yet who thinks of fish and chips as authentic Jewish cuisine?

What we regard today as traditional Jewish food is really just the food traditional to some of the lands through which the wandering Jews passed. While we sojourned there, we ate the foods available, adapted the recipes to our dietary requirements, and adopted the words used for them. Traditional Jewish cookery therefore reveals our journeys, as do the words used for these dishes.

The English language also adapted the foods and adopted the words. The Angles and Saxons had cows, sheep, calves and swine. The French conquerors in 1066 brought French words to the table as beef, mutton, veal, and pork.<sup>42</sup> Some foods were adopted with their original names, others with the name of the place from where they originated. Tomatoes took the Mexican name *tomatl*<sup>43</sup>; potatoes were grown on Mount Potosi by the Potosino silver miners in Peru<sup>44</sup> and xocolatl (chocolate) was drunk in the court of the Emperor Montezuma of Mexico<sup>45</sup>. Tea - *tcha* in Cantonese, but *tay* in the dialect used in Amoy, the Chinese port from where it was imported by the Dutch East India Company - became the English 'tea' but the Slavic *tchay*<sup>46</sup> and the teapot became the *tchynik*, as in the Yiddish phrase *hak a tchynik*<sup>47</sup> ('strike the teapot').

S.Y. Agnon describes the first encounter of a party of early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Jewish pilgrims with coffee: "Their Sephardic brethren boiled *kahava*, a kind of drink which rouses the heart and causes sleep to depart and which is not known in the land of Poland although it is mentioned in the 'Ordered Table'".<sup>49</sup>



Eastern Europe immigrants to South Africa were introduced to many unfamiliar foodstuffs. One remembered being given grapes and bananas at Madeira: "The grapes I ate, but the bananas I threw overboard as I did not think they were food."<sup>51</sup> Another remembered her mother buying her a green ball on the vegetable cart in Cape Town and not realizing that squash was a vegetable not a toy.<sup>52</sup>

When we consider traditional foods we forget that although our culinary tastes are conservative, habits can change. Could you think of a children's party without coke or chips? But a century ago there was Life without Coke. Could one imagine a dinner where sardines on toast was served between the dessert and the coffee? This was offered on the first class carriage dinner menu (cost 5/-) of the London, Midland and Scottish Railway of 9 April 1924.

Certainly Lucy, enjoying tea with Tumnus the faun in CS Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, was given sardines on toast. Today, no first class dinner menu today would offer sardines on toast, let alone after the dessert.

One menu of much sentimental interest to this writer demonstrates clearly the changes in taste and availability of food. This comes from the Waldorf Restaurant, then one of the smartest restaurants in Cape Town, to where my father took his girlfriend (who became my mother) on her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in 1941. The nine-course set menu cost 2/6d. One could order separate dishes which included, under 'Sundries' - sweet corn on toast, asparagus on toast, welsh rarebit, sardines on toast (but not after dessert) and sardine, tomato or cheese omelettes. Desserts cost 6d - stewed apple and cream, stewed figs and cream, stewed prunes and cream or bananas and cream. If you really wanted to splurge and spend 1/- you could order canned pears and cream or canned peaches and cream. This was in the middle of the war and was a long way from the meat-rich banquets earlier in the century.

To return to Heinrich Heine, the Gastronomic Jew, and his much loved *cholent*: A slow-cooked stew of meat, potatoes, beans and barley, *cholent* is regarded as the typical Jewish dish, invented by Jews to enable them to have a hot, cooked dish on Shabbat. Many are the stories of children sent down to the bakers on Fridays, each with their own specially marked pot to be placed in the baker's oven where the heat would keep it cooking slowly after Shabbat came in. There are stories of children stealing meat out of the pot on the way home, or moving a potato from the pot of the rich to the pot of a poor family.

In 1840, Heine wrote *Princess Sabbath*<sup>53</sup>, part of his "Hebrew Melodies" collection as a parody of Schiller's *Ode To Joy* (set to music by Beethoven in his 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony). Heine's collection resulted from his outrage on learning of the Damascus Affair in which eight Jews were accused of ritual murder, following the death of

a monk. Heine's conversion was only skin deep and this antisemitism brought to the fore his identification with his fellow Jews as is obvious in his ode to *schalet (cholent)*.<sup>54</sup>

"Loved one! smoking is forbidden/  
For today the Sabbath is./ But at noon, in  
compensation / Thou a steaming dish shalt  
taste of,/ Which is perfectly delicious  
- Thou shalt eat today some *Schalet!*  
*Schalet*, beauteous spark immortal, Daughter  
of Elysium !/ Thus would Schiller's song  
have sung it,/ Had he ever tasted *Schalet*.  
*Schalet* is the food of heaven,/ Which  
the Lord Himself taught Moses/  
How to cook, when on that visit/ To  
the summit of Mount Sinai,...  
*Schalet* is the pure ambrosia/ That the  
food of heaven composes / Is the bread of  
Paradise; And compared with foods so glorious,  
The ambrosia of the spurious/ Heathen gods  
whom Greece once worshipp'd/... Was but  
wretched devil's dung.

Is *cholent* then an original Jewish dish with an original Yiddish name - possibly a corrupted 'shul end'?<sup>55</sup> The *cholent* cooked in Eastern Europe by Jews fleeing the Crusades and the persecutions of Western Europe had its name gradually changed from the Western Yiddish *schalet*, which had been used in Holland, Germany and Bohemia. The name derives from the Old French *chaldain*, meaning anything hot, which in turn had come from the Latin *calidus*. The answer is, probably.

So what can one conclude from all this? That, for Ashkenazi sentimentalists, Gastronomic Judaism refers to the East European recipes picked up by the wandering Jews from their neighbors with the exception of authentic dishes like boiled matzo meal dough balls (*kneidlach*), possibly *gefilte* fish, probably *cholent* if you take Heinrich Heine's word for it and definitely fried fish and chips. And that tastes do change from one generation to the next. When last did you eat turtledoves, pheasants or partridges, let alone *pitcha*, *grievenes*, *kishka* or stuffed *helzel* or sardines after dessert?

Have I made a *tzimmes* of the subject. i.e. a prolonged procedure (aka a dish of slightly sweetened mixed cooked vegetables, from the German *zum essen* - to the eating)?<sup>56</sup> *B'tay Avon*.

## NOTES

- 1 He called conversion "the ticket of admission into European culture".
- 2 Heinrich Heine on the magical powers of *cholent (schalet)*; 19 Sep 2010; [onthemainline.blogspot.com/.../heinrich-heine-on-magical-powers-of..](http://onthemainline.blogspot.com/.../heinrich-heine-on-magical-powers-of..)
- 3 Abrahams, Israel, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1919, p151.
- 4 Friedman, Matti, *The Aleppo Codex: A True Story of Obsession, Faith and the Pursuit of an Ancient Bible*,

- Algonquin, North Carolina, 2012, p64.
- 5 I thank genealogist Paul Cheifitz for photocopying these and drawing them to my attention.
- 6 Dordrecht is in the Eastern Cape and its synagogue was completed in 1913 with a celebration that took place in the home of Mr and Mrs M Stern with its president Joseph Moss giving the opening speech. At the lunch for Smuts 11 years later, Councilor Moss and Mr Stern both spoke. With thanks to Tammy Glander of the Jacob Gitlin Library who checked this for me, and found information about the congregation in Vol 3 of the Bet Hatfutsot SA Country Communities.
- 7 A relative of Paul Cheifitz; paulcheifitz@gmail.com.
- 8 Herman Lichtenstein's farewell took place at Indwe in the Eastern Cape, about 40 km south-east of Dordrecht. Lichtenstein, a character of note, fought in the Boer War, With thanks to Paul Cheifitz, pers. communication, 29.11.2012.
- 9 David Sherman (ed), *40 Years in Retrospect: The story of the Western Province Zionist Council 1943-1983*, Western Province Zionist Council, Cape Town, 1984, pp 44-5.
- 10 With thanks to Yaniv Nachmias and Tamar Lazarus for help with the translation, 28.11.2012.
- 11 Gill Marks is a rabbi, author of *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* and founding editor of *Kosher Gourmet* magazine. From 'Is There a Secret Ingredient in the Jewish Relationship with Food?', *Moment*, July, 2013.
- 12 With grateful thanks to Tamar Lazarus, former chairman Bnoth Zion Association-WIZO, 2012.
- 13 With grateful thanks to Barry Levitt, of the United Jewish Campaign, 2012.
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- 17 Rosten, op. cit. p202.
- 18 Usherwood, Steven, *Food, Drink and History*, David & Charles, Newton Abbot.,1972, p54.
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- 20 Both quote John Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied: A Social History of Jewish Food*; Winston-Macauley, Marnie , 'A Brief History of Challah', 7 Jul 2012, www.aish.com > Jewlarious > Cool Stuff; Fass, Jonathan, "Challah: a richly fascinating history: Jewish Herald Voice On Line 8 March, 2012, Houston and the Texas Gulf Coast's Jewish Community Newspaper, [jhvonline.com/challah-a-richly-fascinating-history-p12674-220.htm](http://jhvonline.com/challah-a-richly-fascinating-history-p12674-220.htm)
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# WHAT WE LEARN FROM 'NUSACH ANGLIA': SOUTH AFRICA AND ITS THREATENED ANGLO-JEWISH HERITAGE

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David Sher

Judaism has a largely heterogeneous array of prayer rites. These are distinguished primarily by different liturgical traditions such as the composition of the thrice-daily services and the *Amida* (the primary Jewish silent devotion). However, alongside these rites has developed numerous customs and supplications. Note the formality and dignity of most Germanic '*Yekke*' synagogues following the *Nusach Ashkenaz* rite, compared with the unbridled spontaneity of the *Hassidic shtieblach* as they uproariously entreat through their *Nusach Sefard* rite. One cannot help but be captivated by the moving convivial tunes developed by those following *Nusach Edot Mizrach* or be stirred by the heartening hymns of *Nusach Ashkenaz*, led by a *Chazzan* more often than not clad in striking robes and cantorial hat.

Arguably, the most famous rite is *Nusach Ashkenaz*, originally of Germany and later of other European and English-speaking lands. Its counterpart *Nusach d'Frankfurt am Main*, styled by the illustrious Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, is also renowned. *Nusach Edot Mizrach* is that of the Sephardim who lived across the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa. The *Hasidim* of Galicia and most of Poland modelled their own rite, confusingly named it *Nusach Sefard* (not to be confused with *Nusach Edot Mizrach*). There is even a *Nusach Italki*, reflecting Italy's rich Jewish heritage.

A less well-known rite is that of *Nusach Anglia*, which reflects the long and colourful history of Jews in the British Isles; it is steeped in tradition axiomatic with cantorial convention and boasts imposing magnificence. It is particularly relevant to the Jews of South Africa, whose history was for so long dominated by the UK influence.

Jews lived in England from early medieval times until their expulsion in 1290 by Edward I. They had already begun to trickle back by the time Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel led his famous deputation to the devout Oliver Cromwell in 1656, when he urged that Jews be allowed back into the country on the basis that the Messiah could only arrive when the Scriptural injunction of their being 'scattered throughout the lands'

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had been achieved. Today's magnificent *Sefardi* Bevis Marks Synagogue in London, constructed in 1701, is a direct descendant of the first post-Expulsion synagogue, which was situated on Creechurch Lane and opened in 1657.<sup>1</sup> In 1722 Ashkenazim, arriving from Germany in increasing numbers, constructed their own majestic synagogue in London's Dukes Place. This colonnaded, galleried, ornate edifice was entitled the Great Synagogue, known informally as Britain's 'Cathedral Synagogue'. It was to profoundly shape the destiny of the Jewish religion in South Africa until the present day.

By 1802, the synagogue had begun to diverge significantly from Germanic *Nusach Ashkenaz* norms. In that year the new Rabbi, Dr Solomon Hirschell Q.D.C., was recognized as the 'Chief Rabbi' of London, and his brief would in due course include guiding the nascent communities of Australia, New Zealand and South Africa<sup>2</sup>. Chief Rabbis were unknown in Germany, where there were only communal rabbis of the various districts. In addition, the requirement for rabbis to possess academic degrees was unique to the *Nusach Anglia* scene and reflected the desire of the congregation for greater Anglicisation. The anglicised state of the Dukes Place Synagogue is further attested to by the *Rules of the Congregation*, published in 1827. Rule 148 declared that the Chief Rabbi would deliver two Sermons, the first discourse on the 'Great Sabbath' before Passover and the second on the 'Sabbath of Penitence'. In terms of Rule 165, 'two readers and a clerk' (*chazzanim* and *shamash*) would have to be present in the synagogue, 'arrayed in their proper costume'. Rule 166 announced that if the *chazzan* failed to read the prayers, he would be promptly fined!<sup>3</sup>

This weekday wearing of ministerial vestments was observed by Cantor Vigoda, who succeeded Joseph Rosenblatt at *Ohab Zedek* in New York. Of his a visit to London, he wrote, "At the 'Great' the chief Cantor alternated with the second Cantor in conducting the daily services, mornings and evenings all year round, both Cantors garbed in their ceremonial robes and hats, and the sextons in their 'Prince Alberts' and silk hats..."<sup>4</sup> Such was the prominence of the synagogue in English society that three Royal Princes, sons of H.R.H. George III, known as the Dukes of Cambridge, Cumberland and Sussex, visited it one Friday evening on 14 April 1809. A special Order of



Service was compiled and printed on silk; the *Parochet* of crimson had been presented by Nathan Meyer Rothschild. As the Royal Dukes descended from their carriages, their path was strewn with flowers: "The 'High Priest', Rabbi Hirschell, was dressed in a robe of white satin of considerable value that had been ordered expressly for him... A space between the pulpit and the ark had been appropriated for the Princes and nobility who stood on a rich platform with four Egyptian chairs."<sup>5</sup> By this time, rich English tradition had permeated the services; puritanical preaching was introduced and magnificent choirs joined distinguished cantors in leading lengthy services at what would become the flagship house of worship of the United Synagogues of London, an institution established by Act of Parliament in 1870.

As time progressed and the British Empire grew in size and importance, numerous English Jews began to relocate to lonely colonial outposts, bringing with them their own unique style of prayer. South Africa was no exception and synagogues there were from the first modelled on the Great Synagogue of London. In 1841, Benjamin Norden and his cohort of mainly English co-religionists founded the congregation 'Tikvath Israel' ('Hope of Israel', a homophonous reference to the Cape of Good Hope) in Cape Town. The first synagogue was built in 1861, in Gardens. The congregation followed the *Nusach Ashkenaz* rite and maintained the British aura of dignified services. The congregation later built a larger edifice, unoriginally entitled the Great Synagogue, in 1904. It was constructed by the British architects Parker and Forsyth in 1904 in Egyptian Revival Style. The Great Synagogue's immense horseshoe-archway before the Ark apse was exactly the same style employed at Britain's foremost Jewish houses of worship - at Singers Hill in Birmingham, Princes Road in Liverpool, New West End in London and Garnet Hill in Glasgow.

As at the Great Synagogue, the ministers of the Cape Synagogue were eventually entitled 'Chief Rabbi'. The services were choral, sermons were introduced and cantors and 'readers' were 'men of the cloth' in the literal sense. The ministers of the Gardens Great Synagogue, notably Rev.



Memorial service for Yitzchak Rabin held in the Gardens Synagogue, Cape Town, 1994

A P Bender and Rabbi Israel Abrahams, were all from Great Britain, and this further moulded South African Jewry's approach to anglicised Judaism. Back in London, "children walked in single file to the Great Synagogue from the Jews Free School"<sup>6</sup> and annual military services were held; in Cape Town, "Jewish girls in neat taffeta dresses from the Christian boarding schools made a procession towards the Gardens Great Synagogue every Saturday"<sup>7</sup> and military services were likewise frequently held.

In 1889, the first synagogue in Johannesburg, located on President Street, was opened by a conglomeration of English and German Jews, headed by the British Rev Mark J Harris. Johannesburg's first truly eminent cantor was Rev Manne, who responded to an advertisement placed in London. In 1914, an almost identical constitution as the one instituted at Dukes Place Synagogue was adopted at the galleried Park - later Great- Synagogue on Wolmarans Street. Here, too, Rabbi Dr J L Landau was Chief Rabbi. He needed to "...attend Divine Service on Sabbaths and Festivals in his official robes" with his clergy of readers, beadles and cantors to "appear on all necessary occasions in their clerical dress."<sup>8</sup> Numerous special military services and services for the British Sovereign were held by the United Hebrew Congregations, an organisation for all purposes modelled on the United Synagogue of Great Britain. As the Johannesburg community gained national prominence, so did its Chief Rabbi, who were all from Britain (although, in Rabbi Landau's case, Galician-born). Manchester, which boasted its own Great Synagogue, provided South Africa with two of its Chief Rabbis - Rabbi Landau of the North Manchester Congregation and Rabbi B M Casper of the Higher Broughton Congregation<sup>9</sup>.

For an extended period before this, the content of Judaism in South Africa had been prescribed by the Chief Rabbi in Dukes Place; this was eventually met with resistance by the Congregation in Johannesburg. Despite this, the renowned cantor of the Dukes Place Great Synagogue, Rev. Simcha Koussevitzky - who had been so popular in London that policemen had to control the crowds at the gates (and the ladies gallery was given over in part to the men)<sup>10</sup> - eventually moved to Johannesburg, bringing Britain's finest cantorial tradition to South Africa.<sup>11</sup> In 1913 Rabbi J H Hertz, who had first been exposed to the spirit of *Nusach Anglia* whilst in Johannesburg's Witwatersrand Old Hebrew Congregation - became Chief Rabbi of the British Empire. His appointment was largely due to his rapport with the British High Commissioner of South Africa, Lord Alfred Milner, something that came about through his support for the *Uitlander* cause and passionate support for English values.<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Hertz guided South African Jewry from the Imperial Capital and in South Africa proper when he conducted the first pastoral visit of a

British Chief Rabbi across Britain's vast Empire, to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the Union of South Africa, in 1920. In his commentary on *Ethics of the Fathers*, he declared that the saintly Talmudic luminary Rabbi Tarfon, who allowed his mother to tread on his hands because her 'sandals split', "outdid Sir Walter Raleigh in his chivalry".<sup>13</sup> This typical observation is evidence of the potent imprint made on his work and exegesis by *Nusach Anglia*.



Interior of the Park Synagogue, Johannesburg, draped in black as a sign of mourning on the death of King Edward VII, May 1910.

Although by the turn of the century East European Jews constituted the majority of Jews in South Africa, there emerged a synthesis of the two traditions, characterised as the "pouring of the Litvak spirit into Anglo Jewish bottles".<sup>14</sup> Even the East European breakaway synagogues in both Johannesburg and Cape Town - the Beth Hamedrash Hagodel and Beth Hamedrash - eventually became conventionally anglicised in their own right (a typical phenomenon in England). The Beth Hamedrash Hagodel eventually joined the United Hebrew Congregations when it merged with the Sandton Hebrew Congregation.<sup>15</sup> One consequence was that most Jews left their traditional Lithuanian way of pronouncing Hebrew for the anglicised pronunciation (which, amongst other things, rendered the Hebrew *cholam* vowel not as 'ai' but as 'oh' as in 'go').<sup>16</sup> In the vast majority of South African synagogues, English influence meant that wedding ceremonies were held before the Ark as opposed to on the *Almemar*, as was the custom of Rabbi S R Hirsch<sup>17</sup>, and as opposed to having solemnisation outside as was the custom in many Eastern European congregations.<sup>18</sup> Some synagogues were so anglicised that they earned the name the '*Englischer Shul*'. This was the case with the Western Road Synagogue in Port Elizabeth<sup>19</sup>. Unfortunately, not all these effects were so innocuous; the anglicising spirit often led to the devout newcomers becoming laxer in their religious observance.

The exterior domes of the old Saint Andrews Road Synagogue in Durban bear a striking resemblance to the Great Synagogue of Manchester, constructed in 1857. Regarding the

marble, turreted Assyrian ark of the Kimberley synagogue, with its large dome and two small spired domes facing it, there is no doubt that these were modelled on the virtually identical arks constructed at Rev. Simeon Singer's New West End Synagogue in St. Petersburg Place, London, and the Princes Road Synagogue in Liverpool (both by the architect George Audsley).<sup>20</sup> The Gardens Great Synagogue's pulpit, positioned to the side with a sweeping staircase, is an almost replica of that at the Manchester Great Synagogue. These synagogues were intended to inspire awe in congregants; the architect and historian H. A. Meek once said of Princes Road, "He who has not seen the interior of Princes Road Synagogue has not beheld the glory of Israel."<sup>21</sup> The Kimberley Synagogue has been described in a recent novel as having "an English service", which made an East European newcomer feel 'uncomfortable'.<sup>22</sup> The fact that at many synagogues - including the Great Synagogue in Johannesburg - Royal Family prayer boards flanked the Ark is an obvious indication of the influence of the Anglo-Jewish tradition. As may be observed in any London United Synagogue today, such prayer boards are given prominent position on either side of the *Aron Kodesh*.<sup>23</sup>



Interior New West End Synagogue, London

South African Jewry's liturgical style was irrevocably changed with the introduction of the *Authorised Daily Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire* by the celebrated minister Rev. Simeon Singer of the New West End Hebrew Congregation. Published in 1890, this was modelled on S. Baer's *Abodath Israel*, and featured a majestic, high-Victorian

English translation. Declared Singer in the preface, “No pains have been spared to render the work of permanent value and worthy of its place as the Authorised Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire.”<sup>24</sup> Thereafter, all South African synagogues used the Singer Prayer Book, and they are still in use today.

So far as Festivals were concerned, the fledgling congregations in South Africa initially used the *Machzor* of Isaac Levy of London (published 1807). Later the Routledge *Machzor*, published in 1906, was used across the country. Published with the sanction of Chief Rabbi Nathan Adler and modelled on Wolf Heidenheim’s famed Rodelheim *Machzor* of 1800,<sup>25</sup> the Routledge reflected the changes that had taken place in Anglo-Jewry with regard to liturgy.

This included Chief Rabbi Adler’s 1847 regulation that the Ark be kept open for the duration of the Yom Kippur *Amida* repetition and the allowance made in 1892 by Chief Rabbi Hermann Adler to omit the first *Yekum Purkan*.<sup>26</sup> These were used in the flagship synagogues of South Africa such as Cape Town’s Gardens and Johannesburg’s Great Synagogues, along with all the large Hebrew congregations of South Africa.<sup>27</sup> Moreover the Hertz Pentateuch, Chief Rabbi JH Hertz’s commentary on the Torah and *Haftarot* first published in 1936, became the staple synagogue and school Bible of South African Jewry and is from Pretoria to Sea Point to this day. The moving service composed by Chief Rabbi Adler for the Setting of a Tombstone, unknown in Eastern European tradition, is still used by officiating rabbis in Great Britain and South Africa and the prayer he composed for a barmitzvah boy was recited in South Africa for a century. Clear-cut translations of the *Selichot* texts were unavailable to South African Jews until Rev Abrahams published his *Selichot* Prayerbook, modelled on *Selichot* Manuscript texts found in London’s British Museum and the Bodleian Library of Oxford (published 1956). Many copies of these were dispatched to South Africa and are still in use, the Artscroll alternative having only recently become available.<sup>28</sup>

All mainstream South African synagogues have *Yigdal* and *Adon Olam* sung at the conclusion of Friday evening services, and the termination of the Sabbath morning service respectively. This is a direct consequence of *Nusach Anglia* tradition; these hymns are not sung in many *Nusach Ashkenaz* synagogues at the times mentioned.<sup>29</sup> *Nusach Anglia* continues to publish its own *siddurim* (the latest Singer’s Authorised Daily Prayer Book appearing in 2006) and *machzorim*, keeping alive the “centuries old tradition that is *Minhag Anglia*”. Much of this work was conducted under the expertise of Dayan Ivan Binstock of the London Beth Din and minister of London’s principal synagogue, St John’s Wood (where Chief Rabbi C.K. Harris once ministered).<sup>30</sup>

The Chief Rabbi of Britain continued to guide

the destiny of a large proportion of South African Jewry as is evident from correspondence from Rev Bender to Rabbi Landau in the Transvaal: “I for one will never approve of a scheme which shall provide for a separate Chief Rabbi for South Africa”. Bender posited, explaining this was because “...I consider this country to be an integral part of the British Empire which is nominally under the spiritual jurisdiction of a recognised Chief Rabbi”<sup>31</sup> In addition to Rabbi Hertz, South Africa’s contribution to the British Chief Rabbinate continues, with Johannesburg-born Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis elected Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth and assuming office in September 2013.

Of course, over time South African Jews modelled *Nusach Anglia* to their own tastes. The institution of a lengthy Friday night service with large attendances is unique to the South African scene, as is the congregants’ custom to leave their seats and crowd around the scroll and kiss it when the procession makes its way to the *Almemar*, distinct from the British custom to ‘bow solemnly’ to the Torah from their pews. Rabbi Cyril Harris found this custom ‘delightful’ when he witnessed it in South Africa. Moreover, the custom for the *Almemar* to be displaced towards the back of the synagogue, even though the synagogues are not Sephardi, is unique to South Africa, something Chief Rabbi Harris also noted on his arrival.<sup>32</sup> Incidentally, it was Rabbi Harris who broke with the tradition of wearing canonicals for all services; he discarded this apparel for Sabbath services shortly after his arrival, although he continued wearing them for High Holy Days. The decline in the wearing of clerical dress amongst the general rabbinate in South Africa is less pronounced in Britain, where the practice continues in many synagogues.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, the time-honoured custom of wardens donning top-hats and tail-coats has been preserved in Johannesburg’s Great Park Synagogue.<sup>34</sup>

On one point alone can it be said that South Africa has fallen short so far as the *Nusach Anglia* heritage and its accompanying values are concerned, namely that of protection for religious immovable heritage (*halachically*, a point of fundamental importance). In the UK, through the devoted efforts of individuals such as the Catholic Bill Williams and the Jewish Dr. Sharman Kadish, the Jewish Heritage UK charity was established to safeguard Jewish architectural sites across the country. The organization provides independent professional support to trustees, congregations and organisations in their quest to maintain their historic buildings and sites, promoting work of the highest conservation standards, whilst also advising funding applications to grant-making bodies. As a rule the Jewish Heritage UK monitors synagogue closures, seeking sympathetic alternative uses for redundant synagogues and encouraging the recycling of synagogue fittings in a last resort situation. The organization protects



disused Jewish cemeteries by encouraging the sharing of the financial burden on a citywide and regional basis and enlists the support of agencies outside the Jewish community to help maintain the sites. Appreciation of Jewish heritage is developed inter alia through research, publications and special touring British Heritage Open Days. The organisation works in partnership with Britain's heritage societies and local planning authorities to ensure that there is a sustainable future for Britain's Jewish architectural heritage<sup>35</sup>. Conversely, it is a most unfortunate fact that when desecration of our magnificent Anglo-influenced synagogues in South Africa occurs, it is generally met without protest.

Being a community which has always sedulously observed the highest standards of religious requirements, it is important that South African Jewry take into account the *halachic* injunctions regarding safeguarding the sanctity of religious architectural heritage. The Jewish Code of Law (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 153:9*) prohibits the sale of a synagogue to any group or individual who would demean its standing. Moreover, it is a *halachically* established fact that "to sell a synagogue to a place of levity and immodesty or to a gentile is prohibited and even more so is the severity of selling it to be used as a gentile place of worship." This ruling is upheld by such *halachic* luminaries as, amongst others, the *Minchas Yitzhak* authored by the Av Beth Din of Manchester and later Eda Haredith, Jerusalem, *Shaarei Yosher*, and Rabbi Moshe Feinstein.<sup>36</sup> Although certain leniencies could be applied in a case whereby the synagogue remained in an exclusively gentile area, these do not apply to selling it for the purpose of a gentile house of worship<sup>37</sup>. Such sources are expressly mentioned in the Talmud (*Yevamoth*), where the worry of retribution for a synagogue being abandoned to gentile worship and heathenism is also emphasised.<sup>38</sup>

One high-profile example: In 1998, due to increasing crime, the architecturally vital Wolmarans Street Great Synagogue in Johannesburg was sold and subsequently used for a fashion catwalk studio. It was visionary for the congregation to relocate to Oaklands, but many in the community felt the abandonment of the old building to be a travesty as it could easily have remained within the Jewish community and be used for a constructive purpose<sup>39</sup>. If synagogues are too far away to walk to on Shabbat, they may still be used for weekday prayers, weddings and even as centres of help for the underprivileged. None of this would entail driving on *Shabbat*, whilst the integrity of the synagogue design would be maintained.

Any religious individual would be perturbed at the stunned expression in the general press that the "Wolmarans St Synagogue is planned to be sold for commercial purposes...without protest." It is disheartening indeed to any Jew when our

prime synagogue is reported by the *Business Day* news outlet as having been "sold for a song... One of Johannesburg's best-known landmarks, the Wolmarans Street Synagogue, was knocked down for R850 000 in a 'blind bid' at a lively Citynet auction this week".<sup>40</sup> Thus our principal house of worship came to be handed over to a Christian domination, its exterior disfigured by chicken takeaways and inside a Christian motif painted over the Ark, beneath the *Shiviti* sign, without a word of reproach from any quarter. It is essential that we now prove that as a community, we value our single most important religious landmark more than the comparatively meagre sum of a new motorcar - a sum that could easily be raised within the community.



Worshippers gather for a church service outside the former Great Synagogue, Johannesburg, 2013.

The South African Jewish community has already taken positive steps regarding other cases. The Lions Synagogue in Doornfontein, remembered fondly by so many, was valued enough by its members for it to be maintained to the present day. The community of Brakpan refused to allow their synagogue to be relegated to the realm of history; innovative tactics are employed and the synagogue is maintained. Defying naysayers, the South Eastern Rosettenville Congregation, over a century old, continues to function, declaring that the surrounding decay will not affect G-d's sanctuary. The Ark at Outsdhoorn has been rescued and placed in the town museum; the synagogue in Worcester has been converted into a museum and preserved its appearance. The Jeppe Hebrew Congregation, for so long situated in an area of terminal decline, had congregants who were not defeatist in their attitude and who ensured that the synagogue remained in use long after most Jews had moved out of the area. The problem of Sabbath desecration was nobly avoided by holding a convivial service every Sunday, when driving is permitted. Nonetheless, that edifice still lacks civil protection, which could easily be implemented through the efforts of a SA Jewish Heritage Society.

Elsewhere, other flagrant breaches of the integrity of our traditional sites have occurred.

The rounded Western Road Synagogue in Port Elizabeth (constructed 1877) was not preserved; neither was the Fox Street Johannesburg Beth Hamedrash protected. It is therefore understandable that a prominent member of the Johannesburg Council informed the author that in his opinion “the Jewish religious authorities have given scant regard to their rich heritage”<sup>41</sup>. Despite the Poswohl Synagogue on Mooi Street being proclaimed a national monument, it has now been left to rot with televisions housed in the *Aron Kodesh*. Are we really prepared to allow a last memorial to the destroyed Jewish community of Poswohl, Lithuania, to slip into oblivion? Once the innovative president of Poswohl Synagogue offered brides transportation to the *shul* in a Rolls Royce were they to have their wedding in the synagogue<sup>42</sup>; now we are the custodians of a heritage that is at risk. How ironic that Temple Israel of the Reform community in Hillbrow should continue to operate. Whilst detractors would suggest that community is viable because its members discount the Sabbath restrictions, the Temple largely survives as an upliftment centre to help the underprivileged, something that any Orthodox congregation could undertake during the week. The German Lutheran Church in Hillbrow, just two years older than the Great Synagogue, has been preserved. The point must be made: “If German Lutherans can keep their Hillbrow site, what an embarrassment it is that we Jews appear not to care about our shul”<sup>43</sup>. Moreover, having a synagogue that doubles as a Jewish Museum is hardly something unique in the Jewish world, where such sites are situated in areas that, like the CBD of Johannesburg, are devoid of Jews.<sup>44</sup> The false impression has been created that the Great Synagogue has been irreparably desecrated. In reality, it remains *completely intact*, down to the memorial tablets and Ark design. Only the Claim and Smit Street elevations have had extensions added, to house a restaurant and takeaway.

When the Jewish community reacts in fury to the desecration of the Bloemfontein Jewish cemetery, this is encouraging. As a community, we found intolerable the unlicensed destruction of our two *ohelim* - the *Kevura Shtiebl* Ohel in Brixton and the one in Braamfontein. The Brixton Cemetery is now completely secure - vagabonds cannot reach it - and it was therefore utterly unnecessary to destroy the *ohel*. Fortunately, those responsible have since been taken to task and the community will no longer accept such wanton destruction. *Kavod Hameth*, honouring the dead, is even more deeply rooted in Jewish tradition than preserving sacred architecture, and the least we can expect is secure burial grounds for our forefathers; efforts must be made to also secure the Braamfontein cemetery.

It is my hope that this essay will serve as a catalyst of our protest against the erosion or destruction of our precious heritage, in no way less resplendent than that of Great Britain. Will

the easily re-purchasable Great Synagogue be left to be despoiled? Will we allow the Jewish community’s most historically significant building in Johannesburg to be changed beyond recognition, so that even when, the Johannesburg CBD, through the efforts of the JHB Development Agency, regenerates there will be nothing left to reclaim? The contravention of *halacha* may yet be corrected and our heritage may be ours once more, but only if unity is achieved and if we follow the superb example set by heritage protection societies in the UK and elsewhere in the Jewish world. A body to protect our architectural legacy is sorely needed in our proud community. The future of those sites rests in our hands.

## NOTES

- 1 These sites are all marked by plaques and Bevis Marks welcomes visitors.
- 2 See commentary on *Yizkor* Service for Departed British Chief Rabbis, Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks, Yom Kippur Machzor, Koren: Jerusalem, 2012 p752
- 3 Rules of the Congregation, published by the Synagogue in Duke’s Place: London (1827)
- 4 Vigoda, S, *Legendary Voices*, published by Rev Vigoda: New York (1981).
- 5 Paul Renton, *The Lost Synagogues of London*, Tysder Publishing: London,(2005), p34.
- 6 Ibid p35.
- 7 Interview with Mrs S. Wittert (Kaler), former student at a Cape boarding-school (June 2013) .
- 8 Constitution and Byelaws: United Hebrew Congregation of JHB, 13/6/1914, Authors Private Collection.
- 9 Bill Williams, *Manchester Jewry- An illustrated History*, Breedon Books: Derby (2008) p121.
- 10 Renton, *The Lost Synagogues of London*, p38.
- 11 He served at Johannesburg’s Greenside Hebrew Congregation and moved to South Africa in 1947.
- 12 Hertz was exiled from the Transvaal due to his fiery pro-Uitlander speech delivered at the Wanderers Hall in Johannesburg. He endured a brief exile in Cape Town, then under British control.
- 13 See Dicta of the Fathers, p43, published separately but also incorporated into the Hertz Authorised Daily Prayer Book (1945), London.
- 14 Gus Saron and L Hotz, *The Jews in South Africa*, Oxford University Press, 1955.
- 15 Anglicisation noted by adoption of choir and a gallery with no obstructive *mechitzah*.
- 16 Interview with UHC Council members.
- 17 Rabbi S R Hirsch’s responsa, *Shemesh Merapeh* (Hebrew) Artsroll-Mesorah: New York, 1992, pp96-7.
- 18 The Polish custom was largely based on the advice of the Re’ma, who advocated outdoor solemnisation “under the heavens” as a “*siman tov*” [positive omen].
- 19 *The Jews in South Africa*, Fieldhill Publishing Co: Johannesburg (1965) p53.
- 20 See Kadish, Sharman; ‘Jewish Heritage in England-An Architectural Guide’, English Heritage publication, Jewish Heritage UK; Swindon: 2006.
- 21 From pamphlet issued by the Liverpool Old Hebrew Congregation. (Princes Road).

- 22 G. Gordon, *South African Journeys*, Jerusalem Publications: Jerusalem (2002) p63.
- 23 For example, author's visitation to St John's Wood Synagogue, Sandys Row Synagogue, Marble Arch Western End Synagogue, Manchester Great and New Synagogue and innumerable others.
- 24 *Authorised Daily Prayer Book of the British Empire*, Rev. S. Singer's Introduction, London: (1890).
- 25 This was a staple of South Africa's Adath Jeshurun Community and is used by Germanic Congregations worldwide to this day.
- 26 Dayan Ivan Binstock, *Rosh Hashana Machzor*, Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks, Koren Publishing: Jerusalem (2011) p xiii.
- 27 Based on interview with former United Hebrew Congregation officials regarding the synagogal rite and authors visit to several U.H.C. synagogues including the Oxford and Great Park Synagogues, which use the *Authorised Daily Prayer Book*. Singer's Prayer Books were used at the Berea North Synagogue and Great Synagogue. The *Artscroll Prayer Book* only recently became fashionable. See also order of service quoting the Singers Prayer Book in the Great Synagogue Golden Jubilee Commemorative Brochure, United Hebrew Congregation: Johannesburg (1964), SAJBD Library, (Johannesburg).
- 28 *Authorised Selichot for the Entire Year, I*, Abrahams, London: 1956.
- 29 As evident in all large congregations in the South African Republic and in the much diminished congregations of former Rhodesia including Bulawayo and Harare (Salisbury).
- 30 See *Rosh Hashanah* (2011) and *Yom Kippur* (2012) *Machzorim*: Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks; Koren Publishing: Jerusalem, 2011, 2012.
- 31 Landau archives, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Archive 40\*798/43/C Also quoted by John I Simon in *Mendel Kaplan, Founders and Followers*, Vlaeburg Publishing Cape Town: 1991 p193.
- 32 *For Heaven's Sake The Chief Rabbis Diary*, C.K. Harris, Goodwood: Western Cape, 2000, p157.
- 33 Chief Rabbi Harris's choice of clerical garb was explained in a discussion with communal activist and friend Mr I Reznik (July 2013) Many British Rabbis and other members of the ministry still wear canonicals, including at the Manchester Higher Crumpsall and London New West End Synagogues. Chief Rabbis Mirvis and Sacks were clad in such robes for the latter's induction shortly before Rosh Hashana 5774.
- 34 Such synagogues include the Sephardi Lauderdale Road Synagogue; the custom of wearing top-hats in the Great Park Synagogue is a consequence of the protocol in the Wolmarans St Synagogue.
- 35 Communication and appeal brochures released by Jewish Heritage UK..
- 36 See, for example, Piske Teshuboth, Ch.153:17, See the Halachic Responsa (Orach Chaim Section of Shulkhan Aruch) in: Imre Yosher Vol.2, Ch.32, Iggereth Moshe (Rabbi Moses Feinstein) Vol.2 Ch.44 and 45, Minchath Yitzhak, (Dayan I J Weisz) Vol.1 Ch.120.
- 37 Rabbi Moses Feinstein, maintaining once again maintains selling it for such a use is an immensely great ignominy. Igroth Moshe Vol2 Ch45.
- 38 See Tractate Yebamoth, Babylonian Talmud, page 96a, incident regarding Rabbi Yose ben Kismo.
- 39 See Eli Goldstein, 'When Pragmatism Trumps Prosperity', correspondence page in *SA Jewish Report*, 15 February 2013 distress at the fact that the synagogue has still not been preserved.
- 40 See *Businessday South Africa: Historic Synagogue Sold for a Song*, 4 March 2005.
- 41 Communication with a City of Johannesburg heritage official, 2013.
- 42 'The Pretoria Women's Zionist League go Touring', *Pretoria Jewish Chronicle*, August 1988.
- 43 See *Jewish Community Must Buy Back Wolmarans Street Shul Building*, *SA Jewish Report*, 28 June 2013.
- 44 For example the Manchester Jewish Museum in Cheetham Hill, an area now primarily Muslim, and the Princes Road Synagogue in Liverpool's Toxteth, where Jews no longer reside.

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## Interviews with Pioneers - The Work of the South African Jewish Sociological and Historical Society

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Naomi Musiker

The first attempt to establish a record of the South African Jewish community dates back to 28 April 1927, when the SA Jewish Historical Society was founded. Its chief objects were 'the securing of reliable and statistical data about Jews in all parts of South Africa and Rhodesia.' Much of the credit for the founding of the Society is due to Chief Rabbi Dr J L Landau, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation (and later of the Federation of Synagogues) and Professor of Hebrew at the University of the Witwatersrand. Chief Rabbi Landau served as President of the Society, with Mr. I M Goodman as Vice President and Registrar. Under Goodman's direction, much valuable information was gathered in reply to hundreds of questionnaires sent to all parts of the country. A committee was set up to compile a Jewish Yearbook and Communal Directory which would also include a South African Jewish "Who's Who". The volume, edited by Morris De Saxe and I.M. Goodman and sponsored by the SA Jewish Historical Society and the SA Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), made its appearance

in 1929. It was officially entitled 'The South African Jewish Year Book: Directory of Jewish Organisations and Who's Who in South African Jewry 1929, 5689-90'. The Directory remains an invaluable source of information. The Communal Directory (Who's Who section) was the first comprehensive effort to compile biographical information on prominent personalities of the Jewish community and is greatly treasured by modern day researchers.

### The South African Jewish Sociological and Historical Society - Reports and Interviews

In 1947, fresh efforts were made to preserve the original records of the South African Jewish community. In February 1947 the SAJBD Executive Council approved the Constitution of the SA Jewish Sociological and Historical Society (SAJSHS)<sup>1</sup>. The initial steps for the formation of the Society had been taken jointly by the Communal Relations and Public Relations Committees of the Board.

The objects of the Society were defined as follows:

- The promotion and organization of research into and study of the history and contemporary life of the Jews of South Africa.
- The establishment and maintenance of a Jewish Library, Archives and Museum.
- The classification and indexing of Jewish historical and sociological material in the archives of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies.
- The publication of a comprehensive history of the Jews of South Africa, pamphlets, monographs and other publications.
- The organization of lectures and discussions of Jewish sociological and historical interest and holding of conferences at which papers would be read.



Committee of the South African Jewish Year Book  
 (Front row: Mr. I. M. Goodman, Mr. J. L. Landau, Mr. J. M. Goodman; Back row: Mr. J. L. Landau, Mr. J. M. Goodman, Mr. J. L. Landau)

*Naomi Musiker, a veteran contributor to Jewish Affairs and a long-serving member of its Editorial Board, has contributed numerous biographical articles for the Dictionary of South African Biography and the Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa and, as an indexer, has worked for some of South Africa's leading publishers. She has held the position of archivist at the SAJBD since 1991.*

At the inaugural meeting of the Society on 26 March 1947, Chief Rabbi Professor Louis Rabinowitz was elected Chairman, Dr H. Sonnabend, Vice-Chairman and Max Geffen, Treasurer. Samuel A Rochlin was appointed as Archivist and Vera Perlstein as Secretary.

The Society proposed the following methods for the promotion and organization of research:

- Some 40 proposed themes for research

were submitted by Rochlin to a meeting of the Executive Committee held on 9 February, 1948.

- The Society sponsored a 'Prize Monograph Competition' to encourage research and study in the fields of South Africa Jewish history and sociology. Two prizes of £20 and £10 respectively were offered.
- The Society initiated a Seminar conducted by the Chairman, Chief Rabbi Rabinowitz to carry out research and study for publication. The first theme of the Seminar was "The Jews and the Boer War".
- In order to preserve 'living' historical material, the Society undertook to conduct interviews with Jewish pioneers in various parts of South Africa. Full written records of these interviews were kept in the Society's Archives.
- Public lectures were given under the Society's auspices and it was intended to publish a selection of them.

### Interviews with Jewish Pioneers

From 1947 onwards, Samuel Rochlin assisted in the interviewing of a number of Jewish pioneers, both in Johannesburg and in Durban, which he visited in November 1947 in company with Dr Sonnabend for the purpose of forming a branch of the Society there. The Society was planning a systematic scheme of work for 1949-1950, including the sponsorship of research by M. Brown on 'The Jew in South African Agriculture'. By the end of 1948, members of the Society had interviewed fourteen Jewish pioneers from Johannesburg, Durban, Kimberley and Port Elizabeth; a further seventeen were interviewed during 1949.

After the appointment of Dora Sowden as Organising Secretary in 1951, the Society was greatly facilitated in its pioneers' interviews. Sowden, film and music critic of the *Rand Daily Mail* and Secretary of the South African PEN Centre, was superbly qualified for the task. She interviewed some 22 pioneers during 1952, and also conducted interviews jointly with Rochlin.

More names were continually being added to the list of people to be interviewed and Mrs H Kehr and Dr H Abt were asked to list and interview members of the smaller communities encountered in their visits to country areas. In March 1951, for example, Abt noted interesting facts during a lecture tour to Upington and Kimberley, particularly regarding inscriptions in the Jewish cemeteries in Kimberley. In December 1953, he presented a report on the Grahamstown cemetery.

In November 1952, Sowden presented a memorandum on the Jewish Archives of the SAJSHS in which she outlined the work done on interviews as follows:

Actually the job takes more time than anyone is aware of, and (though I say it myself) demands

the efforts of someone whom people know and trust....The basis of the collection, before I began to work for it about 18 months ago, was the Library of the Board [of Deputies] - made up of press cuttings and other material of historical and sociological interest. There is a staff here which cuts papers and files material, but our archivist, Mr. S A Rochlin, also makes cuttings which may be of immediate use to us as information, or as a guide to sources of material-just as a check.

An additional source of archivist material comes from personal interviews with old pioneers. This is a slow and arduous task, if it is to be properly carried out (my own job being part-time, I have managed only about 35 interviews in 18 months) and [have] to be as accurate as possible in noting down the information. Usually it leads to gifts of old material from the old folk who are interviewed or from relatives or friends.

By the end of 1953, the Organising Secretary was finding the task of interviewing, carrying on correspondence and collecting material greatly handicapped by limited time and assistance. Sowden recommended that the work should be better allocated so as not to fall so heavily on one person. She tendered her resignation in March 1954, but continued to write for *Jewish Affairs* until her departure for Israel in 1966.

Sowden was succeeded as Secretary by Mrs H Dreiman, who held the post until the end of 1955. After her departure, the main focus of the Society was on the production of the volume entitled *The Jews in South Africa: a History*, which was edited by Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz and appeared in 1955. In the preface to the book, the editors acknowledge their debt to the continuous co-operation and material assistance received from the SAJBD, and to the 'wealth of historical material assembled in the archives of the Board of Deputies' which was freely drawn upon by the writers.

As mentioned earlier, one of the aims of the Society was to investigate the role of Jews in the Boer armed forces during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. The compilation of this information was undertaken by Chief Rabbi Rabinowitz during the late 1940s and early 1950s. It involved corresponding with, and where possible interviewing, both Jewish and non-Jewish veterans of the war. Important work in this field was also done by Eric Rosenthal and Rochlin. The results of this investigation were embodied in scholarly addresses delivered by Rabbi Rabinowitz to public meetings under the auspices of the SAJSHS. Examples of lectures were "Herman Judelowitz: the 'Russian Rebel' of the Boer War", delivered 17 June 1948,<sup>2</sup> and 'Jews in the Boer War', delivered at the Parkview-Greenside Communal Hall, Johannesburg on 27 May 1949. The lectures aroused great public interest and encouraged other war veterans to come forward with further information which would otherwise have been lost; many of the

original participants were already deceased at this period.

The research by Rabbi Rabinowitz and the Society formed the basis of the scholarly book which appeared in January 2010 under the title *Boerejode: Jews in the Boer Armed Forces 1899-1902* by David Saks, editor of this journal. Saks discovered many new facts concerning the 'Boerjode', which he was able to add to the existing body of information first unearthed by Rabbi Rabinowitz and the members of the SA Jewish Sociological and Historical Society.

### Articles in *Jewish Affairs*

Through the work of the Society, many interesting and vitally important interviews appeared in *Jewish Affairs* the journal of the SAJBD. Those featuring reminiscences of pioneers included 'Through the Eyes of a Litvak, 1893: Johannesburg Jewry's first years: a contemporary report' by M D Hersch.<sup>3</sup> These articles were translated from the letters of Johannesburg pioneer Meyer Dovid Hersch and originally appeared in the 1895 and 1896 issues of *Hatzefirah*, a Hebrew journal edited by Nahum Sokolow and published in Warsaw.<sup>4</sup>

Another example was the 'Memoirs of a Rand pioneer' by Siegfried Raphaely,<sup>5</sup> a well-known personality and former President of the SAJBD. About ten years before his death in 1953, he commenced writing his memoirs but completed only a small part, recording the history of his family and their early years in South Africa from 1884 to the commencement of the Anglo-Boer War.

Sowden and Rochlin provided many of the biographical articles for *Jewish Affairs*, based on personal interviews. Sowden's contributions included 'The Jewish Pioneer of Krugersdorp', a tribute to Abner Cohen.<sup>6</sup> 'The First Jewish House in Johannesburg', an account of the Johannesburg pioneer, Wolf Miller<sup>7</sup>; 'The End of an Episode: Hannan Hirsch-Yiddish Actor (1873-1953)'<sup>8</sup> and 'The Late Harry Morris, Q.C. -Son of a Pioneer Family'.<sup>9</sup>

By 1958, the SAJSHS had ceased to function. In the SAJBD Report to Congress of 1958, the sections on the Library of Information and on the Museum contain a passing reference to the fact that many items of Jewish Africana remained buried in the stored cases of the Board's archives and in the cupboards of the SAJSHS at the Board's premises. Further information on the fate of the Society's collected archives is presented in the reports of SAJBD Librarian, Fanny Stein, for May 1969 and November 1970. She mentions the unpacking, sorting and cataloguing of a great deal of library material. Among other items, the 1970 report states that the cupboards containing material collected by the SAJSHS had been sorted and tidied and a start had been made with the cataloguing of these items.

It is clear, therefore, that after the demise of the Society, its holdings were incorporated into the Library of Information, the Archives and the Museum of the Board. The interviews with Jewish pioneers, which formed a vital, separate part of the archival collections, were catalogued, but, with a few exceptions, never published. This biographical section was augmented through the succeeding years by appropriate press cuttings of interviews and obituaries and also by family memoirs donated by descendants of the original pioneers. Many commemorative volumes, such as those issued on the fiftieth and seventieth anniversary of Johannesburg, contain valuable biographies of the founders of the city, which form a valuable source of additional information. The most original and valuable section, however, continues to be the interviews carried out by the SAJSHS, and progress is being made towards ensuring their eventual publication under the auspices of the SAJBD.<sup>10</sup>

### NOTES

- 1 South African Jewish Board of Deputies. Executive Council Minutes February 1947.
- 2 This article was reprinted in *Jewish Affairs* June 1948, pp28-31.
- 3 *Jewish Affairs*, 11 November 1956, pp 4-9, and *Jewish Affairs*, 11 December 1956, pp23-29.
- 4 The complete letters of Meyer Dovid Hersch together with other biographical information were incorporated into a monograph entitled 'Meyer Dovid Hersch (1888-1933), Rand Pioneer and Historian of Jewish Life in Early Johannesburg' edited and published by Joshua I. Levy, 2005.
- 5 *Jewish Affairs* 9(4) 1954: 18-22 and 9(5), 1954: 20-24.
- 6 *Jewish Affairs* Sept 1953.
- 7 *Jewish Affairs* October 1953, pp 23-4.
- 8 *Jewish Affairs* Feb 1954, pp32-4.
- 9 *Jewish Affairs*, Nov 1954, pp29-30.
- 10 The following is a list of the pioneers interviewed by the Society: Moses Aaron, Fritz Baumann Adler, Alexander family, Frederick Henry Ansell, Mrs Simma Asher (formerly Binion, nee Hertz), Samuel Baranov, Charles Baneshik, Herbert Baumann, Barnett Capcan, Zvi Harris Capcan, Abner Cohen, Edward Cohen, Samuel Epstein, Sidney Samuel Fisch, Augusta Fisch (nee Rothbert), Maurice Freeman, Fanny Esther Goldblatt, Paul Goodman, Benjamin Grolman, I.H. Guinsberg, David Hayden, Israel, Hayman, Benzion Hersch, Hannan Hirsch, Isadore, Heymann, Aaron (Harry) Hilson, Lewis Philip Hirsch, Felix C Hollander, A Z Idelson, Harry Itzkowitz, B.I Joffe, Salli Kahn, Israel Kuper, Moses Mayer Landsman, Sophie Leviser, Rose Levison (nee Shepherd), Jacob Leviton, Harry Levy, Louis Flavian Lezard, Herman Lichtenstein, Harry Lipinski, Harry Lourie, Ernest Lowenherz, Joubert Marks, Jane Mendelsohn, A L Meyer, Wolf Miller, Isaac Mofson, Hyman Morris, Henry Harris Morris, Effie Nathanson (nee Joffe), Jacob Morris Polevnick, Clara Raphaely (later Schuler), Sara Rosenthal (nee Green), Myer Rubin, Toni Saphra (nee Plaut), Aaron Sarenkin, Schlosberg family, Maurice Schwartz, Sam Silverman, Wolf Sulsky, Philip Wartski, Max Weinbrenn, Jacob Werner, Leo Yatt, Harry Mortimer Zeffertt.





## FROM THE BALTIC TO THE CAPE: THE JOURNEY OF THREE FAMILIES

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Sorrel Kerbel

Readers of Ivan Kapelus' first publication, *Reflections on a Visit to Lithuania*, 2009, (revised 2013) will remember the moving account of his 'roots' journey to present day Lithuania; the book conveys his sense of shock, more than seventy years after the Nazi invasion of the Baltic States, over the systematic massacre of some 200 000 Jews in the years 1941-1944. Nearly 96% of the total Lithuanian Jewish population was obliterated, a figure higher than in any other state in Europe; the killers, for the most part, were Lithuanians and not Germans.

Fortunately, Kapelus' ancestors were able to escape the tumultuous history of the Bolshevik revolution, two world wars and its Soviet aftermath by leaving Lithuania in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to settle in South Africa. *From the Baltic to the Cape: The Journey of Three Families* is a model account of his family's history, one so typical of those who courageously left the closed, struggling society blighted by antisemitism for a new home in the fairest Cape. In a short time, they and their children were acculturated within the new society, going on to make significant and, as Kapelus points out, numerically disproportionate contributions in many spheres of South African life.

Kapelus tells the story of these immigrant lives, unveiling some intriguing secrets along the way. These are fine portraits of some South African Jewish pioneers, men and women, their children and children's children. We see their resolute struggle from humble beginnings to occasional splendour; they come to represent the source and spirit of South African Litvak vitality and communal generosity, as demonstrated by

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*Dr Sorrel Kerbel is editor of The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Jewish Writers of the Twentieth Century, 2003 and 2010. Born and educated in South Africa, she now lives in London, where she is an independent researcher/reviewer and gives classes at the Hendon Holocaust Survivor Centre and at Selig Court, Golders Green.*

those denied basic freedoms in Lithuania, but who for the most part adapted and thrived in their new land.

*From the Baltic to the Cape* focuses on the journey of three families – the Kapelus family from Plunge (Plungyan), the Dorfman of Skuodas (Shkud) and the Hotz and Abramson families of Sauliai (Shavl) and Panevezys (Ponevezh) – to Ceres, Van Rhynsdorp and Calvinia in the hinterland of the Cape. Readers are given a feel of life in these remote parts of South Africa, where Jew and Afrikaner were intimately interlinked. In Ceres, for example, where Raphael Kirsch (a Kapelus cousin) returns after a disastrous trip to the goldfields, his response is, "This is a beautiful place! Here anyone could live forever." He becomes a typical young 'smous', a peddler with a horse and cart, seizing opportunities to sell goods to and buy produce from the farming communities in the Bokkeveld. Later, he emerges as a farmer of note, encouraging his family from Plungyan to join him. This story and others like it are full of consoling warmth and optimism, allowing the new immigrants to forget the bitter poverty and hardship endured in the old country, and to prosper in the new. Kapelus' prose speaks directly to the general reader, and is searching, frank and perceptive, though it largely ignores the dark shadows of Apartheid and the fact that Jews were allowed opportunities that were denied to people of colour around them. I enjoyed his family stories and memories that tap as well into the shared repertoire of my own family experiences. My father, yet another Plungyaner, came with his father, Rabbi E M Stein, to Worcester, *di zelbika medina!*

The book explores the extraordinary role and records kept by the Union and Castle shipping lines, The Hamburg-American Shipping Company and the Shelter for Poor Jews in London's East End. Descriptions of the voyage/journey itself summarise much larger accounts, which the general reader will find easy and interesting to access.

Personal family stories are set against the backdrop of a history that reaches deep into the past, to the earliest Jewish immigration during the period of the Dutch settlers, to the British occupation, and the impact of the diamond and gold rushes. The book probes into influences and moral issues for three generations of Jews, describes the growing antisemitism of the *Ossewa Brandwag* and Greyshirt movements, and the decline of the rural communities as many young people moved to the cities or abroad to countries not blighted by Apartheid.

The book is liberally adorned with fascinating

family photographs of people and places, and has many helpful maps, indices and lists. A model of well-documented historical research, it will prove useful to budding genealogists, providing them with access to a wide range of source material and giving them a better understanding of some of the dilemmas and predicaments of East European Jewish immigrants to South Africa.

*From the Baltic to the Cape: The Journey of Three Families* by Ivan Kapelus; Kadimah Print, South Africa, 2013 (all royalties and proceeds have been gifted to the Jacob Gitlin Library, Cape Town).

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## THE PINSKER ORPHANS

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Veronica Belling

Between 2006 and 2011 David Solly Sandler dedicated himself to compiling three books which together encompass the stories of some 350 individuals who, for a variety of reasons, were placed in the care of Arcadia, the South African Jewish Orphanage in Johannesburg, or Oranjia, the Cape Jewish Orphanage. Sandler's quite remarkable achievement testifies to his persistence, patience and detective work in tracking down, making contact and persuading his subjects to submit their stories (no easy task). His inspiration is clear. A former Johannesburg resident since 1981 in Perth, Australia, Sandler spent seventeen years of his childhood (1954-1969) in Arcadia, where he was thrown together with a multitude of 'siblings', each with their own difficult family stories.

First in the series, featuring the memoirs of just over 120 children, was *100 Years of Arc Memories* (2006). This was followed by *More Arc Memories* (2008), which added another 100 stories. In the course of this work, Sandler became aware of the dramatic stories of the orphans, victims of the pogroms in the Ukraine during the Russian Civil War, who were rescued and brought to South Africa by the businessman and philanthropist, Isaac Ochberg (1879-1937) and who found a home at Arcadia or Oranjia. This resulted in a third collection, *The Ochberg Orphans* (2011), featuring the memoirs of 130 of the approximately 181 individuals brought out by Ochberg.

Sandler's aim is not so much to interpret as to collect and to compile. The result can be characterised as *an archival anthology of primary and secondary sources*. His methodology is to compile the memories, both first-hand from the individuals themselves or, for those who have already passed on, from their families. However,

not only are personal memories included, but all manner of material, such as lists of names, entries in registers or forms (both in Yiddish and English), photographs, personal letters, newspaper cuttings, articles from books or journals relating to the individuals, the historical circumstances of the pogroms and organisations that provided relief work. There is also a description of a parallel venture undertaken by the Canadian Jewish community.

Why, then, the need for a fourth volume to an already exhaustive series? Isaac Ochberg was only given permission by the South African government to bring a limited number of orphans back to South Africa, about 200. As a result he was forced to choose among literally hundreds of orphans that he encountered on his travels through the devastated villages and in the three orphanages that were set up for their care and maintenance in Pinsk. This was a heart breaking task. Certain criteria were defined such as: their being full orphans, their age, their mental and physical health, that siblings not be split up, etc.

This new addition, *The Pinsker Orphans* (2013) is dedicated to the orphans who didn't make it – those who remained behind. As such, it contains a series of 110 letters in Hebrew and Yiddish – as well as in English translation – from numbers of orphans that were sent to Alter Bobrow, a beloved teacher in one of the orphanages, who left to accompany the orphans to South Africa. The letters, written in 1921, are distinguished not only by their poignancy, but for the standard of the Hebrew, not to mention the often impeccable calligraphy of the young students. It demonstrates the efficacy of the Hebrew education afforded to the Jews in Eastern Europe long before the establishment of Israel. The letters were preserved by Bobrow's daughter,

Liebe Klug, who has also contributed a personal memoir about her father containing descriptions of conditions in the three orphanages. In addition, Sandler has added a section on the work of the Pinsker Orphans Relief Fund in London, together with the stories of 14 pogrom orphans who found a home in England.

This series is a valuable contribution to South African Jewish history, migration and genealogy as well as to the history of Eastern European Jewry. It is also a rich resource for historians

of institutional childcare, a subject that is rarely that well documented owing to its very personal and private nature.

*The Pinsker Orphans: the Life and Times of the Children from the Three Pinsk Jewish Orphanages in the 1920s* by David Solly Sandler. United States: The Author, 2013. To order, see the website: [www.CreateSpace.com/4232204](http://www.CreateSpace.com/4232204); for: *Arc Memories, More Arc Memories & The Ochberg Orphans*, see [www.arcadia.ca.com.au](http://www.arcadia.ca.com.au).

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## THE GRAND SCAM - HOW BARRY TANNENBAUM CONNED SOUTH AFRICA'S BUSINESS ELITE

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Ralph Zulman

How did “an innocuous former advertising salesman in his early forties, described as a ‘great human being’, manage to dupe South Africa’s most financially savvy out of so much money?” In *The Grand Scam*, Rob Rose seeks to provide the answer to this question he poses in the preface. A multi-award investigative journalist (including having been named as South African financial and legal journalist of the year), Rose is business editor at the *Sunday Times*.

The opening chapter (‘White knuckles’) describes a meeting in June 2009 attended by a group of almost exclusively white men, about half of whom were older than sixty. The meeting was presided over by a lawyer named Dean Rees (who features prominently in the ensuing narrative). It was revealed by Rees, who read from a letter that as at the date of the letter no monies were due and payable to Frankel Chemicals by Aspen Pharmacare. Frankel Chemicals was the cornerstone of the “investments” made by investors. Rees told the audience that he had gone to Frankel Chemicals, where someone called Arlene Tannenbaum extracted the company’s accounts. These showed debts of only R2 million to investors whereas investments in the company from people in the room should show that the company had taken more than R3.7 billion from them. Rees then said: “It looks like we have all been caught in a gigantic Ponzi scheme.”

The angrier elements in the audience did not speak up but remained silent, “instead stewing on thoughts of culpability and vengeance. For them the perpetrator was no longer ‘Barry’ the affable Santa Clause, ‘incapable of hurting a fly’, as someone later described him. Instead they could only spit out his surname: Tannenbaum”. Among Barry’s victims was Norman Lowenthal, a seventy year-old stock broker, businessman and company director who for three years had

chaired the Johannesburg Stock Exchange; a former CEO of Pick & Pay, Sean Summers (who invested R19 million) and Jeremy Ord, chairman of South Africa’s largest home-grown technology company. Barry had offered to some investors a return of 219% per annum. Like America’s Bernie Madoff, he was seen as “a pillar of the Jewish community and wealthy Jewish investors were the core market of the scheme”.

Chapter 2 (‘Krugersdorp Royalty’) describes how the story of Barry Tannenbaum, Adcock Ingram and Frankel Chemicals “starts in Krugersdorp towards the end of the nineteenth century.” How the Tannenbaums of Lithuania ended up in this “dusty mining town” on the other side of the world is one of thousands of untold Jewish immigration stories. In September 1970, the Tannenbaums were very much South Africa’s pharmaceutical industry. In 1950, Adcock Ingram was listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, becoming the first pharmaceutical company to sell shares to the South African public.

In Chapter 3 (‘Big shoes, small steps’), Barry is described as “a scion of what passed for royalty in Krugersdorp. Barry Tannenbaum was used to things coming easy as a child.” One of his schoolmates at King David, Linksfield, said that he “had the air of an entitled rich kid right from the start.” David Shapiro of Sasfin Securities refers to the ‘pedigree’ of the Tannenbaum family.

Chapter 4 (‘This time, they came for the Jews’) refers to other Ponzi Schemes (Miracle 200, Krion and Kubus). What the Tannenbaum case has in common with them is that “con artists placed themselves in the centre of communities that they blithely stole from - the irony was that Tannenbaum was devoutly Jewish - and it was a body blow to the community that he had spent years engaging with at synagogues, cultivating their credibility and friendship.”



Barry was brought up in a devoutly Jewish household so much so when his cell phone was being assaulted with text messages asking “where’s my money” he continued to donate to Jewish causes and institutions. Reports said that he been a platinum member of the Chevrah Kadishah. Barry officially donated a Sefer Torah to the Umhlanga Chabad congregation. Mervyn Serebro, a devout Jew and a former CEO of OK Bazaars, was influenced by the Adcock Ingram story, which provided good reason to invest with Barry.

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, the richest Tannenbaum investors such as Jawmend Rossi, Jeremy Ord and Arnold Sharp came out fine. Some even made a profit. Once in Australia, Barry continued lead a devout existence, sending his children to a Jewish school and joining an orthodox synagogue in St. Ives close to where he then lived.

The title of Chapter 5 (‘The Dry Run’) refers to a scheme about furniture. It was not pursued. The name of another lawyer – Darryl Leigh is revealed. He is described as Barry’s “bagman”. In Chapter 6 (‘The scheme takes off’) it is stressed that Barry’s pharmaceutical scheme was not always a scam. It started off as legitimate using a legitimate company - Frankel Chemicals, but progressed from there to a full-blown Ponzi scheme. Barry not only pillaged the rich but also the poor. Sherry (not her real name) was one such person; she lost everything by investing in the scheme.

Chapter 7 (‘Welcome, Dean Rees’) explores the role of this lawyer in the scheme. He became a mega-millionaire, who was effectively exiled to Switzerland.

In Chapter 8 (“Agents” of destruction), we learn that according to the criminal investigators, Barry had eight agents, besides Rees (347 investors) and Leigh (229). Friends and relatives were being conned all over the place and “close relationships would splinter when the true nature of the scam emerged.”

Chapter 9 (‘Going International’) recounts the setting up of Concordia, a global API. The prospectus listed Merrill Lynch as the banker and PricewaterhouseCoopers as the auditors with the fund manager and Continuity Multi-Fund Management in the British Virgin Isles. In Chapter 10 (‘Fault lines’), we find that purchase orders were forgeries, with Aspen’s head of legal affairs stating that Aspen did not order any of the chemicals as claimed by Barry. Chapter 11 (‘Snap!’) sees Barry telling an investor that there would be a big article in the newspaper but that she should not worry too much. He explains that South African investors will be paid from overseas profits. This never happened. On 13 June 2009, the news of Barry’s scam made it to Australia. While publically protesting his innocence, there was “a sideshow taking place behind closed doors that immediately exposed him as a liar.”

It now emerges (Chapter 12 - ‘Admissions’) that certain documents, including invoices, bills of lading and emails, were altered or fabricated according to Barry. While outwardly pledging to investors that they would be paid and that he would make things right and find those responsible, he had been secretly also going out of his way to recover what he could for himself, and “spilling the beans to lawyers”.

In Chapter 13 (‘Hiding in plain sight’) Meir Levin, one of the large investors, sensationally claims that he was owed \$825 million by Barry. When all “went belly up, he was distraught”; the incident completely destroyed him. Chapter 14 (‘The banks that greased the wheels’) features an illuminating table showing the scale of the cash flows through the banks. If the banks had done their job, the scam would probably not have worked.

As the author graphically puts it in Chapter 15 (‘Crime and punishment 1: Liquidators and tax collectors’), “As soon as the Tannenbaum bubble burst, the sleazy undertakers of corporate South Africa slithered out of their holes”. These were the liquidators who followed on the litigators. Four years after the bubble burst the law-enforcement authorities were “still tripping over their own tail, talking tough about extraditing Tannenbaum and Rees, and issuing warrants of arrest that have yet to be served on anyone”. When the trustees were first appointed, they spoke about getting the Ponzi money back from the investors, but first needed to “get a handle” on where the money was, and who got what. Alec Brooks, “a veteran of companies gone bust”, was given the task. The Tannenbaum liquidation inquiry ran for months without yielding anything of consequence.

‘Crime and Punishment 2: All the president’s, men and the prosecutor who didn’t know when to quit’ is the arresting title of Chapter 16. The prosecutor was Glynis Breytenbach. She made the following offer to Barry’s Australian lawyer: “Your client can come back now voluntarily and we’ll offer him a nice jail cell. Or he can fight us, and we’ll put him in a cell with forty angry Zulus.”

Needless to say the offer was refused. In late 2013, more than four years after the scheme was exposed, even the preliminary steps for extradition have not been taken.

With the National Prosecuting authority at war with itself and SARS looking at the estate for back taxes, Barry, Rees and Leigh “are quietly going about their business as if nothing happened.” To date, none of them have been apprehended or charged.

In Chapter 17 (‘The forgotten men’) Derek Ziman, Barry’s Australian lawyer, describes his client as “not very bright”. He was, however, bright enough to put all the properties that he owned into his wife, Debbie’s, name. Barry fled from his mansion in St. Ives, North Sydney, to an ironically named place on Australia’s Gold Coast - Runaway Bay. In October 2013, Alec

Brooks announced that despite all efforts they were unable able to trace any assets belonging to him.

Barry and his wife set about reconstructing what they could of their life, “ostensibly without much cash and even less of a plan”. An Australian Federal Court Judge in a judgment in August 2012 said, “There is no doubt that on the evidence substantial funds sourced from South Africa were transferred to Australian entities controlled by him [Barry] and his wife [Debbie].” Barry was a director of 19 companies linked to Australia. He has been living in Australia on a permanent-residence visa. To do this, he needed to obtain a South African Police clearance letter. How he obtained such a letter is strange, to say the least.

The concluding chapter (‘Flushed Out’) recounts how in mid-2012, Barry’s trustees were amazingly able to get him into a witness box to testify about what had happened. The only way they were eventually able to more or less pin him down was to get him to concede that in the years 2004-2009 he had been involved in heavy

gambling. The evidence showed that Barry had gambled away R62 million of investors’ money, although he later got some of it back.

Leigh made R114 million from the scheme and Rees is said to have made anything from R70 million to R600 million. Rossi “cashed in” R140 million. Barry never made this sort of cash. The most plausible theory is that he used investors’ funds to fuel his gambling and ended up short.

To quote Ziman again, “The easiest way to lose money is to give it away. Look at people who win the lottery and end up penniless again. Not because they gambled it away, but because they gave it away. That was Barry”.

Well written and researched as well as appropriately documented, *The Grand Scam* tells a fascinating true story of greed-driven *ganavis* on a grand scale.

*The Grand Scam - How Barry Tannenbaum Conned South Africa’s Business Elite* by Rob Rose, Zebra Press - An Imprint Of Random House Struik, 2013, 272pp. Footnotes, index.



### Di farlorene

Di farlorene:  
a liste fun numern, dates, ortn,  
keyn nemen nit,  
gezemlekh nit-menshn,  
gezemlekh nit-blumen,  
hoyfens ash.

Kovno iz itst Kaunas,  
Yaneshok iz itst Joniskis,  
Kupeshik Kopiskis,  
Kurshan Kurshenai.  
Rakishok iz Rokiskis,  
keyner zaynen nit geblibn aroyszogen  
di idishe nemen.

Keyner zaynen nit gebliben aroysreden  
zeyer nemen;  
akhutz mir,  
di fragmentn.

*[The lost: a list of numbers, dates, places,/no names;/ clumps of not-people;/clumps of not-flowers;/ clumps of ash.*

*Kovno is now only Kauen,/Yaneshok now only Joniskis,/*

*Kupershik Kopishok,/Kurshan Kurshenai/ Rakishok is Rokiskis/*

*None left to pronounce/the Yiddish names.*

*None left to pronounce/their names;/only we,/the fragments].*

*Hazel Frankel*