

SA-SIG

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<http://www.jewishgen.org/SAfrica/>

Southern African Jewish Genealogy Special Interest Group Newsletter

Vol. 11, Issue 2

April 2011

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

A large envelope arrived in my box the other day. It's the 2011 UK census questionnaire. H1 form, shades of purple, lots of barcodes, etc.

In the UK it comes every decade and is secret for 100 years. In South Africa and in Australia they at least destroy the forms after getting the data. It is used to help plan and fund services such as education and transport for your community. One can request the questionnaire in about 60 languages, including Yiddish but not Hebrew (although Arabic is naturally there). It must be filled in in English.

From a genealogical perspective it does not ask for anything other than the main ethnic group, with choices from White, Mixed/multiple ethnic groups (e.g. White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, White and Asian, etc.) Then, Asian/Asian British, and Black/African/Caribbean/Black British.

Now the next one got me flummoxed: Other ethnic group, which includes Arab or anything else not mentioned above! Remember this is the United Kingdom!

So, now in a mood that would make Verwoerd happy I wrote in "Jewish".

My humble opinion is that censuses (or is it censi?) were much better in the past. There must be a huge group of people working on this rubbish.

Saul Issroff

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

The purpose and goal of the Southern Africa Special Interest Group (SA-SIG) is to bring together Jewish genealogy researchers with a common interest in Southern Africa and to provide a forum for a free exchange of ideas, research tips and information of interest to those researching Jewish family history in the communities of South Africa, Lesotho (Basutoland), Botswana (Bechuanaland), Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia), Zambia (Northern Rhodesia), Swaziland, Mozambique, Kenya, and the former Belgian Congo.

The SIG has been producing a quarterly Newsletter since 2000 in which is included articles on personalities in the Southern African Jewish community, religious congregations, communities – past and present and general news about the lives our Southern African families led.

Further information on how to subscribe to the Newsletter can be found at:

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

If you would like to contribute articles to the Newsletter, accounts should include descriptions of families of the community, aspects of local Jewish life, its institutions and particular character. Jewish involvement in the community at large, its history, business life and development could be featured as well.

Articles for inclusion in the Newsletter should be sent to Colin Plen, Editor, at colplen@iafrica.com

General enquiries about the Newsletter can be sent either to Colin or to Mike Getz at MikeGetz005@comcast.net

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

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EDITORIAL

From a rainless, extremely hot Cape Town, to many of you who have suffered a winter of extreme cold (even Atlanta scored a new low record with about a foot of snow!) – greetings! This will be the last summer for us in Cape Town, as my wife and I are relocating to Durban to be closer to two of our children, six of our grandchildren, and my wife's mother.

Much of this Newsletter edition is involved with books: old books, new books, and eBooks.

I found a book in my own library on Germiston which was my birthplace and my hometown for

many years. I have summarized it as if it is a book being reviewed. For those who ask: where is Germiston? It is a city near Johannesburg, and it has suffered from being so close to Johannesburg that nobody ever knew it was there.

Some years ago Theo Richmond wrote a book called *Konin*. It has nothing to do with South Africa but is all about how genealogists treat sources. It is a worthwhile book and I have tried to show it as such.

The Hammers was never officially published, but is a story of how a group of young South African men helped to put Israel on the map in the War of Independence of 1948. Today those boys are in their 80's and I was just lucky enough to read their stories.

The burial information for Durban's cemeteries are now on-line so you can easily look up your KwaZulu Natal ancestors – unless they were buried by the Reform *Shul*! The site will not include Jews buried in Redhill by the Reform Congregation, but Stan Hart has put together a well organized web site.

Sylvia Rafael was a South African who made *Aliyah* and was conscripted by the *Mossad*. We have found this exciting story and it is very worth reading.

Maitland Cemetery in Cape Town is deteriorating sadly and now the Cemetery Maintenance Council is sending a repair gang in weekly to reinstate it.

Some Moms give names to their children in the high hopes that they will live up to them. A lighthearted piece on a somber subject.

I found a different way of looking at Jewish surnames' origins through the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, so I have paraphrased their article. It makes one think a bit about what one's name means. Or rather, what it meant originally.

Lily Poritz Miller is another South African born lady who has become successful, this time in journalism in the USA.

Bishopscourt Village is an affluent section of Cape Town, but why should Jews show any interest in it? Read the article!

From Lithuania to Belarus by Benny Kaplinski is a heartbreaking story of his cousin who was beaten and left for dead but survived the holocaust.

Colin Plen

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LOOKING BACK: THE BEAUTIFUL MOSSAD AGENT

Yaniv Akiva

This article was originally published by Torah MiTzion and is re-published here with permission. The author, Yaniv Akiva, is a former Shaliach from Montreal.

One of the most colorful chapters in the Mossad's history belongs to Sylvia Rafael.

Born in the town of Graaff-Reinet, South Africa, in April 1937, Rafael was the daughter of a Jewish father and a Christian mother and was raised as a Christian. However, although she never converted, she considered herself to be a Jew. A Zionist, she made *aliyah* in 1963, and initially settled in Kibbutz Gan Shmuel, where she learned Hebrew in *ulpan* and worked as a substitute English teacher.

Later, she moved to Tel Aviv, where she was discovered by Mossad recruiter Motti Kfir. After undergoing training for over a year, she was given a desk job, but eventually, her skills and talents enabled her to qualify as a "combatant" (i.e. a top-ranked operative who was eligible to operate in hostile countries). Rafael was dispatched to Canada, where she assumed her new identity: a famous anti-Israel and anti-Semitic photojournalist named Patricia Roxburgh. She remained in Canada for about a year and then began operating out of Paris. Her missions took her all over Europe and the Middle East.

Following the massacre of the Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972, Prime Minister Golda Meir decided to eliminate all those responsible for the atrocity and ordered the Mossad to launch "Operation Wrath of God".

On June 21, 1973, Mossad operatives believed that they had identified PLO terrorist Hassan Salameh in

Lillehammer, Norway, and shot him dead in front of his pregnant wife. Or so they thought. However, they subsequently learned that a mistake had been made, and the victim was actually a Moroccan waiter named Ahmed Bouchiki. In the wake of the botched assassination attempt, Norwegian police arrested six of the agents who had participated in the operation.

Dan Arbel, the leader of the detainees, revealed the location of the safe house where Sylvia Rafael and her partner Avraham Gehmer were hiding, and the two were soon arrested as well. Rafael confessed that she had helped the Mossad pursue many terrorists.

In January 1974, she made her first appearance in an Oslo courtroom and became an overnight media sensation. Referred to in the press as “the beautiful Mossad agent,” she was represented by Annaeus Schjodt – a well-known defense attorney who had been hired by the Israeli government. During the course of the proceedings, the two fell in love, and several months after the trial, Schjodt left his wife for Sylvia, who had been sentenced to five and a half years in prison.

Rafael’s arrest prompted many of the world’s intelligence agencies to launch their own investigations into her actions. For instance, French authorities discovered a safe house used by Rafael when Dr. Mahmoud Hamshari, the PLO’s representative in France, was assassinated on October 8, 1972. Furthermore, Italian intelligence agents began investigating Rafael’s role in the assassination of Abdel Zwaiter on October 16, 1972. Both the Italians and the French interrogated Rafael in Norway but were unable to uncover any incriminating evidence.

In addition, some reports allege that Rafael was involved in the planned mission to assassinate Yasser Arafat in Beirut, but the attack was later called off. She was also linked to *Mivtza Aviv Ne’urim* (“Operation Spring of Youth”), and was apparently based in Egypt both before and during the Six Day War.

Norway’s prison authorities granted her deluxe accommodations. She had a two-room cell and was allowed to meet with her husband/attorney in one of them. However, she did not complete her sentence. The Israeli government exerted heavy pressure, and

as a result, Norway released her, due to health concerns, and deported her to Israel in May 1975.

Initially, Rafael was not allowed to return to Norway, and her husband was required to fly out to Israel on the weekends to see her.

However, in 1976, she was finally permitted to rejoin her husband in Norway, where she quickly became a local celebrity. In 1986, the couple was forced to leave their Oslo apartment and move to an undisclosed location under police surveillance for several weeks.

Credible intelligence had suggested that Yasser Arafat was behind a terrorist cell which planned on attacking the former Mossad agent.

Rafael and her husband stayed in Norway for thirteen years and then returned to her native South Africa, where she died of leukemia in February 2005.

On February 9, 2005, Sylvia Rafael was buried in Kibbutz Ramat HaKovesh, and in a rare move, representatives of the Mossad eulogized her in public.

Torah MiTzion establishes Religious Zionist Kollels (centers of Jewish learning and outreach) in Diaspora Jewish communities to strengthen the study of Torah, Jewish identity, the unity of the Jewish people, and the connection between Torah study and Israel. Their web site can be found at:

<http://www.torahmitzion.org/eng/>

FROM LITHUANIA TO BELARUS: A JOURNEY TO THE PAST

Benny Kaplinski

It is difficult to describe one’s feelings when standing on top of the burial pit containing the remains of one’s own grandparents and thousands of other innocent Jewish men, women, and children so ruthlessly murdered during the Holocaust.

This was the scene which confronted me recently while on a ten day trip to Lithuania and Belarus for the filming of a BBC television documentary on the family history of my cousin, Natasha Kaplinski,

who is a prominent BBC television news presenter in London.

My visit started in Vilnius which was the birthplace of my late mother, Sima, and her parents who were both talented and well known musicians, my grandmother, Feign Krewer, a professor of piano at the Vilna Jewish Academy, my grandfather, Salomon Rothenstern, a notable violinist in the local symphony orchestra.

Walking through the streets where they lived and worked was almost a surreal experience. I could almost hear faint strains of Chopin coming from the apartment block in which they once lived, such a closely knit, happy, talented family.

There is so little left in Vilnius of what was once such a rich and flourishing Jewish culture in the tradition of the great Rabbi Vilna Gaon, of whom some would say was the greatest Jewish thinker of all time. Gone are the great *yeshivot*, the myriad of Jewish theatres, schools and synagogues (only one survives) and the strong Jewish intelligentsia of writers, poets, actors, painters and musicians. It is little wonder that Vilna in its heyday before the Holocaust was referred to as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania.” It is heartbreaking when one sees faded signs in Yiddish of what was once a confectionery shop here or a tailor there, which today’s visitor would easily miss were it not for the trained eye of one’s guide.

Not far from Stepano Street where my grandparents lived, are the entrance and buildings of the Vilna Ghetto which today look bizarrely quaint, not unlike some of the houses and buildings of Paddington or The Rocks. Who could believe today, passing through these neat looking buildings, that this was once the scene where less than seventy years ago these same buildings were part of prison neighbourhoods housing their emaciated, systematically decimated residents? Signs in Yiddish atop some of the buildings remind one of the numbers of Jewish men, women, and children who were once incarcerated here under horrific conditions of starvation and terrible suffering before being callously exterminated.

A lonely fifteen minute train journey from the central train station of Vilnius takes one to the entrance of the Paneria Forests, the grim scene to where some 70,000 or more men, women, and children, including my beloved grandparents, were

forced to make their final journey. I could not help thinking while on that train of those who made the same journey in 1942.

What thoughts would have been running through the heads of these unfortunate victims, many so very young, before being forced to undress and stand in front of deep, circular pits, then mercilessly cut down by machine gun fire? Many of the children were simply bashed to death here in order to save on bullets.

As I stood on top of one of these pits, I could not help thinking of the grandparents I had never met and the envy I felt as a child for all my friends who seemed to be so spoiled by their Bobbes and *Zeides* while I never had any to boast of. Indeed, my late mother was not even able to salvage a single photo of her father, so I was even robbed of the opportunity to see what he looked like and whether I resemble him in any way. Life can be so terribly cruel and unfair.

What was so baffling to understand about this scene was the seemingly peaceful atmosphere with its chirping birds and serene beauty of the trees with its fresh scents, so hauntingly deceptive when one thinks of the horror that happened in such a tranquil setting.

The next leg of my journey took me to Minsk, Belarus, and the long awaited meeting with my cousin, Natasha, whose grandfather and my father were brothers. I had last seen Natasha as a child in Cape Town some three decades ago. Together, we were about to embark on a traumatic journey of self-discovery through the *shtetls* of Belarus where our ancestors lived, most of whom were so ruthlessly murdered. We would discover previously unknown aspects of our past which were kept secret by our families in order to protect us from the terrible trauma of the graphic details we uncovered, which moved us both to tears and, which in some instances, left us with more questions than answers.

Starting in Slonim, the village where our paternal ancestors lived, we followed in the footsteps of my grandparents who owned a prosperous rope and fishing net factory in the town which was situated in a warehouse above which was the apartment in which they lived together with their eight children including my father Izak.

My father, being the youngest in the family, was chosen to study medicine at the Sorbonne University in Paris in the late 1920's returning to Slonim in 1936. Of the entire family, he was the only Holocaust survivor, four of his siblings wisely choosing to immigrate to South Africa (including Natasha's grandfather) and South America before the war. His parents and other three siblings, we discovered from local researchers for the BBC programme, suffered the most horrific of fates. In a series of three pogroms carried out by the Nazis together with local collaborators, hordes of attackers stormed into Jewish homes, dragging residents from their rooms into the streets below where they were variously bashed, clubbed, shot or stabbed to death. Those who attempted to escape this initial onslaught by running down to the nearby river, were mercilessly pursued, cornered as if part of some perverse sport, before being murdered and thrown into the river until the water ran red with their blood. My grandparents and two of their children were, according to our researchers, forced into one of the wooden synagogues which was barricaded from the outside and then set alight. My father at this stage had been working as a doctor near the town of Baranowich, some 60 kilometres away miraculously escaping this most terrible of fates.

We discovered in the local archive that my Uncle Abraham, after whom I was named, an optician also working in Baranowich, had been taken to the nearby ghetto together with his wife and two infant children from whom he was later separated. Upon hearing that his wife and children were later transported to Auschwitz, he then committed suicide at the age of 36.

A family photograph discovered in the local archive, which we had never before seen, showing him, his wife and elder child in happier days, brought us all to tears.

While in Slonim, we visited its last remaining synagogue, once a great and beautifully ornate building with now very faded exquisite Chagall like painted murals very Kabalistic in nature, now virtually derelict strewn with garbage and anti-Semitic graffiti on its outside walls. We had to wear hard hats to gain entry to the very fragile *bimah* area in the centre situated between four magnificent Corinthian looking columns. What a spectacle this must have once been when the Slonim community was at its peak. As I stood in this area and intoned

the *Hazkara* and *Kaddish*, I realized that this was the first time since the Holocaust that there has been a cantorial rendition here.

The next day was to be the most harrowing as we journeyed to the town of Iwje. In this seemingly quiet and sleepy village with its old thatched roof houses and a rather Gothic looking church, we made our way to the town square, a very long but narrow grassed area nestling beneath rows of beautiful trees. It is so hard to imagine that this was the scene some 64 years ago where the 3,000 Jews of the Iwje Ghetto, men, women and children, were forced to assemble in their best clothes but with no bags. Told that they were to be "resettled", the women came wearing layers of their best dresses, the men in hats, suits and ties, the children in sparkling clean clothes. Included in this group were my beloved parents, Izak and Sima. Surrounded by machine guns, they were first told to hand over any jewellery or other valuables. Some were shot on the spot. The others were told to start walking in groups to the first street intersection a short distance away.

We followed the road to the first fork where many of the women, children and the elderly were told to turn right, the rest to turn left. My parents by an oversight were initially told to take the right turn which led to an entrance into the forest area about half a kilometer up the road. At virtually the last moment following frantic screaming by my mother, for which she was mercilessly whipped, that my father was a doctor, doctors being spared by the Nazis to treat their own soldiers, that the commanding officers realized their mistake confirmed by the Nazi collaborator mayor of the town who recognized my father as having worked in nearby Baranowich as a doctor. Told to turn back and to take the left fork in the road instead of the right, they were spared the horrific fate of undressing, packing their clothes into neat bundles, then being forced to stand in front of two long and very deep parallel pits where they were subsequently shot. Those approaching this area from the road knew of their impending fate hearing the continuous bursts of machine gun fire, then seeing the bloodstained clothes which were later sold to the locals or traded for bottles of vodka.

Our guide related the story of a young boy, no more than 8 or 9 years old, who upon becoming totally hysterical on his way to the pits, jumped onto a Nazi

officer biting him on the neck before the boy was able to be restrained, then shot like a mad dog.

The eerie silence of this area now belies what must have been such indescribable chaos and horror those few short decades ago. In front of the pits now stands a solitary memorial with an inscription in Hebrew and Yiddish reading, "Here lie Iwje's finest Jews amongst whom were rabbis, cantors, small children ... and the world remained silent."

Many of the painful details of what happened here came from testimony given by my late father who was called as a witness in 1965 to give evidence in Mainz, Germany, at the trial of the two commanding officers responsible for this terrible massacre. This document of evidence, never before seen by me, was uncovered in German archives by BBC researchers. It was impossible to maintain my composure as the details were read out in front of the cameras in the town square where that life and death selection was made.

Yet, in the midst of such pain and anguish, came the final moment in our journey that left us feeling inspired and uplifted as we then tracked the trail in the nearby forests to where my parents managed to escape a certain death in the ghetto when they scaled the walls and eventually joined up with the Bielski Brothers Partisans Resistance Unit, a legendary detachment which hid out in what must have been an oasis in the forests from the destruction of their families in the *shtetls* of Belarus. With great determination and personal courage in the face of great adversity, these partisans lived in the open for almost three years creating battle and sabotage groups and surviving precariously with danger at all times of being caught in addition to braving freezing winters and hunger.

As we entered the small, cleverly camouflaged wooden dug-outs in the forest, which are miraculously still standing intact and which was home for these people on the run, we could not help being amazed at the ingenuity of the partisans against such hopeless odds. These extremely well organized groups functioned like small villages in the forest with local commanders, and little "factories" producing essential goods such as soap, clothes, shoes and food cleverly processed from forest berries and mushrooms. There were even hospitals in which doctors like my father were utilized, schools and bath-houses. Workshops produced armour such as handmade mortars used to

strike at essential enemy infra structure such as rail lines and bridges.

I was struck by the serenity and beauty of this area and could not help trying to imagine this scene as it once was where each partisan member had lost someone from their families, some indeed losing all their loved ones as was the case of my mother's family.

This experience in the forests made me realize what heroes my parents and the other partisans really were to live life like this on the edge for so long. My only regret was that my parents hardly told me anything of this in the belief that concealing this information would protect us from the trauma that they lived through. When I think about it now, their story contains the essence of great legends, particularly their experiences in the forest which would have made such wonderful bedtime stories when my brother and I were small children. I almost feel as if I was robbed as a small child of hearing such wonderfully courageous stories about my own father and mother.

Both Natasha and I emerged from this emotional rollercoaster journey as different people from what was a totally life-changing experience. We felt shaken and traumatised by the details we uncovered. Yet, something happened as we stood with our dead in Lithuania and Belarus. The intimate details of death and destruction that we discovered made us want to cry endless tears as well as boil with anger. We returned, however, feeling committed to life in the realization that even though so many members of our family died so needlessly, they were not really completely destroyed as the Nazis would have preferred. The reality is that they survive through us and our children.

For me, the Holocaust with its terrible suffering still remains incomprehensible. In some ways, though, by walking in the path of my ancestors, this journey was able to unlock previously repressed emotions which have been swept aside for so many years. My journey, in many ways, enabled these feelings to rise to the surface allowing me to mourn and come to terms with the deaths of my beloved grandparents together with the uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces whom I never had the privilege of knowing as well as with the untimely deaths of my own parents who both passed away twenty years ago this year within six months of one another.

In some ways, this journey provided me with a certain sense of healing and closure as well as giving me a better understanding of my life as a child growing up in the home of Holocaust survivors in which their experiences were seldom talked about and the consequent reasons for their frequent bouts of paranoid anxiety, panic and depression.

Finally, as a child of survivors, my journey also made me realize that even though I too am understandably emotionally scarred as a result, and in spite of all their suffering and death,

I am so very grateful that my ancestors gave me the greatest gift of all – the gift of life.

31st IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy

www.dc2011.org

Follow the latest information about the 31st IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy with the DC2011 Capital Conference Blog. You can connect to the blog through the conference web site, or go to www.dc2011conference.blogspot.com.

The conference is hosted by the Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Washington (JGSGW) and will be held at the centrally-located Grand Hyatt Hotel in Washington D.C. The latest updated information on the hotel, special offers and rates, sightseeing suggestions, conference schedules and content all can be found on the DC2011.org web site and the “2011 Capital Conference Blog”.

Everyone is invited to view this blog and share comments and questions regarding all aspects of the conference experience. Updates will continue until the conference begins. Stay tuned! Join us at this greatly anticipated event.

See you in D.C. next August 14-19!

Sue Isman
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A BRIEF HISTORY OF BISHOPSCOURT VILLAGE

This article was originally published by the BishopsCourt Village Residents Association and is re-published here with permission. The Association web site can be found at www.bvra.org.za.

Historically, Vineyard Estate was made up of Vineyard Estate, BishopsCourt; Edinburgh Township; Grayville Township, Vineyard Estate, Newlands; and Vineyard Estate Township, and stretched from the BishopsCourt boundary to Sans Souci.

The BishopsCourt Village of today encompasses both Vineyard Estate, BishopsCourt (between BishopsCourt, the Liesbeek and Princess Avenue) and the portion of Edinburgh Township between Princess Avenue and the M3.

On the 26th March 1822, the widow of Colonel G Graham was granted the area we now call BishopsCourt Village. During the period 1827-1838, this land changed hands several times, finally becoming the property of James Maynard in 1838. During 1840-1850, many of the plots were randomly sold to individuals and in 1876, on the death of JM Maynard, JM Hiddingh acquired the balance which remained in his name until 1929.

In 1929, the land east of Princess Avenue was bought by two companies (Saxteno & Naruna) owned by Isaac Ochberg and called Edinburgh Township. Isaac Ochberg was a remarkable man – he was a Ukrainian Jew who arrived at the Cape in 1895, penniless. He worked hard and built up a vast business empire. If he was offered a tract of land which appeared to other business investors to be useless, he would proceed to make it habitable and open up the area as a township and the plots were sold. He would even finance certain people so they could erect their own homes. Three of his ‘townships’ were Paradise, Edinburgh, and Southfield. One of his interests was underprivileged children and he brought many orphans to this country whom he saw happily settled in this country.

BishopsCourt Village was not developed until the 1930s and 1940s and it is thought that the first houses were built in 1934 in Robinson Avenue.

Ochberg named the streets, Angelina, Bertha, Noreen, and Princess Avenues after members of his family. These were all prefixed with 'Upper' in the late 1960s after Edinburgh Drive bisected Edinburgh Township. Robinson was named after Julius Robinson who married one of Ochberg's daughters. Maclear's Beacon is in a straight line with Maclear Road but the beacon is not visible from the road which suggests that the name was given by a surveyor. Balfour Avenue was named after Arthur Balfour, British Prime Minister 1902-5 and Foreign Secretary 1916-19, who was responsible for the Balfour Declaration (1917) which promised Zionists a national home in Palestine. Ochberg built an office block in St George's Street and named it Balfour House. Edinburgh Drive is presumably named after Edinburgh Township and incidentally the dual carriageway was opened in 1966. Colenso Road was named after Bishop John Colenso. In 1939 and 1943, Mr & Mrs CA Abrahamse – Hilda and Alan – bought plots in Hildalan Road and built a house at No 2 and named it 'Hildalan' and the street was subsequently named after the house.

There must be a lot more interesting history of Bishops court Village which needs to be documented – the gravel quarry, the Liesbeek in the early days, interesting people who have lived here etc., and if any residents can provide more information, please contact Joan Parker at info@bvra.org.za.

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THE TWO DEDICATION CEREMONIES IN PIKETBERG, 17 FEBRUARY 2011

Diane Shaer

This article was originally published by TelFed and is re-published here with permission. The TelFed Online web site can be found at www.telfed.org.il.

In the small town of Piketberg which is in the Swartland of the Western Cape, north east of Cape Town, we attended two very moving and

meaningful dedication ceremonies in memory of our family members who had lived in Piketberg in the 1930's and 40's.

In 1922, a beautiful synagogue in the Dutch gabled style was built. At that time there were about 30 Jewish families living in Piketberg and the surrounding areas.

In 1929 when there was a terrible drought in the Cape area, it was the Jews who lent the Afrikaans farmers money with no interest. The Jews were those who brought electricity and electric street lighting to the area and built the first cinema and public swimming pool.

The community also looked after the cemetery and in 1970 the synagogue was sold to the municipality who rented it to a furniture store till 1997. By this time there were no longer any Jews living there.

The relations between the Afrikaners and the Jews were always very good and the Afrikaners have never forgotten what their Jewish friends did for them.

In 2004 the Piketberg Municipality turned part of the synagogue into a Jewish Museum. This was the side where the Holy Ark stood and our family, the Shaers, helped with the restoration. Max, the youngest brother, made the casings for the Torah Scrolls and Phina, the eldest, repaired the covers of the scrolls and the Ark curtain. Harry, the elder son, donated two glass cabinets to display many historical artifacts associated with the Shaer family. Amongst these items there is a pair of *shabbat* candlesticks that were assumed to have belonged to their mother, Esther Gilman, with an explanatory plaque which she had made in memory of her parents and brother, Harry who had died at a very early age. Since then Phina has worked hand in hand with Roche Du Toit, the curator who always cooperated untiringly. There is another municipal museum on the same grounds next to the Synagogue building.

In 2004 there were centenary celebrations and due recognition was given to the town's early Jewish settlers. There was also an olive tree planting ceremony. About 200 people from South Africa and all over the world came to celebrate and a stone with the word *Shalom* was placed on the outer wall of the synagogue.

The Ten Commandments above the ark had been erased with the passing of time and so the Hoberman, Goldberg, Barnes and Shaer families decided to replace them in memory of Max Shaer, their youngest brother who passed away in 2008.

Phina Hoberman worked tirelessly, designing the tablets of The Ten Commandments, as well as the Crown above them. Phina was the liaison between the printers, the builders and the curator of the museum.

On February 17th, 2011, many people attended the two ceremonies. Some were family members who had come from Cape Town, Johannesburg and Israel. Others were friends and family of some of the original Jewish families who had also come from far and wide.

First a large new headstone was put up at the entrance to the cemetery in memory of the Gilman family, grandparents and uncle of the Shaer siblings in whose memory the candlesticks had been donated. Due to weather conditions and disrepair some of the graves were now unmarked and no records had been kept of where people had been buried. The municipality had erected a new fence around the cemetery and cleaned it up and a large awning was put up for the ceremony and chairs were placed near the stone. Rabbi Silberhaft officiated. Harry Shaer, Max's older brother who had been named after his uncle Harry, said *Kaddish* and made a short speech and Rabbi Newman sang *El Ma'aleh Rachamim* in his beautiful operatic voice. It was a very moving ceremony.

From there we all went to the Museum for the consecration of the Ten Commandments.

The Mayor, Mr. Liebenberg spoke. Two representatives of the Jewish Board of Deputies from Cape Town, Harry and the librarian of the Museum also made speeches. Harry presented the Museum with a framed certificate which the Israeli Defense Forces had given Max when he served as a Sergeant Major in the Israeli Army from 1958-1960. As it happens Rabbi Newman had served together with Max.

A large and very tasty lunch was beautifully prepared by the ACVV (The ladies of the Church). They had also taken the trouble to learn from the internet how to prepare *felafel* and *hummus*, two

typical Israeli foods which by chance were Max's favourite foods.

There was a wonderful atmosphere of harmony, warmth, tolerance, and love between two different peoples and religions. At this moment in Time where in the world Anti-Semitism is so rampant, it was more than heartwarming to see how much honour and respect was bestowed on the Jews who settled in this area in the 1920's and 30's, despite the fact that no Jews have lived in that area for the past 40 years.

I believe that if people commit positive acts, ripples are caused which eventually turn into waves and this brings the hope that there will be more understanding between different peoples of the world as we are all equal in the eyes of God. Hopefully this will make the world a better place to live in.

Biography

LILY PORITZ MILLER

Lily Poritz Miller's web page can be found at www.lilyporitzmiller.com.



*Lily Poritz Miller in Eastern Europe
Photo by Olga Zabudoff, 1998*

Lily Poritz Miller began her career as an editor at Macmillan in New York, where she worked with such distinguished writers as Jane Yolen and the Irish storyteller and poet, Padraic Colum. She credits Colum, who wrote a poem for her, as being a major influence in her publishing career. During this time she also produced a revised and updated edition of the Jennie Hall classic, *Buried Cities*. She was brought to Toronto by Jack McClelland in 1972 as senior editor at McClelland and Stewart. During

her 18-year tenure at the company, she worked with some of the most gifted Canadian authors, including Roloff Beny, Austin Clarke, Leonard Cohen, Sylvia Fraser, Alistair MacLeod, Farley Mowat, Michael Ondaatje, Mordecai Richler and Gabrielle Roy. This era in Canadian publishing is documented in James King's biography *Jack: A Life With Writers*.

Born in Cape Town, South Africa, Lily Miller moved to Massachusetts with her family when she was fifteen. She has taught creative writing at the City University of New York, and her short stories have been published in the anthology *American Scene: New Voices*. Her play *My Star of Hope* was performed off-Broadway and *The Proud One* received a Samuel French national award. The play was produced in Toronto and published by Playwrights Canada and the International Readers' Theatre. Her play *A Greater Love* appeared as part of Alumnae Theatre Company's New Ideas Festival 2004.

She became involved in her family's ancestry when she first traveled to Eastern Europe in 1992. In 1998 she and Olga Zabudoff edited *If I Forget Thee* – the destruction of the *shtetl* Butrimantz. In 2005 her program *Journey to My Boba's Shtetl* was presented during Holocaust Education Week at the Workmen's Circle and the Al Green Theatre in Toronto. In 2007 she was featured in the TV program *Israel Today* which was broadcast nationally in Canada.

She co-edited an English-language translation of letters from the Yiddish chronicling the quest of a young man from a small Lithuanian *shtetl* to reach America via Cuba in the 1920s. Entitled *A Thousand Threads: a story told through Yiddish letters*, it was published by Remembrance Books, Washington, DC in 2005. A staged reading from the book was presented at the Leah Posluns Theatre in Toronto. Her screenplay, *Paved in Gold*, inspired by this material, was showcased in Toronto in 2006 under the direction of Anthony Furey.

Her novel *In a Pale Blue Light* was published by Sumach Press on October 5, 2009. She is a member of the Dramatists Guild of America, International PEN, and Women in Film and Television Toronto.

Book Reviews

Colin Plen

Germiston Jewry: A Communal History

Author: Alfred Stanley Bernstein

Publisher: United Hebrew Institutions of Germiston, 1949

By 2010 the once-thriving community has dwindled to a less than *minyan* size, but in looking through this 87 page book one can see that in its day Germiston had a definite importance.

Simmer and Jack registered a company in 1886 to trade on the farm Elandsfontein and then set up a company to mine there. In 1903, Germiston was proclaimed as a municipality. In the same year the Hebrew Congregation was established.

In 1949 it had grown into a community of 1500 souls and there was a flourishing clothing industry in the town (it became a city in 1950) Most of the industrialists running the clothing factories were Jews.

I found specifically the history of the development of Industry in the town to be most interesting. But then I must state openly that Germiston is my home town.

The author states that in 1917 the gold mines of the area were already deteriorating and Germiston was in danger of losing its identity as a mining centre. A clothing shop owner Morris Kalmek conceived the idea of manufacturing clothing locally, because almost all the clothing available was imported. He started a factory with only "a couple of machines and three hands". By 1949 there were several factories including some which were the largest in the country and Germiston was the centre of the industry.

In addition Jews were responsible for introducing heavy industry in processing base minerals and plastics (plastics noga before World War II ?!) and other factories.

If anyone wants to have a photocopy of any part of the 87 page book, please write directly to me at colplen@iafrica.com

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Konin: A Quest

Author: Theo Richmond

Publisher: Vintage, and also Jonathan Cap, 1996

Theo Richmond was born in London just prior to World War II, to parents who had immigrated from the small town of Konin in Poland.

In the 1960's a group of survivors of Konin, living in Israel, published a Memorial Book and over the years, this book fascinated him so much that he tried to find all the living Konin survivors. (By this time, his grandparents and his parents had passed on and he had minimal information from them.) He learned Yiddish and Hebrew so that he could fully utilise the contents of the book and be able to interview people who could potentially assist him.

He put together this book as the English form of a *Yizkor* book, and there is so much in the book which is of interest to genealogists and to Poland researchers, as well as to the ordinary Jew in the street who wants to know more.

I might almost say the book is an excellent introduction to genealogical studying. If you have Polish ancestry, this book is highly recommended. If you have ancestors who came from Konin, this book is obligatory.

EDITOR'S MUSINGS

Colin Plen

What Is Old?

As I have mentioned before, I grew up on the East Rand. When I began showing people around my town, I proudly told them that this or that building was already fifty years old, because 50 was old for a building in Germiston, or anywhere on the Reef. I never considered that Cape Town would have buildings dating back to 350 years ago, and when I went to Israel and England, I would find that 1000 years was quite young.

In the photographing of old tombstones which I do quite a lot of, I have recently had the privilege of seeing the old 7th Avenue Cemetery which predates the 20th Century. One thing I noted was that quite a few of the epitaphs read: "Deeply Regretted by his Widow and Children ..." which is an expression that reads so wrong nowadays. Was the life of the man regretted or was his death regretted?

Commonwealth War Graves Commission

You may be interested in the January 2011 Newsletter of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission which includes a description of their work in South Africa. The newsletter can be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/CWGC-newsletter>

Dusetos

Dusetos, Lithuania, now has a webpage added to Shtetlinks recently created by Ada Gamsu of Johannesburg. There are several South African families who originate from Dusetos namely Glick, Milun, Levit, Gordon, Slep, Scop, Berman, Orlin, Chait, and Aires, to name a few. Some of the descendants are still living in South Africa and the webpage and the *Yiskor* book now translated into English is very informative. The site can be viewed at:

<http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/Dusetos/>

Grave thoughts

As I must have written 100 times, I spend a lot of time in graveyards taking photos of stones, and as I go along I think. So if I see a stone for a person whose surname was Glass, I think: Is this a glass stone? People under glass stones cannot throw?

If I see a stone for someone whose name was Stone, my thoughts are: is this a Stone stone?

High Faluting Names

A stone I saw named the departed as Theodore Herzl Rubin, and another had the name Lloyd George Kaplan. At least two mothers in days gone by had high hopes for their sons.

Jewish Surnames

This is adapted from Paul Johnson's book, The History of the Jews, published by Hodder and Stoughton, 1995.

From 1781 onwards, various countries tried to reform their laws with what were at first considered to be laws of toleration. Unfortunately, they were administered in very many cases by hostile petty officials who feared that if toleration went too far, Jews could be after their jobs. For instance, an Austrian law of 1787 compelled Jews to adopt "German-sounding" family names and first names. Sephardi Jews had long since adopted the Spanish practise of using family names, the Ashkenazis had been very conservative and followed the age old custom of using patronymics, their first name *ben* their father's name. Hebrew-sounding names were now usually forbidden and the bureaucrats produced lists of 'acceptable' names, and often bribes were necessary (*remember this is Paul Johnson, the historian, writing and not the editor of the Newsletter!!*) to secure nice family names derived from plants or precious stones: Lilienthal, Edelstein, Diamant, Saphir, Rosenthal, are examples. Two very expensive names were Kluger (clever) and Froelich (happy). Many Jews were lumped brutally by bored nasty officials into any of four categories: patronymic, origin, descriptive, and occupation). Weiss (white), Schwartz (black), Gross (big or fat), and Klein (small). Many poorer Jews had unpleasant names foisted on them by malignant clerks: Glagenstrick (Gallows rope), Eselkopf (Donkey head), Taschengregger (Pickpocket), Schmalz (fat or grease), Borgenicht (don't borrow) are examples.

Jews of priestly or Levitical descent who could claim names such as Cohen, Kahn, Katz, and Levy, were forced to Germanize them: Katzman, Kahnstein, Aronstein, Levinthal, and so on. A large group were given place names as their surnames: Brody, Epstein, Ginzberg, Landau, Shapiro,

Horowitz, and Posner. The pain of this humiliation was worsened by the knowledge that the aim of the government in doing this was to be able to tax them.

Maitland Cemetery Cape Town

Maitland Cemetery, also known as Gate 8, is one of the older cemeteries in the town. It is part of a very large general cemetery and in the last few years has been allowed to run down. The men who look after the place for the Cemetery Maintenance Committee were shocked to find that the wall which had encircled the Jewish section had disappeared between two visits. The entire wall of prefab concrete had been stolen. They have now replaced it with a hedge.

There are parts of this cemetery, not the Jewish part, where people have set up squatting camps. Imagine living next to old graves and new graves?

The result of people living in the area means that when they get bored, they go around looking for things to steal or to break.

Here are two stones which were found to have been shattered, and the caretakers had to set the pieces into concrete, having joined them up in a macabre jigsaw puzzle.





***The Hammers*, by Zan Swartzberg**

The Editorial Board of the SA-SIG received an article some months ago about Butch Bottger (*aka* Butch ben Yok). We wished to publish this article but we had great trouble finding the necessary contact person to obtain permission to re-publish the article. We first tried the publishers of the *Machal* newsletter which had first published it, and after at least three phone calls from Cape Town to Israel, many emails, and many dead-ends, I finally made personal contact by telephone with the author, Zan Swartzberg, now a farmer in the Bethlehem, Free State, area, who gave me the permission. (The article was published in the December 2011 issue of the SA-SIG Newsletter.)

Zan also gave me a copy of a book he has written and self published, titled *The Hammers*, which is very interesting. These boys, now in their 80s, were volunteers who went to Palestine after the Second World War and fought for the independence of Israel. In order to pick up his book, I went to Sea Point and met another of the *Machal* boys, 86 year old Kenny Jacobson. I wonder if I would have been able to pack up my career and my life at 18 and go to Israel to fight, as these men did. I don't think so.

If you are interested in more details of Zan's book, you can write to Zan Swartzberg at P.O. Box 200, Bethlehem, 9700., or contact him by e-mail at noreenswartzb@telkomsa.net.

Northern Cape Interest

Nicola Jenkin has set up a new RootsWeb mailing list for the Northern Cape in South Africa. The focus is on the settlers to the region, residents of the area, such as Kimberley, the Boer War and other such matter related to the area. If you wish to join this group, you can subscribe at:

<http://tinyurl.com/northern-cape>

Vilnius Literary Seminar

Circulating information about a Summer Literary Seminar in Vilnius, from 31 July to 12 August 2011. This is organised by Mikhail Iossel, Associate Professor of English/Creative Writing at Concordia University, Montreal. Some familiar and well-known friends who will give a series of seminars include Rachel Kostanian, Rose Lerer Cohen, Saul Issroff, Simon Davidovich, Regina Kopelovich, Dr. Efraim Zuroff (director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Israel), Mr Vytautas Toleikis (educator, civic activist, author), Fania Brantsovsky (Vilna Ghetto survivor, veteran of the anti-Nazi partisans, Holocaust educator), Milan Chersonski, editor of *Jerusalem of Lithuania*, and Ms Faina Kolinsky. There will also be associated tours of *shtetls*, etc. The seminar web site can be found at:

<http://www.sumlitssem.org/lithuania/lsi.html>

Questionnaire

I have been the Editor of the SA-SIG Newsletter for just over a year, and I would dearly love to know what you think of the articles that have been published in the Newsletter, so that future issues can reflect more of what you want to read and to know about. It is only if I know what you like (or don't like) that I can better cater to your taste.

Please answer the following questions. You can respond to me directly at colplen@iafrica.com. Please respond! I look forward to your reply.

- In the last 3 issues of the SA SIG newsletter, which articles did you enjoy most?
- Was there anything that you did not like? What was it? (What were *they*?)
- What kind of article would you like to see in the future?
- Are the articles too short or too long?
- Are they too technical or not technical enough?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ceres Museum

I was looking at the SA Jewish genealogy site, and I thought you may find a link to www.ceresmuseum.co.za of interest. From time to time folk with Ceres roots arrive from all over the world wanting to see the cemetery. With the help of the curator of the Ceres museum, Mrs. Bertdene Laubscher, we photographed all the grave stones and she put them on the website.

*Jos Kahn
Prince Alfred's Hamlet
btc@servit.co.za*

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Pottas Surname

I was forwarded your SA-SIG due to my research of the POTTAS/POTAS/POTHAS family in South Africa. I also collected the info I could find on the POTASH families as I wasn't sure if it was another spelling of the POTTAS surname, but each one of them were Jewish and from the old USSR, most emigrated round about 1918.

I intend publishing the POTTAS family sometime later this year, and if you could possibly add my e-mail in your SA-SIG Newsletter, I would gladly add the POTASH families to register in more detail than what I have available at the moment. most of my data which consist of roughly 44 names is also not complete in the sense that it I still need some info on the families.

The POTTAS surname originally was spelt POTHARST/POTHAST and means as far I could determine a Goulash dish especially made of rabbit meat.

I came across the POTHAS surname (Nick POTHAS, who played cricket for Northern Transvaal), but he originated from Greece and is not related to the POTTAS or the POTASH families.

*Johan J Pottas
IKT / ICT
pottasj@ufs.ac.za*

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Durban Website

This is to inform you that the Durban United Hebrew Congregation web site has been extended to include a cemetery search facility of the Jewish cemeteries in KwaZulu Natal.

The databases are quite extensive, but are still under construction as certain information such as Hebrew Names and dates are still to be added.

Go to www.durbanshul.co.za and click on the Cemetery Search button at the bottom of the left hand column, and have a look at what is available. Once the information and photo of the headstone are shown, click on the photo to enlarge it.

*Stan Hart
Durban
stan@stanhart.net*

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Article on Plungyan

Former Capetonians Abel and Glenda Levitt (now living in Israel) have been working for over a decade in the town of Plungyan to preserve the memory of the Holocaust in Lithuania. They tell us about their work and their current project to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the genocide in a recent article in the online edition of the Cape Jewish Chronicle. The article can be found at:

<http://www.cjc.org.za/?p=1272#more-1272>

If anybody has an interest in Plungyan, or has an interest in initiating a similar project in other *shtetls* in Lithuania, they can contact Glenda and Abel Levitt at: alevitt@netvision.net.il.

*Saul Issroff
London
saul65@gmail.com*

SURNAMES APPEARING IN THIS NEWSLETTER

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The numbers in brackets refer to the page numbers where the surname appears:

Abrahamse (9), Aires (12), Akiva (1, 3), Arafat (4), Arbel (4), Aronstein (13), Baleson (2), Balfour (9), Barnes (10), Beny (11), Berman (12), Bielski (7), Borgenicht (13), Bouchiki (4), Brantsovsky (14), Brody (13), Chait (12), Chersonski (14), Chopin (5), Clarke (11), Cohen (2, 11, 13, 14), Colum (10), Davidovich (14), Diamant (13), Du Toit (9), Edelstein (13), Epstein (2, 9, 13), Eselkopf (13), Fraser (11), Froelich (13), Gamsu (12), Gehmer (4), Getz (2), Gilman (9, 10), Ginzberg (13), Glagenstrick (13), Glick (12), Goldberg (2, 10), Gordon (12), Graham (8), Green (11), Gross (13), Hamshari (4), Harris (2), Hart (2, 3, 9, 15), Hiddingh (8), Hoberman (10), Horowitz (13), Iossel (14), Isman (8), Issroff (1, 2, 14), Jacobson (14), Jenkin (14), Johnson (13), Kahn (13, 15), Kahnstein (13), Kalmek (11), Kaplan (13), Kaplinski (1, 3, 4), Katz (13), Katzman (13), Klein (13), Kluger (13), Kopelovich (15), Kolinsky (14), Kostanian (14), Krewer (5), Landau (13), Levit (12, 15), Levy (13), Liebenberg (10), Lilienthal (13), Maynard (8), McLelland (10), McLeod (11), Meir (3), Miller (1, 3, 10, 11), Milun (12), Mowat (11), Newman (10), Ochberg (8, 9), Ogus (2), Ondaatje (11), Orlin (12), Parker (9), Plen (1, 2, 3, 11, 12), Posluns (11), Posner (13), Potash (15), Pottas (15), Rabinowitz (2), Rafael (3, 4), Richler (11), Richmond (3, 12), Robinson (9), Rosenthal (13), Rothenstern (5), Roxburgh (3), Roy (11), Rubin (13), Salameh (3), Saphir (13), Schjodt (4), Schmaltz (13), Schwartz (13), Scop (12), Shaer (1, 9, 10), Shapiro (13), Silberhaft (10), Slep (12), Swartzberg (14), Taschengregger (13), Toleikis (14), Weiss (13), Wiesenthal (15), Yolen (10), Zabłudoff (10), Zuroff (14), Zwaiter (4)

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