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**RECOVERING THE LIVES OF SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH
WOMEN
DURING THE MIGRATION YEARS,
c1880-1939**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation sets out to demonstrate how a group doubly situated on the margins, as Jewish and female, helped to build the larger community of South African Jewry and contributed to the wider South African society. The investigation is rooted in the transformation wrought in Jewish communities worldwide in the nineteenth and twentieth century through emancipation, assimilation, immigration, acculturation, and Zionism.

The discussion is divided into three sections, of which the first two constitute a description of the normative experience of Jewish women, the majority of whom were first and second generation immigrants from eastern Europe. Entitled "Setting up house", the first section opens with their migration, their establishment of immigrant neighbourhoods, and the perpetuation of their close knit communities through bonds of marriage.

Entitled "Beyond hearth and home", the second section explores how the period, 1880-1939, that witnessed dramatic changes in women's status worldwide - through education, the workplace and the attainment of the vote - resonated among South African Jewish women. It will show that while pursuing a career beyond marriage was exceptional, participation on the Jewish communal scene, whether in the welfare societies or in the Zionist movement was normative, and by the end of the period women had wrested control of their organisations from the men.

In contrast to the normative experiences described in the first two sections, the third section, "Varieties of integration: case studies of extraordinary women", that is divided between the fields of 'Politics' and 'Culture', compares and contrasts the lives of women, who by virtue of education, career, lifestyle, political or cultural orientation, did not conform to the norm. These female iconoclasts accentuate what is considered to be normative in the South African Jewish community, whether it be the traditional family, the identification with the English language community, or passive conformity to the existing racial status quo. The dissertation will show that these idealistic and driven women were frequently the most far sighted, and their contributions to the political and cultural life of South Africa in retrospect, take on much greater significance.

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**RECOVERING THE LIVES OF SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH WOMEN
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Introduction

This dissertation sets out to explore the experiences of Jewish women, immigrants to South Africa from eastern and western Europe during the migration years, from c1880 to 1939. It investigates how a group doubly situated on the margins, as Jewish and female, helped build the larger community of South African Jewry and contributed to the wider South African society.

Today women's history has been eclipsed by the history of gender, defined as constructions of male and female and the power relations they symbolize. Whereas the use of gender as a category of historical analysis, to examine social, economic, and political relationships and the dynamics of power, facilitates the reinterpretation of conventional history, women's history is deemed merely to create supplementary narratives.¹ However, to quote Sandra McGee Deutsch's recently published, *Crossing Borders, Claiming a Nation: A History of Argentine Jewish women, 1880-1955* (2010): "Without basic knowledge of women's familial, political, professional, and associational roles, it is difficult to write the history of gender and indeed any kind of history."²

This history of Jewish women, therefore, aims to contribute towards the understanding of gender relations in the South African Jewish community and within the wider South African society, but it is not a gender history. In the context of South African women's history it hopes to add another ethnic dimension to what Belinda Bozzoli has described as 'the patchwork quilt of patriarchies'³ in nineteenth century Southern Africa, where women were subordinate to men, but where important contrasts in the operation of gender existed, between the different social systems,

¹ Joan Wallach Scott, "Women's History and the rewriting of history", in *The Impact of Feminist Research in the Academy*, edited by Christie Farnham, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1987, pp. 34-50.

² Sandra McGee Deutsch, *Crossing Borders, Claiming a Nation: a History of Argentine Jewish Women, 1880-1955*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2010, p. 4.

³ Belinda Bozzoli, "Marxism and Feminism and South African Studies", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 9(2) 1983: 139-171.

particularly between the pre-capitalist Bantu-speaking societies, and the colonial states established by the settlers.⁴

The topic is also located in the field of Jewish Women's Historical Studies, first pioneered in the United States in the 1970s,⁵ that examines women's experience of the main processes of nineteenth and twentieth century Jewish history brought about by the *Haskalah*, the late 18th century Jewish enlightenment, namely: emancipation, assimilation, immigration, acculturation, the Holocaust, and the creation of the State of Israel. The time period spans the period of the great migration from eastern Europe, from the late nineteenth century until the outbreak of the Second World War, when eastern European Jewish immigration was curtailed by the Immigration Quota Act of 1930, and the influx of Jews fleeing Hitler's Germany was stemmed by the Aliens Act of 1937.

Until the introduction of freedom of religion with the British occupation of the Cape Colony, first in 1795 and then in 1805, the entry of Jews into South Africa was largely prohibited. As there was initially no infrastructure to maintain a Jewish way of life, the earliest arrivals were assimilated Jews from England, Holland, and Germany who found it easy to blend in with the local white colonists, whether Boer or Briton, while some found it more convenient to jettison their religion, to marry out of the faith and have their children baptized. Those who wished to preserve their faith tended to go back to their home countries to find brides and bring them back to South Africa. With the exception of Sophie Levisieur, the daughter of Isaac Baumann, pioneer of the Orange Free State Republic,⁶ very little is known about the Jewish women in mid-nineteenth century South Africa.

With mineral discoveries in Griqualand West in the 1860s and in the Transvaal in the 1880s, the Jewish community grew steadily. Once the religious qualification on the franchise was removed with the British conquest of the South African Republic during the South African War, the stage was set for assimilated English and German

⁴ See Cheryl Walker, "Women and Gender in Southern Africa: an Overview", in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa in 1945*, edited by Cheryl Walker, David Philip, Cape Town, 1990, pp. 1-32.

⁵ See Gerda Lerner, *Teaching Women's History*. American Historical Association, New York, 1981.

⁶ Myer Pencharz and Dora L. Sowden, "In the Orange Free State", in Saron & Hotz, eds, *The Jews in South Africa: a History*, 1955, p. 322; Sophie Levisieur, *Memories*, edited by Karl Schoeman, Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1982.

Jews to be accepted into the main stream of society. The men were prominent in the mining houses and leaders in the world of business, their wives were active on the social scene. If not for the antisemitism that soon surfaced, with the Hoggenheimer figure as its central trope,⁷ they might have passed for locals.

Women were doubly affected by these attitudes. Besides their outsider status as Jews, Jewish women shared the fate of all white women in South Africa, during this period, who were excluded from political activity, and denied the parliamentary vote until as late as 1930. This dissertation will therefore examine the extent of the participation of Jewish women in the struggle to penetrate the male bastions of power, whether through secondary education, the workplace, admission to the university and to the professions, or finally through the attainment of the vote.

Unlike the assimilated Jews from England and Germany, the eastern European Jews who arrived in the mid 1890s, part of the great outpouring of Jews fleeing the harsh conditions in Tsarist Russia, were from the outset perceived as double outsiders. Unlike their predecessors who could outwardly pass as locals, the eastern European Jews spoke a foreign language, Yiddish, and dressed and behaved differently to the local population who perceived them as outsiders. They were even perceived as outsiders by their more assimilated English and German co-religionists, who feared that they would harm their own position in society. Their arrival gave rise to a wave of alienism, blending often with antisemitism, expressed in the enactment of a series of immigration restrictions in 1902, 1907, 1913, and 1923, culminating in the passing of the Immigration Quota Act of 1930, that finally put paid to eastern European immigration to South Africa.

Besides their double exclusion as Jews and as women from full participation in the wider society, there was still a third dimension to Jewish women's outsider status in South Africa. In Orthodox Judaism, the form of Judaism adhered to, if not strictly practised, by the immigrants who came to South Africa, women are relegated to the status of outsiders. Prohibited from taking part in public prayer, not counted in a *minyan* (prayer quorum), forced to sit separately so as not to distract the men,

⁷ See Milton Shain, *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa*, Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1994, pp. 61-62.

orthodox Jewish women the world over, are excluded from full participation in their own religious congregations. Reform Judaism, first introduced in Germany in 1809, that sought to redress some of these inequalities, was a latecomer to the South African scene (1933) and never had a wide following. Therefore the struggle of white women to gain entry into the political life of their country during this period, was paralleled by Jewish women's struggle to achieve representation and voting rights on the committees of their synagogues, and at the same time to wrest control of their own communal organizations from the control of the men.

This dissertation is divided into three sections. The first two sections constitute a broad description of the normative experience of Jewish women, creating a model of Jewish acculturation as it played out in a South African context. Except for one notable exception, that of Sophie Levisieur, whose family settled in Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State Republic in the mid-nineteenth century, very little is known about Jewish women in South Africa before the period of the great migration. For this reason the dissertation opens with the immigration of east European women, who created a way of life in immigrant neighbourhoods, that became emblematic of South African Jewry.

The period, 1890-1939 saw dramatic changes in women's status worldwide and witnessed the achievement of the goals of what is today referred to as the 'first wave' of feminism - the struggle for women's suffrage⁸. In South Africa however this excluded women of colour. While the participation of Jewish women in the South African women's enfranchisement movement was rare, and confined to the more acculturated, the sure mark of an insider within the South African Jewish community was participation on the communal scene, whether in the welfare societies or in the Zionist movement.

In contrast to the normative experiences of the women described in the first two sections, the final section considers varieties of integration, comparing and contrasting the lives of women, whose experiences did not conform to the norm, whether through lifestyle, career, political or cultural orientation. In a conservative South African

⁸ Dina Pinsky, *Jewish Feminists: Complex identities and Activist Lives*, University of Chicago, Urbana and Chicago, 2010.

Jewish community, these women, by their iconoclasm, shed light on the accepted norms and conventions examined in the earlier chapters. In their assorted rebellions, they accentuate what is considered to be normative in the South African Jewish community, whether it be the traditional family, the identification with the English language community, or passive conformity to the existing racial status quo. It was often these idealistic and driven women who were the most far sighted, and whose contributions to the political and cultural life of South Africa in retrospect, take on much greater significance than those of their more conventional sisters.

South African literature survey

Jewish gender and family studies have been a neglected area in South African Jewish historiography, and no dedicated work on South African Jewish women has been attempted thus far. South African Jewish history has focused on the political - both internal, relating to communal and congregational themes and to the Zionist Movement, and external, relating to antisemitism and Apartheid.

Modern historiographical work on South African Jewry is generally considered to have begun with the publication of *The South African Jewish Year Book* of 1929, which summarizes the history of the Jewish communities and institutions at that time. However no chapter is devoted to a description of women's activities, and the biographical section, that includes over 800 men, lists only 25 women. These few women, however, are extremely accomplished: 6 are medical doctors, 1 is a chemist; and 4 are legal professionals. They include the first female medical graduate at the University of the Witwatersrand, the first woman advocate to be admitted to the bar in South Africa, and the first female solicitor to start her own practice. Other professionals include a famous South African writer and a well known artist photographer. All the women were active on the Jewish communal scene, two were members of the National Council of Women and one was a member of the suffragist movement.⁹

The first historical monograph, *The Jews in South Africa to 1895*, by Louis Herrman, published in 1930, deals with a period that largely predates the establishment of

⁹ *The South African Jewish Year Book*, South African Jewish Historical Society, Johannesburg, 1929.

organized Jewish life in South Africa. Thus the women cited are either the wives of Jews who have converted to Christianity, or wives of early Jewish settlers of whom not much is known.

Marcia Gitlin's history of the Zionist movement in South Africa, *Vision Amazing* published in 1950, is the first communal history to point out the importance of women's contribution to the communal scene, and to take cognizance of the absence of women in South African Jewish historiography. She notes that women's voluntary work was of fundamental importance to the operation and welfare of the community as a whole, and to that of the Zionist movement in particular.¹⁰

In 1955 the first official history of South African Jewry to 1910, *The Jews in South Africa*, sponsored by the South African Jewish Board of Deputies in Johannesburg, edited by its director, Gustav Saron together with Louis Hotz, is virtually oblivious of women. The detailed six page index contains only 19 female names, the majority of whom are either somebody's wife or daughter.¹¹ Exceptions are the first women graduate at the old South African College in Cape Town, two early pioneers of Johannesburg and the Orange Free State respectively, a dancing and music teacher, and a teacher of English classes to immigrant girls in the early 1900s. The only woman to warrant an entry of more than one page, is Sophie Levisieur, a daughter of the Baumann family, whose family history is synonymous with that of the Orange Free State.¹²

Gideon Shimoni's seminal monograph, *Jews and Zionism: the South African Experience, 1910-1967*, the most comprehensive history of South African Jewry, reflects little of the history of the very active women's Zionist movement.¹³ Although acknowledging the centrality of women's work, Shimoni is not so much concerned with the practical day to day activities that are the focus of Marcia Gitlin's *Vision Amazing*, but with the wider political and international context of South African Zionism. Thus the few female names that appear in the index to this work, include

¹⁰ Marcia Gitlin, *Vision amazing: the Story of South African Zionism*. Menorah Book Club, Johannesburg, 1950.

¹¹ Pencharz, Myer and Dora L. Sowden, "In the Orange Free State", 1955, p. 322.

¹² Ibid, pp. 320-321.

¹³ Gideon Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism: the South African Experience, 1910-1967*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1980.

such figures as Golda Meir, Israel's first woman premier, and Sonja Schlesin, Mohandas Gandhi's South African secretary, rather than those of local Zionist workers. In Shimoni's more recent work, *Community and Conscience: the Jews in Apartheid South Africa*, women feature more conspicuously, with summaries of the lives of prominent women activists and acknowledging the contribution of women's organizations.¹⁴

The most in depth consideration of the role played by Jewish women in the South African Jewish community thus far, is Riva Krut's Doctoral dissertation, "Building a Home and a Community: Jews in Johannesburg, 1886-1914" (1985), that addresses the role played by women in the emergence of a male Jewish middle class in Johannesburg. The expectations and restrictions placed on the Victorian lady, characterized as the 'true woman' are highlighted through the prism of a very public divorce, concluding that Jewish women in Johannesburg were more conservative than their peers. Krut examines the communal politics surrounding the establishment of the two main Jewish women's charitable associations: the Jewish Women's Benevolent Society and the Jewish Ladies Communal League, in great detail. She also describes the most important women's initiative of the League, that of the establishment of the South African Jewish Orphanage in the 1900s,¹⁵ and its pivotal role in the creation of a Jewish community in Johannesburg.

Six years after Krut, Mendel Kaplan and Marion Robertson's edited social history of Johannesburg Jewry, 1887-1915, *Founders and Followers*, published in 1991, does not even cite her work. With the exception of the Jewish actress, Frieda Godfrey, and a brief glimpse of Jewish prostitutes in Johannesburg, neither being typical examples of South African Jewish women, women are generally absent.¹⁶

Published also in 1991, Richard Mendelsohn's *Sammy Marks: the Uncrowned King of the Transvaal* provides intimate insights into the life of an upper class Jewish lady,

¹⁴ Gideon Shimoni, *Community and Conscience: the Jews in Apartheid South Africa*, University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, Hanover and London, 2003.

¹⁵ Riva Krut, *Building a Home and a Community: Jews in Johannesburg, 1886-1910*, Thesis (Ph. D) - University of London, 1985.

¹⁶ Mendel Kaplan and Marion Robertson, eds, *Founders and Followers: Johannesburg Jewry, 1887-1915*, Vlaeberg, Cape Town, 1991.

refracted through the prism of her husband, the Jewish industrialist, Sammy Marks.¹⁷ Like Caroline Baumann and her daughter, Sophie Levisieur, in the Orange Free State, Bertha Marks's chief responsibility was to organize and to direct the large household. While authority within the marriage lay clearly with her husband, Bertha did possess a degree of influence and on rare occasions even expressed open rebellion against what she considered were unreasonable demands and criticisms. She was also one of the very few women in the Transvaal who was allowed to operate a bank account.¹⁸

When the family finally moved from Zwartkoppies outside Pretoria to Johannesburg in 1909, Bertha served on the committee of the Jewish Women's Benevolent Society, as well as the Jewish Ladies Communal League, where she chaired the building committee and also played a part in the running of the orphanage.

By 1993, eight years after Krut completed her thesis, her work was still not integrated into the South African Jewish historiographical mainstream. This is evident from an issue of the journal, *Jewish Affairs*, the organ of the S. A. Jewish Board of Deputies that attempted to recover the lives of Jewish women.. Three years after the unbanning of the ANC and just a year before South Africa's first democratic election, this issue, with its 'Focus on Women' is more notable for what it omits than for what it includes. It contains two articles on early evidence of women's activities in the two main centers of Jewry, Cape Town and Johannesburg. While Schrire's article on Jewish women in Cape Town, accentuates women's empowerment and the vital contribution of women to welfare and to the Zionist movement,¹⁹ Norwich's article on women in Johannesburg,²⁰ provides a catalogue of women taken from various biographical sources, with little historical interpretation or context, and with no reference to Krut's pioneering work. Nonetheless it remains a useful resource for information about South African Jewish women. This issue also contains an article on the life and work of Bertha Solomon, whose fight for the legal rights of married white women in South Africa, was the focus of her work as a Member of Parliament for the United Party,

¹⁷ Richard Mendelsohn, *Sammy Marks: the 'Uncrowned King of the Transvaal'*, David Philip in Association with Jewish Publications, Cape Town, 1991.

¹⁸ Richard Mendelsohn, 1991, pp. 181-183.

¹⁹ Gwynne Schrire. "Women and Welfare", *Jewish Affairs*, 48(2), Winter 1993: 85-88.

²⁰ Rose Norwich, "Jewish Women in Early Johannesburg", *Jewish Affairs* 48(2), 1993: 89-99.

between the years 1938 and 1958.²¹ On the other hand the issue contains not even a hint of the work of the well known activist and fighter for the rights of Black women, Ray Alexander Simon, who had by then been back in South Africa for three years and was not unknown to the Jewish community. This omission has now been addressed with the publication of Ray Alexander Simons' autobiography, *All My Life and All My Strength*, edited by Raymond Suttner, in 2004.²²

In the past ten years Richard Mendelsohn and Milton Shain have produced two very important works. The first, *Memories, Realities and Dreams*, published in 2002, is a collection of articles by experts in the field, on topics ranging from the Struggle against Apartheid, the South African War, antisemitism, to Yiddish, but completely ignoring any women's issues.²³ In their second book, published in 2008, Mendelsohn and Shain revisit the history of South African Jewry bringing it up to date and incorporating all the latest research. The express aim of the authors is to integrate topics, that in earlier works, such as Saron and Hotz's *The Jews of South Africa*, were either ignored or under played. These include antisemitism, radicalism, anti-Zionism, Yiddishism, the anti-Apartheid struggle, and criminality. Women are no longer invisible and feature relative to their significance and contribution to the history. They include the Baumann women of the Orange Free State Republic; the journalists, Ruth Schechter and Ruth First; the trade unionist, Ray Alexander Simons, the politicians, Bertha Solomon and Helen Suzman; the authors, Sarah Gertrude Millin, Nadine Gordimer; the artist, Irma Stern; and the Union of Jewish Women and the B'nai Zion organisations.²⁴

A slightly different slant on South African Jewish gender studies is contained in a major new book by the eminent South African historian, Charles Van Onselen, entitled, *The Fox and the Flies: the World of Joseph Silver: Racketeer and Psychopath*. This work follows the career of Joseph Silver, a Jewish pimp and white slave trader, from his home town of Kielce in Poland, to the East End of London, the Lower East Side of New York, South Africa, Buenos Aires, and western Europe,

²¹ Elaine N. Katz, "Bertha Solomon: a feminist for her time", *Jewish Affairs*, 48(2), 1993: 100-13.

²² Ray Alexander Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength*. STE Publishers, Johannesburg, 2004.

²³ Richard Mendelsohn and Milton Shain, eds, *Memories, Realities and Dreams: Aspects of the South African Jewish Experience*, Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2002.

²⁴ Richard Mendelsohn and Milton Shain, *The Jews of South Africa: an Illustrated History*, Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2008.

during the latter years of the nineteenth century to 1918. Silver enticed or entrapped a number of Jewish women, victims of the large scale impoverishment and social dislocation in eastern Europe, into prostitution, whereby they found their way to South Africa.²⁵ Excluded and marginalized, their lives hardly shed light on the making of South African Jewry. However their presence resulted in a remarkable demonstration of communal solidarity to help to stamp out these undesirable elements from the community and the wider society.

With the focus of this dissertation on the eastern European immigrant women, use will be made of South African Yiddish literature, both fiction and non-fiction, that has never before been seriously considered in any major work of South African Jewish history, and certainly not from a feminist perspective. The dissertation incorporates for the first time, the writer's own recently published translations of South African Yiddish works, as well as the large body of fiction and essays that have never before been translated or incorporated into South African historical research. Almost exclusively male authored, this literature reflects a community where males far outnumber females, and echoes male concerns of loneliness, alienation and desperation to find partners. Women are either absent or portrayed in a very negative light as grasping and materialistic. Leibl Feldman's *Yidn in Yohanesburg biz Yunyen, 31 May 1910*, originally published in 1956, and translated into English by the author of this dissertation in 2007,²⁶ contains useful information relating to marriage, including both attitudes as well as some early statistics highlighting marriages between Anglo-German and eastern European Jews.

Besides South African Yiddish literary works, the dissertation also utilises popular Yiddish works relevant to women's lives, published abroad, that were available at bookstores in South Africa at the time, such as Ozer Bloshteyn's *Kokh-bukh far Yudishe Froyen* (Cookbook for Jewish Women) published in Vilna in 1896.

²⁵ Charles Van Onselen, *The Fox and the Flies: the World of Joseph Silver, Racketeer and Psychopath*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2007.

²⁶ Leibl Feldman, *Yidn in Yohanesburg biz Yunyen, 31 May 1910*, Dorem-Afrikaner Yidisher Kultur-Federatsye, Johannesburg, 1956; Leibl Feldman, *The Jews of Johannesburg until Union 31 May 1910*, translated from the Yiddish by Veronica Penkin Belling, Jewish Publications – South Africa, Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 2007.

Another important source of information for the investigation of gender and family, is the ever growing collection of family memoirs, a product of the contemporary Jewish obsession with genealogical research. Very often privately published and circulated, these memoirs contain valuable information for gender and family research. An excellent example of this is the memoir by Ita Hersch (1871-1958), whose writings were collected, and translated by her grandson, Joshua Levy. This is the earliest record that we have of Jewish life in a small town in Lithuania by a woman and a scholar, who defied the norm, learning Hebrew alongside her brothers from her father, a *melamed* (Hebrew teacher). She was a contributor to the South African Hebrew journal, the *Barkai*.²⁷ This is the only South African memoir included in the bibliography of eastern European Jewish women, published in vol. 18 of the journal *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, in 2005, that includes 82 such memoirs.²⁸ Ita Hersch's daughter, Amelia Levy, edited the organ of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, *Jewish Affairs*, between 1952 and 1968, and also translated Yiddish poetry into English, that has also been privately published.

Recent articles include Edna Bradlow's survey of "The Position of the Women in the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation", in *The Centenary of the Great Synagogue, Gardens, 1905-2005*. This rather slight article focuses on the activities of the Anglo-German Jews, and confesses that as far as the lives of the eastern European Jewish women are concerned, they remain in 'Stygian darkness.' Howard Phillips' article "'A Move for the Better': Changing Health Status among Jewish Immigrants in Cape Town, 1881-1931" examines causes and statistics of mortality among the immigrants, including revealing statistics of infant mortality in the early immigration years.²⁹

Women's columns in newspapers are another invaluable source, central to the dissertation. The *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* had a regular women's column, initially entitled "Social matters: Our ladies' letter" and later, "Social and Fashionable" until approximately 1930, that reported on the activities and the attitudes of the Anglo-German Jewish ladies. The focus of the *Zionist Record*, that started in 1908 is not

²⁷ Ita Hersch, *The Writings... in Hebrew, Yiddish and English*; with a foreword by Dan Jacobson, Johannesburg, 2000.

²⁸ Karen Auerbach, "Bibliography", *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*. Vol. 18, Jewish Women in Eastern Europe, pp. 121-132.

²⁹ Howard Phillips, "'A Move for the Better': Changing Health Status among Jewish Immigrants in Cape Town, 1881-1931" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32(4), 2006: 591-601.

quite as broad, while the other popular English Jewish newspaper, *The South African Jewish Times*, started only in 1936. The earliest surviving Yiddish weekly, *Der Afrikaner (The African Jewish World)*, never had a women's section, nonetheless, humorous columns written by the journalist, Yakov Azriel Davidson, published between 1911 and 1913, provide valuable insights into the social life of early Jewish Johannesburg. *Der Afrikaner's* successor, *Di Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung, (The African Jewish Newspaper)*, first published in 1933, featured a women's column, *Froyen Velt (Women's World)*. Even though most of the articles were written by males and are taken from American Yiddish newspapers, they still reflect women's concerns. Other useful sources include advertisements and cookbooks.

As women's experiences feature rarely in published sources the main source of the dissertation is the collection of oral interviews that were conducted by the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research in the 1980s. These interviews, whose respondents were randomly selected, were never intended to interrogate the eastern European background of the informants, but rather to widen historical insight into Jewish life in South Africa in the early decades of the twentieth century. The selection criterion was age - over 75 years old - not origin. However, virtually 95 percent of the informants turned out to be either first or second generation immigrants from eastern Europe, who had either come to South Africa directly, or via the United Kingdom, and in a few cases via Israel or Australia. The special focus of this dissertation on the period following the First World War, in the 1920s, was chiefly determined by the fact that that was the time when most of the Oral History respondents, born on average between 1900 and 1910, were reaching maturity.

Structure

The dissertation is divided into three sections, entitled: "Setting up House", "Beyond Hearth and Home" and "Varieties of Integration: Case Studies of Extraordinary Women". United under the title "Setting up House" the first three chapters examine how women immigrants from eastern Europe, in contrast to their co-religionists from England, Germany, and the Netherlands, established a home in a strange and far away land. This section opens at the time of the great migration, between 1880 and 1911, when the local Jewish population of an estimated 4000 Jews had increased to 50 000

by the time the first census of the Union of South Africa was taken in 1911.³⁰ A second wave of immigration from eastern Europe in the mid 1920s, peaked just before the introduction of the Immigration Quota Act of 1930 that severely curtailed eastern European immigration.

Entitled “Women’s Journeys from eastern Europe to South Africa”, Chapter One investigates the circumstances surrounding the emigration of this intensely traditional and close knit Jewish community, predominantly from Lithuania, from the point of view of the women, exploring the conjunction of their living conditions, educational opportunities, religion and politics. Like Sydney Stahl Weinberg’s *World of Our Mothers*, which describes the migration of eastern European Jewish women to the United States (1988),³¹ this chapter is based on oral testimony, in this case of approximately 32 female immigrants who were old enough at the time of immigration to reflect on their lives. However, unlike the American women explored by Baum, Hyman, and Michel³² whose focus was the Jewish Labour Bund, (the Jewish Socialist movement in Poland and Russia, founded in 1897), the focus of the women who came to South Africa from Lithuania, was the Zionist movement. The heritage of these immigrant women left an indelible imprint that has become synonymous with the image of South African Jewry.

Particular attention will be paid to the timing of women’s immigration in relation to their men, a timing that created much hardship, but also led to the emergence of a breed of independent women, capable of fending for their families on their own. They were the forerunner of the ‘New Jewish women’ who would emerge in South Africa after the First World War.

Chapter Two, “A Woman’s Place: the Neighbourhood,” surveys the immigrant precincts in the main areas of settlement - District Six and Maynard Street in Cape Town, and Ferreirastown and Doornfontein in Johannesburg - but life in the smaller country towns will also be considered. This chapter will illustrate how the eastern European women transplanted the way of life of their home communities,

³⁰ Gideon Shimoni, 1984, p. 5.

³¹ Sidney Stahl Weinberg, *World of our Mothers*, Schocken, New York, 1988.

³² Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman & Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America*, New American Library, New York, 1977.

transcending and transforming the rules that had formerly governed their lives. With husbands, now being the main breadwinners, often forced to operate their businesses on a Saturday, the women had, in addition, to assume the primary responsibility for the transmission of the Jewish tradition to their children. Accordingly this chapter will focus on the interface of work and living conditions, family and domestic Judaism - the observance of Judaism in the home and in the network of immigrant boarding houses, as well as its facilitators: the neighbourhood synagogues, the Jewish bookstores and the kosher food stores. Although initially perceived as outsiders, in the collective memory the way of life of these women today epitomize the essence of South African Judaism.

Marriage is the ultimate determinant of status for women, and exactly how this was affected in South Africa, is the subject of Chapter Three, 'Marriage strategies.' The effects of the gender imbalance in the small Jewish population that gradually began to level off during this period will be explored, as well as the persistence of the practice of 'arranged marriages' versus the shift towards 'companionate marriage'. Although more of a male than a female concern, women's attitudes to intermarriage will be considered, and particularly its representation in South African Yiddish literature. Miscegenation – interracial marriage – a specifically South African problem, will also be considered, and particularly its very rare appearance in South African Yiddish and English literature.

Entitled "Beyond Hearth and Home", Section Two explores the conditions that facilitated women's move beyond the home into the workplace, the welfare scene and the Zionist movement, ultimately to obtain the parliamentary vote. The section opens with the chapter "Education and Careers for Jewish Women." While both very limited before the First World War, the post war years saw a softening of attitudes to women's work, together with the gradual improvement in women's educational and employment prospects and the emergence of a very small group of professional women. The educational attainments of Jewish women, like that of their men, tended to be disproportionate to their numbers, but few pursued careers for more than a few years. The few that did, favoured teaching, writing, journalism, art, law and politics. The lives of individual women, such as Bertha Solomon, Sarah Gertrude Millin, Ray Alexander Simons, Ellen Hellmann, Irma Stern, Sarah Goldblatt, Muriel Alexander

and Leontine Sagan, who will be examined in greater detail in Section Three, *Varieties of Integration: Case Studies of Extraordinary Woman*”, stand out for their contribution to the culture of their adopted country.

Women’s organizations are the focus of Chapters Five to Seven. These are: “Women and Welfare”, “The Feminization of Zionism”, and “Jewish Women and the Franchise.” On the communal scene, South Africa did not produce women as influential as Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist organisation in the United States³³, Lily Montague, the driving force behind Liberal Judaism in England, or Rebecca Sieff, the founder of the British Women’s Zionist Organisation, and one of the founders of the WIZO, the Women’s International Zionist organization, both of whom were active in the suffragist movement.³⁴ This is most likely due to the much smaller size of the community, its more recent history, effectively only dating back to the 1890s, as well as its relative isolation at the tip of Africa. In addition the fact that a nominal Orthodoxy prevailed in the synagogue, together with the late introduction and peripheral nature of the Reform movement, meant that women have always played a marginal role in the synagogue and Temple. Names such as Rebecca Klagsbrun, on the Welfare scene, or Katie Gluckmann and Ethel Hayman, in the Zionist movement, are relatively unknown. The only personality who stands out at all is Toni Saphra, prominent on the welfare and the Zionist scene at the Cape and in the Transvaal, and the founder of the Union of Jewish Women in 1932.

Zionism achieved a very early foothold among South African Jews, and from the earliest times its support was overwhelmingly female. Unlike the early Welfare societies that were dominated by Anglo-German women, many of whom had arrived before the main wave of immigration from eastern Europe, the Zionist societies were initially the domain of the eastern European immigrant women. However in the course of time these societies proved to be a mixing ground and a leveler for Anglo-German and eastern European women. Both the Welfare and the Zionist societies

³³ Allon Gal, “The Zionist Vision of Henrietta Szold”, in Shulamit Reinharz & Mark A. Raider, eds, *American Jewish Women and the Zionist Enterprise*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, Mass., c2005, pp. 23-45.

³⁴ See Linda Gordon Kuzmak, *Women’s Cause: the Jewish Women’s Movement in England and the United States*. Columbia University, New York, 1987.

were enhanced by the formation in 1932, of an umbrella organization, the Union of Jewish Women, that championed women's cause combining welfare work within and beyond the Jewish community with education and Zionism.

Women in South Africa have been historically less empowered than their sisters in Europe or the United States, due to the conservative patriarchal conventions of South Africa's racially divided society. In the third chapter of this trilogy, Jewish women's participation in the Women's Enfranchisement movement will be explored. Although marginal in the Jewish community, patronized almost exclusively by a handful of Anglo-German women, the Women's Enfranchisement movement had a significant influence on women's status within the Jewish community, helping to accelerate their participation and voting rights on committees in the synagogue.

Section Three is dedicated to investigating "Varieties of Integration" utilising twelve case studies of extraordinary women who defied the norms laid down in the first two sections, be it by virtue of lifestyle, career, or through radical or alternative cultural politics. The twelve case studies are divided into two chapters dedicated to 'Politics' and 'Culture', respectively.

Under the rubric of Politics are included five women on opposite sides of the political spectrum: United Party supporters, Bertha Solomon, South Africa's first Jewish woman parliamentarian, and Sarah Gertrude Millin, South Africa's foremost author before the second World War, whose fiction, biographies and commentaries, were politically inspired. On the opposite side, are intellectual socialist, Ruth Schechter Alexander, who transferred allegiances from Zionism to Jewish Socialism and then to Communism, Ray Alexander Simons, a dyed in the wool Communist from the Old Country, and finally Ellen Hellmann, social anthropologist and executive member of the South African Institute of Race Relations, who fought Apartheid within the system. This chapter will illustrate how their divergent paths can be traced from Jewish political ideologies influenced by their own or by their parents' migration.

Under the rubric of Culture are seven women who defied the gender stereotypes described in the first two sections, and dedicated their lives first and foremost to a career rather than to marriage. Central to this group of women are the avant garde

lesbian couple, Roza van Gelderen and Hilda Purwitsky, prominent teachers and journalists in the Cape Town Jewish community. They were at the centre of a group of talented women that included Irma Stern, South Africa's most prominent artist before the Second World War, and Sarah Goldblatt, literary executrix of the Afrikaans poet, Cornelis Langenhoven, who dedicated her life to the promotion of the Afrikaans language. In Johannesburg are three actor directors who made seminal contributions to South African theatre. They are Muriel Alexander, founder of the Johannesburg Repertory Players who kept South African theatre alive during the period before the emergence of professional companies; Leontine Sagan whose career on the German and British stage, inspired the founding of a National Theatre Organization, the forerunner of the National Arts Council; and Sarah Sylvia whose valiant efforts kept Yiddish theatre alive in South Africa until approximately 1960.

Finally it should be noted that a dissertation of this nature cannot possibly be fully comprehensive and there will inevitably be women who have been left out, whose lives were no less significant than those who have been included. The selection process was determined by a number of factors. Firstly, the period under examination, 1880-1939, meant that the majority of the subjects of the dissertation were no longer alive. Moreover as women's lives are extremely elusive, and there are few diaries or memoirs to be found among the archival sources, the dissertation relied very heavily on the collection of oral interviews that were conducted in Cape Town in the 1980s as part of the Kaplan Centre Oral History project. While interviews were also conducted in Johannesburg, and passed on to the University of Cape Town (although several are missing), they are not of the same quantity, as thorough or as systematic as those that were conducted in Cape Town. Hence Chapters Two to Four, "A Women's Place: the Neighbourhood", "Marriage Strategies" and "Education and Careers for Jewish Women", that are heavily reliant on the interviews, are necessarily biased towards Cape Town. There was simply not as much information available for Johannesburg.

Similarly the choice of case studies was governed by several factors. Firstly by the availability of sources. Secondly by virtue of the theme of the dissertation, that is set during the migration years, women whose lives most reflected the influences of Jewish migration were preferred. A third consideration related to the time frame, 1880 to 1939, meaning that even though the majority of the women examined lived on long

beyond 1939, the formative processes of their lives and certain key achievements that determined the course of their lives, occurred before 1939.

Unless otherwise indicated all the translation from the Yiddish is that of the author. The system of Romanization very broadly follows that of the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, unless a more popular spelling is current or the text is taken from an external source. With some exceptions, the Hebrew words follow the Ashkenazic (Yiddish) pronunciation. The spelling of the eastern European towns and villages conforms to the Yiddish version, cited in Nancy Schoenburg and Stuart Schoenburg's *Lithuanian Jewish Communities* (Garland Publishing, 1991) and Gary Mokotoff and Sallyann Amdur Sack's *Where once We Walked: a Guide to the Jewish Communities Destroyed in the Holocaust* (Avotaynu, 1991).

Lastly I would like to thank my supervisors, Professors Milton Shain, Director of the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, and Richard Mendelsohn in Historical Studies, as well as Gwynne Schrire Robins, Deputy Director of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, Cape Council, for all their assistance and support.

SECTION ONE
SETTING UP HOUSE

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER ONE

WOMEN'S JOURNEYS FROM EASTERN EUROPE TO SOUTH AFRICA

The Eastern European immigrants who left their homes between 1881 and 1914, in the wake of the assassination of Czar Alexander II and the outbreak of the pogroms,¹ were escaping lives of grinding poverty, discrimination and lack of economic opportunity. It is to these immigrants, who swelled the local population of approximately 4 000 English, German and Dutch Jews to almost 50 000 in 1911,² that the cultural and religious content of South African Jewish life is attributable, rather than to their more westernized counterparts, whose Judaism was in the main tenuous.

Although much has already been written about the immigration experiences of the eastern European Jewish men, very little is known of the background and experiences of their wives, daughters, sisters, or mothers, who were forced to remain behind in eastern Europe until their male relatives had saved enough money to send for them. South African Yiddish literature is written almost exclusively by men, with only a handful of women.³ South African Jewish women's writing about their experiences in eastern Europe is extremely rare. The recent bibliography of eastern European Jewish women, published in vol. 18 of the journal *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, in 2005, includes 82 memoirs but only one of them has a South African bearing, the memoirs of Ita Hersch (1871-1958), the wife of Meir Dovid Hersch, the earliest South African correspondent to the eastern European Hebrew and Yiddish press, who came to settle in South Africa in 1893.⁴ Because of the scarcity of memoir literature, most of the information in this chapter is derived from the collection of Kaplan Centre interviews conducted in the 1980s in Cape Town and in Johannesburg.

¹ Pogroms are attacks on Jews that occurred in Eastern Europe between 1881 and 1922, see John Klier & Shlomo Lambroza, *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1992.

² Gideon Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism*, 1980, p. 5.

³ The exceptions include: Sore Aisen, Leah Benson-Rink, Rochel Bergman, Anna Bloch, Chaye Fedler, R. Levin Brainin, R. Rogoff, Taibe Segal, Rochel Turok. Veronica Belling, *Bibliography of South African Jewry*, Jewish Publications, South Africa, Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 1997, pp. 160-163.

⁴ Karen Auerbach, "Bibliography", *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*. Vol. 18, Jewish Women in Eastern Europe, 2005: 121-132.

In Lithuania, the origin of the majority of the immigrants to South Africa, where the great rabbinical academies in Telz, Slobodka, Ponevezh, and Kelme held sway,⁵ status was determined by lineage and to be born into a long line of rabbis and scholars was very prestigious. On her father's side, Ita Hersch (1871-1958) could trace her lineage to the seventeenth century Cabalist, Isaiah Horowitz. One of her uncles was the Head of the Pinsk-Karlin yeshiva. All her brothers obtained *smikha* (rabbinical ordination), one of them being the rabbi of Vorna.⁶

Of all the regions that made up the Russian empire, Lithuania was the least industrialized and most economically backward. Earning a living was frequently a haphazard undertaking. Since government regulations prevented Jews from owning land or sources of raw material, many served as middlemen, selling fruit, wheat, beets, while others simply lived "by their wits." Because of this precarious existence, any added income brought in by a wife was useful if not essential for a family. In rural areas, women often grew cucumbers, cabbages and carrots and sold what they did not need in the market.⁷ In some cases, the wives would provide the sole means of support, while their husbands devoted their time to religious study in the Bet Midrash (House of Study).⁸ Ita Hersch's father was a *melamed* (Hebrew teacher) who taught *kheyder* (religious elementary school) while the family lived off the earnings of her mother who operated a shop from their home. She also grew vegetables in an adjacent plot of land, of which any surplus would be sold at the market.⁹

⁵ Between 1795 and 1914 Lithuania was incorporated into the Russian empire, located on the northwestern border of the Pale. South Africa's Eastern European diaspora is unique in its homogeneity. The Zionist historian, Nahum Sokolov, described it as 'a colony of Lithuania'. South African Jews are called *Litvaks*, a term used exclusively to refer to Jewish Lithuanians. The name has a geographical connotation which is broader than the boundaries of modern day Lithuania, incorporating the pre-1917 boundaries of the Czarist Russian provinces of Kovno, Vilna, Grodno and Northern Suwalki, which are Polish-Lithuanian in character, and Vitebsk, Minsk and Mogilev which are Bylo-Russian in character, G.. Shimoni, 1980, p. 5; Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1983), p. 215.

⁶ Joshua Levy, "Amelia Levy: biography", in Amelia Levy, *Translations of Yiddish, Hebrew and German Poetry into English Verse*, Johannesburg, 2009, p. 6.

⁷ Sydney Stahl Weinberg, *World of our Mothers: the Lives of Jewish Immigrant Women*, Schocken, New York, 1988, p. 6.

⁸ The poorest families tended to be the families where the husband was studying Torah or teaching Hebrew in the *kheyder*, the religious elementary school. These families were dependent on the earnings of their women, who generally operated a shop of sorts or a bakery. Rose Berelowitz, interviewed by L. Robinson, Cape Town, June 1982, BC949, 0019, p. 16, 18.

⁹ Ita Hersch, *The Writings*, 2000, pp. 19-20.

In her memoirs Ita Hersch presents a remarkably detailed description of the living conditions of her family in her hometown of Trishik, a small town in Lithuania, who were sharing a house with several families, with close to 20 people living under a single roof.

The house in which we lived belonged to Rachel Tsireleh and there were neighbours living in every part of it. The best part of it she rented to father on condition that she would live in our kitchen...

Entrance to the house from the front was through a passage, a small area with an earthen floor... In the passage stood a barrel that served as the pantry...

From the passage there was an opening to a spacious room with three windows. This room we called "home". Apart from the "home", we had another room called "alkir", and the third room was the kitchen, in which Rachel also had a share...

Part of the house contained a shop and behind that two rooms... One of the neighbours kept the shop... In each room lived a family of four and occasionally five people... In the corner of the house there was another room, where a widow lived with her son and two daughters.¹⁰

Twenty years later, the mass migration of Jews to the west, mainly to the United States, but also to South Africa, had eased the economic situation somewhat. This was because the emigrants rapidly began to send financial assistance to their relatives in Russia.¹¹ The family of Tilly Whiteman (b. 1897), for example, were handsomely supported from the earnings of their father and grandfather's cartage business in Johannesburg. Tilly says:

I was the most spoiled child in this world because my father was very generous..., there was a letter every week, and a draft every month and my mother lived like a princess what does she want to go to Africa for, we thought Africa – like the Americans think Africa the animals roam in the street...¹²

¹⁰ Ita Hersch, 2000, pp. 20-21.

¹¹ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol.14, p. 449.

¹² Tilly Whiteman, interviewed by L. Levine, Johannesburg, 8 May 1985, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, p. 5. This situation is confirmed by a satirical column in the South African Yiddish newspaper, *Der Afrikaner*, that claimed that, "In the old country we lived like princesses and, if not to improve our

Thus the interviews with the immigrants of the early 1900s reflect a standard of living somewhat higher than that described by Ita Hersch. Families in Lithuania, Belarus, the Ukraine, and Latvia, were living in single family homes with on average four rooms consisting of a hall, dining room and two bedrooms. Five or even six rooms, were not unknown for wealthier families. In the inter-War period in Libau, a thriving port city in Latvia, Riva Abrahamson lived in an 8 room apartment with three bedrooms, fine furniture and indoor plumbing.

Servants were not uncommon.¹³ They could be Jewish girls from very poor families, or Lithuanian gentiles. However if a cook were employed she had to be Jewish.¹⁴ If this were not the case, it was a sure sign that the family was no longer observant.¹⁵ In his Yiddish cookbook for Jewish women published in Vilna in 1897, Ozer Bloshteyn specifically directs advice to Jewish women who were working as cooks in wealthy Jewish homes.¹⁶ The Kaplan Centre Oral History Project contains two references to the employment of cooks, both from wealthy households in Latvia, Bloshteyn's home country. In the one case the cook accompanied the family to South Africa, where she eventually married and made her own home.¹⁷

Virtually all of the respondents among the Kaplan Centre interviewees, describe their families as being strictly observant, lighting candles and celebrating Friday nights

lot, what do we need such a miserable place as Africa?" The City Kokhelefl, "A Prayer for Jewish Wives", *Der Afrikaner*, cited in Leibl Feldman, *The Jews of Johannesburg: Until Union, 31 May 1910*, translated by Veronica Belling, Jewish Publications – South Africa, Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 2007, p. 181.

¹³ Riva Abrahamson, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, March 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0002, pp. 1-2.

¹⁴ Rachel Lipshitz, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, March 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0162, p. 8.

¹⁵ Dora Schapiro, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0219, p. 7.

¹⁶ "A young woman takes up a position as a cook. She is either totally ignorant or knows very little about the art of cooking. She is desperate: she must prepare meals, and she does not how to begin, or she knows very little, and is terrified that she may spoil the food, and lose her position. Here is a cookbook that she can read and understand, a tremendous boon. Now she can prepare all the meals required of her with a quiet mind, without heartache. She can be confident that she will give satisfaction, and that she will be appreciated." Ozer Bloshteyn, *Kokhbukh far Yudishe froyen*, Mets, Vilna, 1897, p. iii.

¹⁷ Feodora Clouts' parents brought out a Jewish governess/cook who later married and settled in Cape Town, Feodora Clouts, interviewed by John Simons, May/June 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0036 p. 9. Zalman Avin's family employed a cook in Riga in Latvia, Zalman Avin, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0010 , 3 tape cassettes in Hebrew – has not been transcribed or translated into English.

with a meal of *gefilte* fish, and chicken soup, with *zmires* (Sabbath songs) and grace before and after meals. With the prohibition of cooking on the Sabbath, a *cholent* – a mixture of meat, beans, barley and carrots was placed in a crockery pot in the oven on Friday around 4 p.m. and left to cook until midday on Saturday. In his famous panegyric, the German poet, Heinrich Heine, describes *cholent* as the food of the Gods, “koscheres Ambrosia”, that God taught Moses on Mount Sinai.¹⁸ The interview with Sadie Festenstein (b. 1908), whose father was a rabbi, contains a haunting description of late Sabbath afternoons in the small *shtetl* of Vorna where her family lived.

I remember that in Lithuania you could not light lamps on Saturdays until father came back from synagogue when *Shabbat* was finished and we did not have electric lights..., and it got dark very, very early, about three o’ clock in the afternoon, or four o clock, and we used to wait and Mommy used to entertain us, we used to sing folk songs... and tell us stories... until my father came home because then we could light the lamps and put on the samovar and have tea.¹⁹

The exception to this rule is Esther Green from a wealthy family living in Vilna, who describes her father, who worked for a large firm and traveled a lot, as “a sophisticated man” who was not that religious.²⁰ However already during this early period the small closed communities were becoming exposed to outside influences. This manifested itself in the increasing Russification of the wives and daughters who were left behind, a process that was facilitated by the money that was being sent home from South Africa. In “A Prayer for Jews in Africa whose Daughters in the Old Country are “Finishing”, and Whose Wives Write Letters”, that appeared in the Yiddish newspaper column, *A Pekl Tekhines* (A Bundle of Prayers), in *Der Afrikaner* in 1912, Davidson mocks this growing trend.

¹⁸ Tor, “In the Communal Looking Glass, VII. Jewish Dishes”, *Zionist Record*, 26 November 1926, p. 21.

¹⁹ Sadie Festenstein, interviewed by Hilda Fleisch, Johannesburg, 10 January 1985, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, p. 4.

²⁰ Esther Green, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0088, p. 7.

I remember the early days, when I first began to receive letters from my wife telling me about Chayke's "finishing" classes, I asked her several times what does this mean "finishing"? And several times she replied, asking if I were living in a jungle that I did not know what "finishing" is? In the old country every small child knows what it is and you don't? Is it because you don't want to send me the money? And when I received a joyful letter that everyone is calling my Chayke, Agafya Gregorovna, I asked them: what sort of names are those, and my wife replied that Agafya means Chayka, and Gregorovna means Gershon's daughter. Then my blood began to boil and I wrote: You can do what you like with your own names, but leave my poor name "Gershon" alone. But they ignored me and I remain a *grine*.²¹

Education for girls

In the *kheyder*, (religious elementary school), as in the synagogue, before 1900, girls were outsiders. As all Jewish education was religious, it was regarded as the exclusive province of Jewish boys. For the mid 1870s, Ita Hersch was exceptional, in that she taught herself to read by listening to her playmates' fathers teaching them the Hebrew alphabet and the biblical verses that she then memorized. When she demonstrated to her sister that she was able to read, her sister exhorted her mother to ask their father to allow her to study with the boys at his *kheyder*. Despite misgivings that his pupils' fathers would object on the premise that he was more interested in her than in their sons, he agreed to allow Ita to sit at a desk and listen to the lessons. In this way she progressed from class to class,²² developing into an accomplished biblical and Talmudic scholar.

Twenty years later, several of the female respondents interviewed for the Kaplan Centre Oral History Project, mention that they attended *kheyder* together with their brothers. According to a survey done by the Russian Free Economic Society in 1894 five percent of the approximately 202 000 Jewish pupils attending the *kheyders*, were

²¹ "A Prayer for Jews in Africa whose Daughters are "Finishing", and Whose Wives Write Letters", in Yakov Azriel Davidson, *His Writings in the Yiddish Newspaper, Der Afrikaner, 1911-1914*, translated by Veronica Belling, Jewish Publications – South Africa Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 2009, p. 53

²² Ita Hersch, 2000, p. 22.

girls.²³ By the 1870s, however, a network of secular private schools, the larger proportion of which were for Jewish girls, had sprung up in the Pale of Settlement.²⁴ The nearest girls' school to Trishik, where Ita Hersch's family lived, would have been in Telz only three Russian miles away. It is possible, however, that these schools, that were simultaneously praised for their enlightened education, and vilified for their lack of Jewish content,²⁵ were not acceptable to her religious *kheyder* teacher father.

A generation later, it seems to have become the rule rather than the exception, for young girls in the larger towns, to attend a Russian government primary school. However, as a result of the Jewish quota, the high cost of the schools, and the lack of availability, very few went on to high school. Some families, were even too poor to afford to send their daughters to primary school. Rose Berelowitz (b.1896) from Ponevezh never went to school and had to go out to work at the age of 12.²⁶ Thirteen year old Lily Korber (b.1905) had to leave school after only 3 years, to take care of her youngest sister, who was still a baby.²⁷ In Ponedel, a small village in Lithuania, Ruth Green and her sister attended school on alternate days as they were forced to share a single pair of rubber boots that was all that their father, who was often sick and unable to earn much of a living, could afford to buy for them. She recalls:

The Ponedel school only went up to Standard 4. We did not need a school uniform but we needed shoes – rubber boots so that our feet would not freeze. Many never went to school. My oldest sister was not so clever so only my one sister and I attended. She would go to school one day and I the next day.²⁸

When no school was available, it was not uncommon for a few families to club together to hire a teacher for their daughters. Vocational training, such as

²³ Zvi Halevi, *Jewish Schools Under Czarism and Communism: a Struggle for Identity*, Springer Pub. Co., New York, c1976, p. 48.

²⁴ H. S. Kazdan, *Fun Kheyder un Shkoles biz Tsisho*, Shlomo Mendelson Fund, Meksiko, 1956, pp. 202-203.

²⁵ Eliyana R. Adler, "Women's education in the pages of the Russian Jewish press", *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 18, 2005, Jewish Women in Eastern Europe, pp. 121-132.

²⁶ Rose Berelowitz, interviewed by L. Robinson, Cape Town, 1982, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0019, p. 17.

²⁷ Lily Korber, interviewed by Ilana Korber, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0144, p. 2.

²⁸ Ruth Green, "Childhood in Lithuania," as told to Gwynne Robins, 19 March 1992.

dressmaking, was also common.²⁹ In Kharkov in the Ukraine, Etta Rappaport (b. 1906) was apprenticed to a pharmacist from the age of ten.³⁰ Minna Fish (b. 1905), from Tavrig, a small town in Lithuania, near the Prussian border, was sent over the border to a high school in Konigsburg, where she was one of only two Jewish pupils among 520 students.³¹

In the 1920s a network of state subsidized Hebrew and Yiddish medium schools was established in independent Lithuania. Hebrew education was so prevalent and popular during this period, that in his world history of Jewish education, Zvi Scharfstein describes Lithuania as a miniature *Erets Yisroel* (Land of Israel).³² Yet only one respondent (from Salant³³), seems to have attended a Hebrew school, probably because the women came from towns where there were no such schools, or because they attended school before their establishment. Quite a few of the women from Lithuania, received their basic education in Russia, where they were evacuated during the First World War. In the 1920s Celia Chiat's mother let rooms in her large house to six students at the Hebrew school in Shavel.³⁴

In Vilna in independent Poland, Esther Green (b. 1905) attended a Yiddish medium high school. Her teachers included Max Weinreich, founder of the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, and the Yiddish poet, Moshe Kulbak. She says of them that "every teacher was an idealist".³⁵ Zysle Tabachowicz was one of only two girls from her village to attend high school, the rest were boys. She had to leave home to attend the Yiddish medium high school in Vilna, where it was possible to obtain a school leaving certificate that enabled one to continue to tertiary education. She boarded with a mother and her two daughters, in a single room, sharing a bed with one of the

²⁹ Sonia Kolnik, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, June 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0143, p. 2.

³⁰ Etta Rappaport, interviewed by Ilana Korber, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0201, p. 1.

³¹ Minna Fish, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, April 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0060, p. 7.

³² Zvi Scharfstein, *Toldot ha-Hinukh be-Yisrael be-Dorot Ahronim*, Ogen, New York, 1949, Vol. 3, pp. 223-234.

³³ Rachel Glezer, interviewed by L. Robinson, Cape Town, August 1982, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0292, p. 5.

³⁴ Celia Chiat, interviewed by L. Robinson, Cape Town, January 1982, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0033, p. 26.

³⁵ Esther Green, 1983, p. 14.

daughters. When she completed school, she was unable to study Medicine, because of the *numerus clausus*, and attended the Yiddish Teaching Seminary in Vilna instead.³⁶

Hebrew medium education never took root in independent Latvia in the same way as in Lithuania. Yiddish medium schools enjoyed greater support, but the majority of the Jewish pupils attended Russian or German government schools rather than Jewish schools.³⁷ Esther Mrost (b.1897) went to a German medium girls school in Telsen, where they were obliged to attend school on Saturdays, although they did not have to write.³⁸ Chaya Shapiro was sent from Plungyan to Riga to obtain an education. There she took the place of a Jewish girl, who had given up her place in the Jewish quota, as she was not willing to attend school on Saturdays.³⁹ In Libau Rachel Lipschitz (b. 1903) went to a private rather than to a public Russian gymnasium as although it was much more expensive there were no classes on a Saturday.⁴⁰

Boys went to *kheyder* from ages of three to thirteen, but girls had little to no supplementary Jewish education. Jewish education for girls generally consisted of being sent to a teacher to learn to read and write Hebrew before starting school.⁴¹ Rachel Lipschitz's mother taught her how to write Yiddish, so that she would be able to write letters to her one day when she went away, because she didn't know any Russian.⁴²

A couple of Latvian respondents attended Commercial colleges,⁴³ and one, Chana Zbenowicz (b. 1908), completed the Hebrew Teaching Academy in Riga. She taught at a nursery school for underprivileged Jewish children.⁴⁴ Only one respondent, Esther Green, from Vilna, attended a university, although she was prevented from studying

³⁶ Zysle Tabachowicz, interviewed by Riva Krut, Johannesburg, 17 February 1982, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, pp. 8-9, 11-12.

³⁷ Scharfstein, *Toldot ha-Hinukh be-Yisrael*, Vol. 3, pp. 234-243.

³⁸ Esther Mrost, interviewed by Milton Shain, Johannesburg, February 1982, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, pp. 20-23.

³⁹ Larna Bronstein, Interview, 5 March, 2009.

⁴⁰ Rachel Lipshitz, 1983, p. 4.

⁴¹ Sheina Baskin, interviewed by M. Baskin, Cape Town, July 1982, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0012, pp. 16-17.

⁴² Rachel Lipshitz, 1983, pp. 3-6.

⁴³ Rachel Lipshitz, 1983, p. 3; Riva Abrahamson, 1983, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Chana Zbenowicz, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, April 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0284, pp. 14-16.

medicine. She studied Humanities but was unable to complete her degree as she immigrated to South Africa.⁴⁵

Zionism and Socialism.

Between the two World Wars the Zionist movement was particularly active in Lithuania, with a proliferation of Zionist youth movements, a network of Hebrew schools, and some very Zionistic rabbis. Lithuania was situated in a buffer region between Russian and Polish culture, among peoples whose national culture held no attraction for other ethnic groups, making Lithuanian Jewry one of the least acculturated of all eastern European Jewries.⁴⁶ The combination of minimal acculturation and a deeply rooted orthodoxy undergoing a process of secularization encouraged both by the government and the Haskalah, produced an environment in which modern Jewish nationalism flourished. Thus Lithuania became a centre of Bundism, Folkism, and Zionism, as well as a bastion of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature and journalism.⁴⁷

Virtually every single respondent from Lithuania had participated in the Zionist movement or was sympathetic towards it. Mary Segal (b. 1897) who grew up in the city of Vilkomir in Lithuania before the First World War, describes Zionism as the formative influence in her life, she relates:

... when I was about six years of age my mother sent me... to a teacher to learn Yiddish, by that time Yiddish was taught grammatically, my teacher was an ardent Zionist... He used to get a fortnightly *Congress Zeitung* and as soon as I learned to read I used to devour that and of course became an ardent Zionist. In ... [my] childish imagination we were going to have our own king and queen... and our own military... because we were all afraid of the Russian police..., we used to run when we saw a policeman we ran.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Esther Green, 1983, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁶ Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, Press, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1983, p. 215.

⁴⁷ Ezra Mendelsohn, 1983, p. 215.

⁴⁸ Mary Segal, 1983, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 17.1.1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0287, p. 3.

Rachel Glezer (b. 1909) from Salant, who went to a Beys Yankev school,⁴⁹ testified to the huge influence exerted by teachers at the Jewish schools and by several very Zionistic rabbis, inspiring many of the youth from her town to emigrate to Palestine.⁵⁰ In Shavel in the 1920s the Hashomer Hatsair and the Maccabi held meetings, organised vocational and agricultural training, as well as Hebrew lessons to prepare the youth for life in Israel. Celia Chiat (b. 1905), who lived in Shavel between 1924 and 1930, remembers Jabotinsky, the founder of the Revisionist Zionist movement, stopping briefly in Shavel on his way to Germany. Hundreds of Zionist youth flocked to the railway station with flags and banners, singing songs, to hear him speak.⁵¹

In the inter-War period, six out of seven Latvian respondents were either apathetic to Zionism or tended to Socialism. During 1917 the Bolsheviks enjoyed considerable support in Latvia, and during the interwar years the Social Democratic Party remained a force to be reckoned with.⁵² The Latvian women's testimony indicates a clear class distinction between the Zionists and the Socialists, with the Zionist [Hebrew] school being associated with the children from wealthy homes⁵³ and the members of the Zionist group as having a matric, and considering themselves superior to the working class youth who did not.⁵⁴ In Varaklan, near the Russian border in Latvia, Ray Alexander Simons and her sisters, were exceptional in their socialist revolutionary zeal. The sisters were particularly influenced by the principal of their school, Leib Yoffe, a Communist and a close family friend, who was also the mayor of Varaklan⁵⁵ (See Chapter Eight, Varieties of Integration: Case Studies, Political).

The one exception among the informants from Latvia, is Chana Zbenowicz, whose family moved to Latvia from Vashki in Lithuania, who was an ardent Zionist and Hebraist. Chana relates that although Zionism had no influence at the Russian school

⁴⁹ Beys Yankev was the Agudes Yisroel network of schools for girls, established in Krakow in 1917 by Sarah Schenirer, who sought to fight the spread of secularization and acculturation among Orthodox women who until then had received no formal Jewish education. The network, that began in Poland, spread to Czechoslovakia, Rumania and Lithuania. In 1935 there were 16 schools with 2000 students in Lithuania. "Beys Yankev", *The Yivo Encyclopedia of the Jews in Eastern Europe*, Gershon Hundert, Editor in Chief, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2008, vol. 1, pp. 175-176.

⁵⁰ Rachel Glezer, 1982, p. 6, 10.

⁵¹ Celia Chiat, 1982, pp. 20-21, 25-26.

⁵² Ezra Mendelsohn, 1983, pp. 241-242.

⁵³ Gessie Brooks, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, September 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0029, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Rachel Lipschitz, 1983, p. 29.

⁵⁵ Simons, 2004, pp. 30-31, 33, 40.

she attended in Riga, she belonged to a small group that used to get together to sing Hebrew songs. Her Jewish education, however, only started in earnest, when she left school and went to the Hebrew Teaching Seminary in Riga, where she started learning Hebrew from scratch.⁵⁶

Reasons for immigrating.

In the pre-1914 period, except for the single respondent from Kiev in the Ukraine, whose family lived in constant fear of pogroms,⁵⁷ the physical threat of antisemitism was not a direct reason for immigration. The small towns in Lithuania and Belarus were not beset by pogroms, nonetheless the Jews were subjected to constant harassment from the police as well as from their neighbours. Freda Saacks (b. 1895) from Ponevezh remembers the police coming round regularly to search for signs of anti-government activity, and recalls hiding a gun for a neighbour in a woodpile.⁵⁸ Sheina Baskin, in Neswich in Belorus, remembers Christian families blocking their windows so that they wouldn't see the Jews going for their Saturday afternoon walk.⁵⁹

Different factors influenced the timing of immigration.⁶⁰ In the pre-1914 period, many of the men left to avoid conscription in the Czar's army with the imminent outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905.⁶¹ The devastation of the First World War and the Russian Revolution in the Lithuanian villages was the spur for thousands of Jews to leave.

The family of Sadie Festenstein, from the small town of Vorna in Lithuania, came to South Africa when the death of her father, a rabbi, left her mother and seven brothers and sisters, destitute. Her brothers, who were studying in a *yeshiva* (rabbinical academy), were keen to leave in order to obtain a western education.⁶² Other factors

⁵⁶ Chana Zbenovicz, 1983, p. 14.

⁵⁷ Minnie Benson, 1983, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 7.2.1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0016, pp. 2-4.

⁵⁸ Frieda Saacks, interviewed by Fern Saacks, Cape Town, August 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0214, pp. 4-5.

⁵⁹ Sheina Baskin, 1982, p. 9.

⁶⁰ See Gur Alroey, "And I Remained Alone in a Vast Land": Women in the Jewish Migration from Eastern Europe", *Jewish Social Studies*, 12(3), 2006: 39-72.

⁶¹ Sheina Baskin, 1982, p. 6; Minnie Benson, 1983, p. 1; Mary Segal 1983, p. 2.

⁶² Sadie Festenstein, interviewed by Hilda Fleisch, Johannesburg, 10 January 1985, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, p. 4.

that influenced timing, included the burning down of the *shtetl*,⁶³ and escaping an unwanted suitor.⁶⁴ Ray Alexander Simons was bundled out of Latvia by her mother to avoid arrest for political activities.⁶⁵ Those who were rushing to beat the Quota Act of 1930 had to leave immediately they received their papers. Ray Alexander's mother and her sister, Gessie Brooks (b. 1904), received their papers at two in the morning, and had to rush home immediately to sell their two houses to pay for the fare.⁶⁶ Chana Zbenowicz from Riga, waited until her future husband was ready instead of leaving with her parents in 1929. Their departure in 1933 was prompted by the fact that Hitler's ideas were penetrating the Baltic States and Jewish employees were being badly treated.⁶⁷

The reason for choosing South Africa rather than the United States, was usually because they already had family there. Some had either already tried the United States⁶⁸ or were put off by the experience of family members and felt that it would be easier in South Africa.⁶⁹ One woman said that she did not come to South Africa with the intention of staying, but was trapped by the outbreak of the First World War.⁷⁰

During the 1920s the United States was closed to immigration, and it was very difficult to get a certificate to immigrate to Palestine. It was still possible to get into South Africa without papers, as long as one had a certified trade. Riva Abrahamson said she got a certificate from a milliner.⁷¹ Finding their village devastated, in 1923, Sheina Kagan (b. 1887) and her husband wrote letters to Africa and to America. As America was closed, her brother in South Africa sent them a ticket.⁷² Lily Korber, who came to South Africa in 1926, said that "it was a craze for the Jewish young people to run away from Europe and to go to Africa" at that time.⁷³

⁶³ Sonia Kolnik, 1983, pp. 7-10.

⁶⁴ Riva Abrahamson, 1983, pp. 18-19.

⁶⁵ Simons, 2004, p. 44.

⁶⁶ Gessie Brooks, 1983, p. 22.

⁶⁷ Chana Zbenowicz, 1983, p. 17.

⁶⁸ Ida Perkin, interviewed by Horvitz, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0192, 1983, p. 20.

⁶⁹ Mary Segal, 1983, p. 3.

⁷⁰ Dora Schapiro, 1983, p. 9.

⁷¹ Riva Abrahamson, 1983, p. 19.

⁷² Sheina Kagan, interviewed by T. Mowszowski, Johannesburg, 1985, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, p. 4.

⁷³ Lily Korber, 198-, p. 15.

Minnie Mankowicz, from Ropczyce in Poland, who came to South Africa in 1933, had never intended to come to South Africa. Her father encouraged all his children to learn Hebrew well and to emigrate to Israel. Four of her siblings had already emigrated to Israel before she left. However at the time that she was due to leave, one of her sisters and her husband from Israel, were in South Africa. With the virulent antisemitism in Poland, her parents encouraged her to join them, as they could always go back to Israel at a later stage.⁷⁴

Most of the Kaplan Centre respondents would not admit to receiving financial aid from any Jewish organisations. If their menfolk were not able to send them the money, they attested to paying their fares by selling up their possessions. Only one respondent admitted to her husband having taken out a loan from the *Gmiles Khso'dim* Society in Cape Town, to bring her and their two children from Lithuania.⁷⁵

Life without their men.

Prolonged absences of the men are common. This resulted in a generation of children who hardly knew their fathers, but also of mothers, who hardly knew their children who had emigrated ahead of them. During this time the women had to take care of their families on their own. David Dektor's mother looked after her three children and managed her dairy farm for five years while his father went to the United States to avoid conscription in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905.⁷⁶ David remembers his mother fearlessly standing up to Cossacks who were raiding their village.

“... and then one evening Cossacks came into the shop, and this I remember, they started taking big jars of sweets from the shelves, and my mother took the jar and threw it on the floor and tramped on it, and the Cossack was flabbergasted ... a woman stood up to a Cossack...”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Minnie Mankowitz, interviewed by Milton Shain, Cape Town, 1982, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0165, pp. 15, 18-20.

⁷⁵ Sonia Kolnik, 1983, p. 10.

⁷⁶ David Dektor, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, June 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0046, p. 6.

⁷⁷ David Dektor, 1983, p. 12.

Frieda Saacks's father and oldest brother left almost seven years before her mother, two sisters and younger brother. She remembers her mother going regularly once a month to the bank to cash the cheque that her father sent them, but they were always short of money.⁷⁸ It took Etta Rappaport's husband six years to save the £100 that he had to deposit to bring his wife and child to join him in Johannesburg, and to pay for their tickets. While he was gone Etta stayed with her parents in Kovno.⁷⁹

Mary Segal, from Vilkomir, was six when her father left, and she never saw him again until she was thirteen years old. Her father provided for the family with half the money from the sale of his business in Vilna that he deposited in the bank. He also moved the family back to Vilkomir, where it was cheaper to live than in Vilna, and where both sets of grandparents were living. Even so, although at first they lived quite comfortably, they were later forced to move to a poorer part of town. When they eventually joined their father, the family could hardly recognize him. He in turn had become accustomed to living on his own, and was unused to having to deal with children. Not long after her arrival, Mary was sent to boarding school in Cape Town. Thus her father played little part in her upbringing.⁸⁰

Rachel Glezer from the small town of Salant in Lithuania, grew up without a father, as her father was already living in South Africa. He married her mother on a return visit to his home town, and returned on various occasions, just before the First World War, and for her brother's barmitzvah. However he never succeeded in accumulating enough money to send for them, and never sent them any money. Her mother supported the family working as a dressmaker, taking in a lodger, and selling any extra milk produced by their milk cow. Rachel left school at the age of 13 and worked in a grocery store to help to support her family. They only joined her father in 1928.⁸¹

In a letter to his wife describing his journey to Cape Town, Taube Kretzmar described the women and children aboard ship who were on their way to join their husbands and fathers in America after many years of being apart. He wrote:

⁷⁸ Frieda Saacks, 1981, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Etta Rappaport, 198-, p. 15.

⁸⁰ Mary Segal, 1983, pp. 2, 4.

⁸¹ Rachel Glezer, 1982, pp. 1-4.

I saw there the true picture, children who grew up without a father and where the mother has such a face, like snow in mud, so the children grew up unmannered and knowing nothing of humankindness and Godliness. I was very upset when I thought about it, that I have also left children at home and who is going to bring them up with character and good manners and belief in God?⁸²

The re-uniting of husbands and wives after almost a life time apart is a recurrent theme in South African Yiddish literature. In a short story by the South African Yiddish writer, Hyman Polsky, entitled, *A Modne To'es* (A Strange Mistake), the addresses of the husbands of two women with similar names, who are traveling together to South Africa to join their husbands after twenty years, are mixed up, and they arrive at the wrong address. Despite the vast difference in their appearances, it is a while before the couples detect the mistake. As the one husband comments, "In Africa, anything can happen."⁸³ In the story, "A Strange Tragedy," a man goes to the station to meet his wife and three daughters, whom he has not seen for ten years. On arriving back at the home, he is arrested on his own veranda, for buying raw gold. Polsky poignantly describes "the weeping, bewilderment, and loneliness of the family."⁸⁴

While women were estranged from their husbands, mothers also sacrificed their close ties with their children when they immigrated many years before them. With large families, it was not uncommon for the older children to leave for South Africa to live with aunts and uncles, while the younger children stayed with their mothers. When Minnie Zurnamer's mother left Sollel in Lithuania for South Africa in 1929, she had not seen three of her children since 1912, and another two since 1921, so that she hardly knew them.

Her own children were strangers to her, they were all in different places, and they came to welcome mother and she saw she was among strangers, she

⁸² Taube Kretzmar, letter to his wife, September-October 1899, quoted in Gwynne Schrire, *From Eastern Europe to South Africa: Memories of an Epic Journey, 1880-1937*, Jacob Gitlin Library, Western Province Zionist Council, Cape Town, 2007, pp. 8-9.

⁸³ Hyman Polsky, "A Modne To'es", in *In Afrike: Bilder fun Yidishn lebn in Dorem-Afrike in di frierdike Yorn*, Dorem Afrikaner Yidisher Kultur Federatsye, Yohanesburg, 1952, pp. 54-60.

⁸⁴ *Der Afrikaner* 24/6/1914, cited in Leibl Feldman, translated by Veronica Belling, 2007, p. 179.

didn't know the little boys she sent off , she never imagined that she herself had grown older, and the children grew up in a different world and by that time she was very close to her old parents, there were the three of them, and she missed them, she missed everything about her old home, she wanted to go back, she stayed there for about twelve months, and she was so unhappy, so unhappy, she just wanted to go back...

Finally her children arranged for her to return to Lithuania via Walvis Bay. On the boat she changed her mind and asked the captain if she could be dropped off at one of the ports, but this was not possible. Soon after she returned her mother passed away and she wanted to return to South Africa. Fortunately a year later they were able to bring her out again.⁸⁵

When Dora Schapiro's mother came to Cape Town from Kupishik, she was bored and miserable. She was unhappy about her son-in-law who was eating non-kosher. She wanted to go to the old age home, but they wouldn't let her.⁸⁶ Tilly Whiteman's mother delayed emigrating to South Africa as long as possible as her own parents had emigrated to America, and she would have preferred to join them there.⁸⁷ Celia Chiat's mother never joined her family in South Africa. She enjoyed a comfortable standard of living in Shavel in Lithuania, and preferred to live out her life there rather than come to South Africa, where her daughter and son-in-law kept their business open on a Saturday and did not observe the Sabbath.⁸⁸

The Journey.

Generally the women did not embark on the voyage on their own. They were either accompanied by other family members or traveled together with another family.⁸⁹ Several of the post-War immigrants, like Rochel Bergman, who left Riga for South Africa in 1928, traveled together with their husbands.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Minnie Zurnamer, interviewed by L. Zurnamer, Cape Town, 18 November 1981, 26 May 1982, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0288, pp. 21-22.

⁸⁶ Dora Schapiro, 1983, p. 37.

⁸⁷ Tilly Whiteman, 1985, p. 5.

⁸⁸ Celia Chiat, 1982, p. 6.

⁸⁹ Dora Schapira, 1983, p. 9.

⁹⁰ Dorothy Krok, "Biografische notits," in Rochel Bergman, *Lider un Mesholim*, Aroysgegebn fun di Kinder, Cambridge, 1958, pp. 7-11.

Most of the women took a train to the ports, though on occasion they had to leave by horse drawn cart to reach the nearest town. Celia Chiat chose to leave from Hamburg as she spoke German and did not speak English. She took the train from Shavel to Berlin, where she bought her ticket, and then went on to Hamburg.⁹¹ In 1933 the mother of Minnie Mankowitz, from Ropczyce in Poland, took her by train to Cracow, from where she traveled on her own to Warsaw. In Warsaw she stayed over at a shelter for youth who were emigrating to Israel, where she encountered other young people who were on their way to South Africa. From Warsaw she traveled through Berlin to Ostende in Belgium.⁹² In 1933 Chana Zbenowicz traveled by train from Riga to Warsaw, then to Vienna, and from there to Genoa, where she took the boat.⁹³

The port of departure depended on the place of origin, as well as the possession of travel documents. The women from Lithuania and Latvia, who had passports, generally left via the port of Libau in Latvia. Those who were unable to obtain a passport left from Hamburg or Bremen, where before the First World War, it was possible to leave without passports. The bureaucracy involved in obtaining a passport in Tsarist Russia was often insurmountable, particularly for women who required the authorization of their husbands or fathers, who were already in South Africa.⁹⁴ Before the First World War, the women from Belarus and the Ukraine crossed the Russian and German borders illegally. In Soviet Russia in 1922, Esther Mrost, who left from Odessa in the Ukraine, had to pay an agent to cross the Polish border, from where she proceeded to Gdansk, and from there to Hamburg.⁹⁵ Stories of agents tricking them are legion.⁹⁶ The second class tickets from Hamburg of the family of Mary Segal from Vilkomir, were exchanged for third class tickets by two Yiddish speaking swindlers in Berlin, who pocketed the difference. As a result they missed their boat and had to wait three weeks for the next one. They slept in a large hall with hundreds of other refugees.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Celia Chiat, 1982, p. 28.

⁹² Minnie Mankowitz, 1982, pp. 20-22.

⁹³ Chana Zbenowicz, 1983, p. 17.

⁹⁴ Gur Alroey, "And I Remained Alone in a Vast Land" *Jewish Social Studies*, 12(3), 2006: 39-72.

⁹⁵ Esther Mrost, 1982, p. 36.

⁹⁶ Gur Alroey, "Beauracracy, Agents, and Swindlers: the Hardships of Jewish Emigration from the Pale of Settlement in the Early 20th Century", *Studies in Contemporary Jewry: an Annual*, 19, 2003: 214-234.

⁹⁷ Mary Segal, 1983, p. 9.

Some did not have the means to travel on a passenger liner. In 1914 the family of Minnie Benson (b. 1899), from Kiev in the Ukraine, left with only the clothes on their backs. They traveled steerage from London to South Africa. There were layers of beds on the ship, and Minnie had to slide down a pole to get their food, generally herring and potato, that was dished out in huge cartons. They were the only Jewish family on board and lived in fear.⁹⁸

Most, however, traveled on passenger liners, Third Class, in four berth cabins, and generally enjoyed the voyage. One respondent rejoiced that they had a bath⁹⁹ on the ship, another said that there were only showers.¹⁰⁰ There was plenty of entertainment, carnival, dances, movies. Virtually all of the passengers were Jewish. Food consisted of herring, potatoes, oranges, bread and jam. Several mention encountering bananas for the first time on the boat. They took along rusks, and avoided foodstuffs such as meat that was not kosher. Riva Abrahamson (b. 1905), however, was embarrassed by the behaviour of her fellow Jews who grabbed each other's food at the table.¹⁰¹ Kosher food was introduced on some of the liners. Some even remember celebrating Passover on board ship.¹⁰²

All who passed through the Poor Jews' Temporary Shelter located in Leman Street in the East End of London have only praise for their treatment. They were taken into London to buy new clothes. A notice in 1914 from the Board of Deputies in the South African Yiddish newspaper, *Der Afrikaner*, advised that it was imperative that the immigrants wear festive clothes on arrival in Cape Town.¹⁰³ One respondent, however, commented that before they boarded the London Underground, the man who accompanied them told them not to shout and to behave quietly. She realized that this was because they were speaking "Jewish" (Yiddish) and he did not want them to be conspicuous.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Minnie Benson, 1983, p. 6.

⁹⁹ Ida Perkin, 1983, p. 21.

¹⁰⁰ Ida Shapiro, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, October 1986, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0233, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ Riva Abrahamson, 1983, p. 20.

¹⁰² Gessie Brooks, 1983, p. 23.

¹⁰³ *Der Afrikaner* 2.4.1914, in Leibl Feldman, translated by Veronica Belling, 2007, p. 180.

¹⁰⁴ Minnie Mankowitz, 1982, p. 23.

Reception in South Africa.

Immigrants arriving in Cape Town, were either received by family or friends, or went to stay at the many boarding houses, in Maynard, Hof, and Harrington Streets. Ray Alexander was met at the docks by her sister and brother who had rented a one bedroom apartment in Roeland Street.¹⁰⁵ In Johannesburg, Sadie Festenstein's two brothers had rented a comfortable house for her mother and five siblings in Doornfontein.¹⁰⁶ Without friends or family a woman could find herself in a difficult situation if she had nobody to stand guarantor. Riva Abrahamson was forced to wait on the boat for 2 days until she could find someone. An older man offered to assist her on condition that she agree to marry him! Eventually she paid a man £12 to take her and her sister off the boat.¹⁰⁷ A great aunt of Sarah Brower (b. 1902) sent money to bring her out to Cape Town. However when she arrived she was told that she either had to agree to marry one of her three sons or she would be sent back to Lithuania! She knew nobody, had no money, nor could she speak English, so she had little option but to comply.¹⁰⁸

Generally the women were happy to have left eastern Europe. Ida Perkin (b. 1902), the wife of a *kheyder* teacher and *shoykhet* (ritual slaughterer), who arrived in Richmond, a small town in the Western Cape, to a three room house with a hot water geyser, and a big garden with fruit trees, wrote to her mother that she had arrived in *Gan-Eydn* - Paradise!¹⁰⁹

But not everybody felt that way immediately. Tilly Whiteman who had lived in a large house in Lithuania, was shocked at the "*chalupkele hayzkele*", the small dilapidated house, her father had rented for the family in Johannesburg.¹¹⁰ Sheina Kagan cried at the thought of starting all over in Triechaardt, a small town in the Transvaal, where her husband bought a mill.

¹⁰⁵ Simons, 2004, p. 50.

¹⁰⁶ Sadie Festenstein, 1983, p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ Riva Abrahamson, 1983, p. 22.

¹⁰⁸ Sarah Brower, interviewed by Veda Howell, Johannesburg, 1985, pp. 8-9.

¹⁰⁹ Ida Perkin, 1983, p. 22

¹¹⁰ Tilly Whiteman, 1985, p. 10.

“We started in a small shanty, I stood behind the door and I cried, I washed my face and I said I must start again and I must forget and I rolled up my sleeves and I put on a little overall and I started working...”¹¹¹

The initial feelings of bewilderment and loneliness that must have been experienced by many of the women is contained in the poetry of women poets such as Anna Bloch and Rochel Bergman. In a poem entitled, *Mayn Opsheyd* (My Farewell), Bergman describes her painful leave taking from her family in Riga.¹¹²

*A zuniker morgn fun ershtn May hot tsesheydt
Un mikh hartsloz fun mayn no'ente antrishn,
Itst leb ikh elent in Afrike vayt,
Un trern fun benkshaft tun gishn.*

“On a sunny day on the first of May I had to part
Ruthlessly torn from those dearest to my heart,
Now in far off Africa I live alone
And tears of nostalgia flow.”¹¹³

The earliest known South African Yiddish female poet, Anna Bloch, was born in Minsk in Belarus in 1901. She learnt Yiddish and a little Hebrew with a rabbi and then attended a school where she learnt Russian and other languages. Left penniless after her father died her mother apprenticed her to a dressmaker. In 1913 she and her mother left for London where she worked in a shop. In 1915 she emigrated to Cape Town and in 1918 she went to live in Johannesburg¹¹⁴ where she got married. According to Moshe Grosman, her entire life was a struggle, that is expressed in her small collection of poems, *Poezye fun a Litvishe Meydl in Afrike* (Poetry of a Lithuanian Maiden in Africa), that was published by her relatives in Johannesburg in 1921.¹¹⁵ It is fortunate that one of these poems was included in Ezra Korman's anthology of women poets, *Yidische Dikhterin: Antologye*, published in Chicago in 1927,¹¹⁶ as sadly not a single copy of her small collection has survived. In this poem,

¹¹¹ Sheina Kagan, 1985, pp. 8-9.

¹¹² Dorothy Krok, in Rochel Bergman, 1958, pp. 7-11.

¹¹³ Rochel Bergman, 1958, p. 17

¹¹⁴ Ezra Korman, *Yidische Dikhterin: Antologye*, L. M. Stein, Chicago, 1927, pp. 339-340.

¹¹⁵ Moshe Grosman, *A Study of the Trends and Tendencies of Hebrew and Yiddish Writings in South Africa, Since the Beginning of the Early Nineties of the Last Century to 1930*, Ph. D. - University of the Witwatersrand, 1973, pp. 958-963.

¹¹⁶ Ezra Korman, *Yidische Dikhterin: Antologye*, L. M. Stein, Chicago, 1927, pp. 131-132.

Elent (Loneliness), Bloch uses the metaphor of a lone cottage perched on a hilltop to describe her feelings of total isolation and longing. From inside the house a voice is singing, crying out to be heard.

*Oyf a bergl shteyt a hayzl,
Eynzam zet es oys.
Bay der zayt a kleyner gertl
Oyf a taykhl flist aroys.*

A cottage stands on a hilltop
Perched there all alone
Alongside a tiny girdle
A rivulet is flowing.

*Kh'her a shtime oft fun dorten,
Vi es zingt un ruft.
Un es tsiteren di tener
In der bloyer luft.*

A voice from there is oft heard calling
Singing, uttering a cry.
And the notes rising falling
Against the bright blue sky.

*Dort iz oft a fenster ofen
Mit a benkende geshtalt,
Un der murmelen fun dem taykhel
Unfershtendlikhen enthalt...*

Often there an open window
Beckons in nostalgic mood
And the murmurings of the stream
Are barely understood.

*Un es beynt dort a neshome
Punkt vi ikh, ohn fraynd, aleynd,
Un dos zingen oft fergeyht zikh
In a peynendig geveynd.*

And there a soul is yearning
Like myself friendless, alone,
And the singing is oft transformed
Into an agonising moan.

Minnie Mankowitz was stunned by the views of the mountain and the sea in Cape Town, but found East London lonely and extremely quiet compared to Warsaw or London.¹¹⁷ Ada Swiel (b. 1892) from Birzh, a small town in Lithuania, found life in Cape Town very monotonous compared to Birzh, where she belonged to a Zionist group and where the young people were always together.¹¹⁸ Riva Abrahamson,¹¹⁹ Esther Green,¹²⁰ and Chana Zbenowicz,¹²¹ felt that the intellectual and cultural life in Cape Town and Johannesburg was inferior to that in Libau, Vilna, and Riga, where they visited the opera, went to concerts, the Yiddish theatre, and attended intellectual discussion groups. In Cape Town and Johannesburg all they did was play cards.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Minnie Mankowitz, 1982, pp. 24-25..

¹¹⁸ Ada Swiel, interviewed by R. Jowell, Cape Town, July 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0251, p. 11.

¹¹⁹ Riva Abrahamson, 1983, p. 25.

¹²⁰ Esther Green, 1983, p. 19.

¹²¹ Chana Zbenowicz, 1983, p. 18.

¹²² Esther Green, 1983, p. 19.

Conclusion

By all accounts, life for women in the small towns of eastern Europe was bleak, coloured by poverty and lack of opportunity. The slight improvement in economic conditions with the men's emigration was artificial, temporary and a double edged sword. Women were forced to endure long periods of coping with their families on their own, and children were deprived of their fathers. A strictly observed religion was a comfort, that some were loathe to forgo, but others were more pragmatic. Jewish women emigrating to South Africa, unlike the United States, were seldom pioneers, leaving ahead of their husbands and families. Social and economic conditions, the lack of work opportunities, made this impossible. Thus women were cushioned by the fact that they were joining their men and their families who had emigrated before them and who had established a home base. The few that traveled on their own or together, on occasion encountered difficulties, but they were the exception rather than the rule.

Despite initial nostalgia, the women from eastern Europe generally made very successful transitions to their lives in South Africa. They enriched the life of the local Jewish community with the strong traditions of eastern Europe and several made significant contributions to their new home.¹²³ Ita Hersch was the first women to teach Hebrew in South Africa, at the *kheyder* of Reb Moshel Friedman in Doornfontein and also at the Bertrams Hebrew school. She lectured to the Women's Zionist League and wrote articles on biblical and Talmudic themes in the Hebrew, Yiddish and English Jewish press.¹²⁴ Chana Zbenowicz, who attended the Hebrew Teaching Seminary in Riga, was the mainstay of the Hebrew Nursery School Association in Cape Town.¹²⁵ Zysle Tabachowicz, who graduated from the Yiddish Teaching Seminary in Vilna, taught at the Yiddish *Folkshul* in Johannesburg for 29 years.¹²⁶ Mary Segal from Vilkomir, became one of the movers and shakers in the Zionist movement. These, women and many others like them, enhanced the quality of Jewish life in South Africa immeasurably.

¹²³ See Chapter Six, The Feminization of Zionism.

¹²⁴ "Death of Mrs Ida Hersch: Distinguished Scholar, Teacher and Writer", in Ita Hersch, 2000, p. 85.

¹²⁵ Chana Zbenovicz, 1983, pp. 32-33.

¹²⁶ Conversation with Cedric Ginsburg, 2009.

CHAPTER TWO

A WOMAN'S PLACE: THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

The eastern European immigrants, described in Chapter One, swelled the small Jewish population of approximately 4 000 in 1880 to 38 101 in 1904 and to 49 926 in 1911, so that it totaled 3.7 percent of the White population.¹ This immigration created a visible divide in the Jewish population between the earlier colonists from Britain, Germany and Holland, who had largely blended in with the local population and the eastern European immigrants who were clearly distinguished in their religion, dress and language. They established their own neighbourhoods akin to the Lower East Side in New York,² the East End of London, or the Marais in Paris.³

In Cape Town they settled in District Six, the area adjacent to the original Castle built by the Dutch East India Company, where they formed part of a multi-racial population consisting of Malays, Coloureds, Africans, Indians and Chinese.⁴ They swelled the existing population of an estimated 7 000 Jews in 1902 (total population of 140 000) to 19 537 in 1904, of whom 60 per cent were born in Russia, with males outnumbering females by two to one.⁵ The fact that District Six became the home for so many Jews can be clearly seen from the addresses of clients listed in the minute book of the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society, 1897-1903. Many seem to have started off in Caledon Street,⁶ that had the Minsker Boarding House and the Courlander Restaurant, where 14 people were living..⁷

¹ Gideon Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism*, 1984, p. 7.

² See, *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections*, edited by Hasi R. Diner, Jeffrey Shandler, Beth S. Wenger, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2000.

³ By 1914 some 40,000 East European Jews had settled in France, many in Paris's Marais district, known in Yiddish as the Pletzel or little square, see, Nancy L. Green, *The Pletzl of Paris: Jewish Immigrant Workers in the Belle Epoque*, Holmes & Meier, New York, 1986.

⁴ V. Bickford Smith, "The Origins and Early History of District Six to 1910.", *Cabo* 4 (2), 1987: 19-25; B. Feldman, *Social life of Cape Town Jewry, 1904-1914, with special reference to the Eastern European immigrant community*. B.A. (Hons) History - University of Cape Town, 1984, pp. 19-20.

⁵ Cape of Good Hope, *Results of a census of the Cape Colony of the Cape of Good Hope as on the night of Sunday, the 17th of April 1904*, Cape Times Ltd, Government Printers, Cape Town, 1905, p. 136. In 1904 there were 8114 Jews living in Cape Town, 251 in Claremont, 382 in Green and Sea Point, 225 in Maitland, 144 in Mowbray, 797 in Woodstock, and 743 in Wynberg. Census 1904.

⁶ Sheina Baskin, 1982, p. 23; Blume Cohen, interviewed by Fern Sacks, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0038, p. 1; Rachel Isaacson, interviewed by Liebe Robinson, Cape Town, 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0113, p. 5.; Freda Dickman., interviewed by Noreen Scher, Cape Town, 1981, Kaplan Centre, Interviews, BC949, 0048, p. 5.

⁷ The Cape Jewish Philanthropic Society, Morris Alexander papers, cited by Gwynne Schrire, unpublished research..

By the 1920s Jews were moving out of District Six into Maynard Street that was parallel to Buitenkant Street. It was regarded as “a cut above” Harrington and Buitenkant Streets as it was purely residential rather than commercial. On the other hand, the residents of Maynard Street regarded the residents of nearby Mill Street, to be “a cut above” them.⁸ The Zion family epitomized this process of moving up in the world. Between 1902 and 1914 their six children were each born in a bigger home in a slightly better location. From a shared terrace house in Vanderleur Street in District Six, they moved to an upstairs flat in Harrington Street, then to a semi-detached house at the bottom of Maynard Street, then to a six roomed house in Buitenkant Street and finally to a freestanding architect designed house in Mill Street.⁹

On the other hand, by the time that the eastern European immigration was in full swing, the wealthier anglicised Jewish members of Cape society had already moved out to Gardens, the Southern Suburbs, Green Point and Sea Point. The Gardens, Tamboerskloof, and a bit later Oranjezicht,¹⁰ on the slopes of Table Mountain, were the favoured suburbs for the more affluent members of the Jewish community.

Not only was the divide geographic, the immigrants also founded their own synagogues where their services more closely resembled those in eastern Europe, and the use of English was less evident. The first Hebrew congregation, Tikvath Israel, the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, was established by German, English and Dutch Jews in 1841 that followed an extremely anglicized rite. It was originally located on the corner of St John and Bouquet Street in the Gardens, but moved to Hatfield Street. Influenced by the eastern European immigration, in 1900, a less anglicized congregation was formed on the boundary of District Six in Roeland Street, known as the New Hebrew Congregation. However in 1903 a group of more recent arrivals,

⁸ Maynard Street was bordered by Glynn Street at the town end, and by Mill Street on the mountain end - before Upper Mill Street was constructed, I. M. Grusd, “Dear Old Maynard Street!”, SAJC, 20 September 1957, pp. 4, 6; series continues: 27 September, pp. 4, 6 & 11 October 1957, pp. 5, 7; 17 January 1958, p. 5.

⁹ Ellis Michael Zion, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 1983, Kaplan Centre Interview BC949, 0285, p. 3, cited in Howard Phillips. “A Move for the Better”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32(4), May 2006: 597.

¹⁰ Oranjezicht was only earmarked for development in 1903. Edna Bradlow, “The anatomy of an immigrant community”, *The Anatomy of an Immigrant Community: Cape Town Jewry from the turn of the Century to the Passing of the Quota Act. South African Historical Journal*, 3, Nov. 1994: 103-107.

Yiddish speaking immigrants, broke away to establish the Beth Midrash Hachodosh, the Cape Town Orthodox Hebrew Congregation in Constitution Street in the very heart of District Six.¹¹

The way of life of the immigrants also distinguished them from the earlier and more established arrivals. They lived in terraced houses with four or five rooms¹² and verandas bordering on the street.¹³ Several mention that their first houses had dining rooms but no sitting room, that was a later innovation.¹⁴ Bathrooms were uncommon and it was the custom for mothers to bathe their children in a zinc bath in the kitchen with water that had been heated on the stove.¹⁵

Some families kept chickens in the back yard,¹⁶ and one family in Maynard Street had a stable with horses for a trap and a milk cow.¹⁷ There were three kosher butchers and a Jewish greengrocer used to come round with a cart. Fish was sold from the fish cart with its familiar horn that signaled its arrival.¹⁸

Informants remembered the copper pots, big brass dish for salt, *perenes* (featherbeds), Russian linen, and velour tablecloths, that their parents and grandparents brought along from the Old Country.¹⁹ An advert for the ‘Brassware Manufacturers’ in Lower Davidson Street in Woodstock, in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*, printed almost entirely in Yiddish, deliberately aimed to evoke nostalgia for the Old Country by reminding immigrants of “the warm glow of beautiful brass trays, vases” that aroused “feelings

¹¹ Max Geffen, “Cape Town Jewry, 1902-1910”, in Saron & Hotz, eds, *The Jews in South Africa*, 1955, p. 46.

¹² Paula Wittenberg, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0272, p. 3.

¹³ Ethel Goldberg, born in 1888, the oldest of the Kaplan informants, lived in Caledon Street when Oranjezicht was still bare ground. Her family had a house with a stoep bordering on the street but no garden. Interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Kaplan Centre Interviews, Cape Town, 1982, BC949, 0075, p. 5.

¹⁴ Goldie Ackerman, interviewed by Noreen Scher, Cape Town, 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0005, p 3; Annie Washkansky, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0263, p. 2. Bella Harwood mentions that in their first house in Hope Street they only had a dining room, but when they moved to Upper Harrington Street they had a lounge as well, Bella Harwood, interviewed by Fern Sacks, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0098, p. 18.

¹⁵ Rose Rabie, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0200, p. 4; Blume Cohen, 1982, p 5; Annie Washkansky, 1983, p. 5.

¹⁶ Esther Wilkin, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0271, p. 19.

¹⁷ Frieda Dickman, 1981, p. 11.

¹⁸ Esther Wilkin, 198-, p. 79.

¹⁹ Ibid, 198-, p. 16.

of peace and tranquility”.²⁰ While as late as 1938, a Mrs Hurwitz, living in Gardens, was still advertising “*bankes*” (hooping glasses), “the Russian Improved Remedy for Asthma, Lumbago, Neuritis, Chronic Bronchitis.”²¹

The Anglo-German Jews and veteran eastern European immigrants, who were more affluent enjoyed a colonial lifestyle alongside their English neighbours. Jagersfontein Avenue was considered to be ‘the best road in Gardens’,²² but Breda Street was where the elite, such as the first Jewish mayor, Hyman Lieberman, and Maurice Eilenberg, the President of the Cape Town Hebrew congregation lived.²³ Nita Steinberg (b. 1905), the daughter of a former President of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, lived next door to the Eilenbergs in Breda Street, in a house that had five bedrooms, a drawing room, dining room, and a breakfast room with French doors leading out to a small garden.²⁴ Sybil Honikman (b. 1903), whose father had immigrated from England, moved from Tamboerskloof to a Sir Herbert Baker house in Montrose Avenue in Oranjezicht, that had been renovated to accommodate her large family of six children, (each of whom had their own room), her grandmother, and a divorced aunt and her daughter - 13 altogether. They had a proper bathroom with a geyser.²⁵

Remote from the city in the country towns, removed from the prejudices of the city, eastern European Jews were more likely to be accepted into society. The Afrikaans people respected the Jews, regarding them as the people of the Old Testament, and were quite prepared to welcome them into their own society.²⁶ The husband of Zipora Beinart (b. 1892) was on the Municipal Council of Malmesbury for seventeen and a half years, serving as Deputy Mayor and Mayor.²⁷ Jewish women were far more integrated into the local Afrikaans communities, joining the Women’s Agricultural

²⁰ SAJC, 28 January 1938, p. 60.

²¹ SAJC, 20 May 1938, p. 336.

²² Lily Roy, interviewed by L. Witkin, Cape Town, 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0208, p. 7.

²³ Dorothy Whitesman, interviewed by Milton Shain, Cape Town, 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0269, p. 12.

²⁴ Nita Steinberg, interviewed by Ruth Jowell, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0247, p. 5.

²⁵ Sybil Honikman, interviewed by Eva Horwitz & Ruth Jowell, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0107, pp. 11, 21.

²⁶ Zipora Beinart, interviewed by L. Robinson, Cape Town, 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0015, p. 42.

²⁷ Zipora Beinart, 1981, p. 28.

Union, and baking cakes for their fetes.²⁸ Living away from the city was often compensated by more spacious living accommodation. Informants from Stellenbosch,²⁹ Piquetberg,³⁰ Malmesbury,³¹ Harrismith,³² Leslie,³³ lived in big houses surrounded by gardens with fruit trees. However life in the country was not always that pleasant. In Faure near Somerset West in the Western Cape, the family of Annie Abramowitz (b. 1897), was the only Jewish family in an area surrounded by farms and Coloured families, and they felt very isolated.³⁴

Muizenberg, 24 kilometres from Cape Town, was the most popular holiday destination for Jews throughout South Africa and neighbouring Rhodesia (present day Zimbabwe). From the early twentieth century, mining magnates, such as Sammy Marks, built themselves seaside mansions, that his wife Bertha, found a much welcome relief from the isolation of Zwartkoppies outside Pretoria, her home in the Transvaal.³⁵ In the early decades of the twentieth century, Jews would spend the week of Passover at one of the many kosher hotels or hire a house for the summer season, while the young people would stay in boarding houses.³⁶

The Strand was also a popular holiday venue, particularly for the eastern European immigrants as it was accessible by horse and cart from nearby Stellenbosch.³⁷ Millie Asherson relates that two servants would walk their cows the fourteen miles from Stellenbosch to the Strand so that they should have fresh milk to drink while they were there.³⁸ From Napier, Dora Brown's family would pack their belongings including the cow, into a wagon and travel to Arniston for the summer holidays.³⁹ In

²⁸ Rebecca Chodos, interviewed by Madge Klingman, Johannesburg, 1986, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, p. 31; Dora Schapiro, 198-, p. 22.

²⁹ Millie Asherson, interviewed by Fern Sacks, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0009, p. 3; Paula Jaffee, interviewed by Fern Sacks, Cape Town, 1982, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0122, pp. 7-8.

³⁰ Dora Schapiro, 198-, 17.

³¹ Zipora Beinart, 1981, p. 24.

³² Rebecca Chodos, 1986, p. 33.

³³ Sheina Kagan, 1985, p. 6.

³⁴ Annie Abramowitz, interviewed by Fern Sacks, Cape Town, 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0003, pp. 3-4

³⁵ Richard Mendelsohn, "A Mining Magnate at Muizenberg:: Sammy Marks and the Cape Town property market, 1881-1919." *Cabo*, 4(2), 1987: 26-31.

³⁶ Goldie Ackerman, 1981, pp. 9-10.

³⁷ Paula Jaffee, 1982, p. 16.

³⁸ Millie Asherson, 198-.

³⁹ Dora Brown, 1982, p. 8.

Malmesbury, Zipora Beinart and her husband would pack the family, beds, chairs, hotplate, etc. into a lorry and drive down to Muizenberg or to the Strand.⁴⁰

Johannesburg

As in Cape Town, the Jewish population of between 10 and 12 000 Jews,⁴¹ (about ten percent of the total White population of approximately 120 000 in 1899,⁴²) was clearly divided between the veteran immigrants of English, German and Dutch origin, and the recently arrived immigrants from eastern Europe.⁴³ The veterans, lived in the suburbs of Fordsburg, Braamfontein, and Jeppestown. The wealthiest lived in Troyeville and Doornfontein. The handful of Jews among the mining magnates, were generally of German origin, who lived in mansions on the Parktown ridge, and were very assimilated. Nonetheless they were so visible, that in 1895 Johannesburg was characterized by James Bryce as an “Anglo-Semitic town.”⁴⁴

The earliest Jewish immigrant community was formed in Ferreirastown in Johannesburg (established 1886), the site of the original Ferreira’s camp. It was situated below Commissioner Street, from Sauer Street down to Fordsburg, and crosswise between Marshall and Market Streets.⁴⁵ What characterized this group of immigrants was that women were almost completely absent. The Russian born immigrants were almost four fifths male and in 1904 out of a Jewish population of 15 444, males outnumbered females by 2 to 1.⁴⁶

Early Johannesburg was a man’s world of bars and brothels. One of the few places where a Jewish female face could be seen, was at the Gaiety Theatre in Kort Street, where before 1910, itinerant Yiddish theatre companies staged seasons of Yiddish

⁴⁰ Zipora Beinart, 1981, p. 32.

⁴¹ D. Sowden, “In the Transvaal to 1899”, in Saron & Hotz, eds, *The Jews in South Africa*, 1955, p. 150.

⁴² G.A. Leyds, *A History of Johannesburg*, Nasionale Boekhandel, Cape Town, 1962, p. 26.

⁴³ C. Van Onselen, *Studies in the social and economic history of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1940*. Vol. 1. New Babylon, Longman, London, 1982, pp. 73-74.

⁴⁴ D. Sowden, “In the Transvaal to 1899”, 1955, p. 151.

⁴⁵ Veronica Belling, *Yiddish Theatre in South Africa: a History from the Late Nineteenth Century to 1960*, Jewish Publications – South Africa, Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 2008, p. 15.

⁴⁶ Census of the Union of South African Census, 1911. Part VI. The Religions of the People, Government Printing and Stationery Office, Pretoria, 1912.

theatre.⁴⁷ The Gaiety theatre was situated in the heart of the Red Light district. Bounded by Bree Street in the north, Anderson in the south, Kruis in the east and Sauer in the west, the area was sometimes referred to as ‘Frenchfontein’, as thirty-six of the ninety-five brothels listed in a municipal survey conducted in 1895, were ‘French’.⁴⁸ Russian and Polish Jews were also heavily involved in the white slave trafficking. They belonged to the American Club, an association of predominantly Russian Jewish pimps, launched by Polish Jewish racketeer, Joe Silver.⁴⁹ According to the Yiddish newspaper, *Ha-Kokhav* (The Star), of 8/10/1904:

Every Jew blushes with shame on hearing about white slavery. We must acknowledge the bitter truth, that there are Jewish slave traffickers in Johannesburg. Johannesburg is a cosmopolitan city. Children of all nations and colours, brown, and yellow – English, French, German, Russian, Italian, Greek, Syrian, Turks, Indians, Chinese and Japanese live here. No nation bears the stain of operating the trade more than the French and the Jews, and particularly the Polish and Galician Jews.⁵⁰

The number of Jewish women who were involved either as madams or as prostitutes was far fewer in number than the pimps, but they were nonetheless a cause of great concern to the community. The prostitutes were generally victims of the great migration, who has been either tricked into false marriages or promised legitimate jobs in South Africa.⁵¹ It was concern for the welfare of such unfortunate women that led to the formation of one of the earliest Jewish welfare societies in Johannesburg, the Jewish Ladies Communal League in 1898. (See Chapter Five, Women and Welfare).

Between 1911 and 1920, however, the immigrants were already beginning to move out of the slums of Ferreirastown into the more comfortable areas of Doornfontein, Yeoville and Hillbrow, that began to take on a distinctly Jewish flavour. Between

⁴⁷ Veronica Belling, 2008, pp. 14-15.

⁴⁸ Charles Van Onselen, *The Fox and the Flies: the World of Joseph Silver, Racketeer and Psychopath*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2007, p. 152.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 158-159.

⁵⁰ Cited in Leibl Feldman, *The Jews of Johannesburg*, translated by Veronica Belling, 2007, p. 143.

⁵¹ “South Africa”, in Edward Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: the Jewish Fight Against White Slavery, 1880-1939*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1982, pp. 204-211.

1911 and 1919, 13 kosher butcheries sprung up in this vicinity.⁵² By the 1930s little remained of the immigrant neighbourhood in Ferreirastown in the city centre. In 1931 the foundation stone of the new *Besmedresh* on the corner of Saratoga Avenue and Davis Street in Doornfontein was laid, which replaced the original *Besmedresh* established forty years earlier in Fox Street in Ferreirastown.⁵³ In the 1930s Doornfontein has been described as ‘a slice of Eastern Europe in Johannesburg.’ Yiddish was spoken on every street corner, and not only by Jews but also by some non-Jews, Africans and Coloureds. Many shops had Yiddish signs on their windows. There were at least six or seven shuls with excellent attendances on a Friday night.⁵⁴

Most of the new immigrants started off in Jeppe and Pritchard Street in little semi-detached houses. As they became more established they moved to Upper Ross⁵⁵ or Aaron Street.⁵⁶ With no money for the cinema, the young people used to stand and chat on the street corners.⁵⁷ The favourite place to congregate was in front of the Chemist shop on Beit Street.⁵⁸ Beit Street was full of small grocery shops and Crystals, the popular Jewish bakery and delicatessen, was located on the corner of Beit and Staid Streets. The residential streets crossed Beit at right angles.⁵⁹

Parnose - a living

As ladies of leisure, Anglo-German Jewish wives, followed the colonial custom of distributing visiting cards among their friends and having a regular ‘at home’ on a designated day of the week.

What we call the lounge today was the drawing room in those days. You remember how they used to withdraw, the ladies used to have to- well, these were the drawing rooms. I remember the ladies in those days used to have

⁵² Margot W. Rubin, *The Jewish Community of Johannesburg, 1886-1939: Landscapes of Reality and Imagination*. Thesis (M.A. Geography) – University of Pretoria, 2005, pp. 97-98.

⁵³ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 31 March 1931.

⁵⁴ L. Hill. ‘Remembrance of a shtetl in Johannesburg’, in *Jewish Affairs*, 36(12), December 1981: 4-27.

⁵⁵ Sadie Saron, interviewed by Thea Fleisher, Johannesburg, 1988, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, p. 3; Bertha Englander, interviewed by Rahleen Kaplan, Johannesburg, 1982, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, p. 7.

⁵⁶ Bertha Englander, 1982, p. 7.

⁵⁷ Tony Englander, interviewed by Rahleen Kaplan, Johannesburg, 1982, Kaplan Centre Interviews, p. 9.

⁵⁸ Sadie Festenstein, 1985, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Jack Shapiro, *The Streets of Doornfontein*, The Author, Cape Town, 2010.

afternoons for visiting... People who used to visit used to leave cards like every second Thursday... I think I can recall my mother's was on a Wednesday. We were never in the drawing room when the ladies were there, and those were the visiting days.⁶⁰

On the other hand the eastern European immigrant women generally had to work to help to support the family. However, unlike her counterpart in the United States, the eastern European immigrant women were seldom if ever, depicted on the streets hawking goods in the manner of her husband. A lone exception is a rare female hawker who was photographed on a Johannesburg pavement, who appears in the book, *Founders and Followers: Johannesburg Jewry, 1887-1915*.⁶¹

Unlike New York, in the early 1900s South Africa had no large factories, so the means by which women supplemented the family income, was largely left to their own ingenuity. A couple of the eastern European immigrant women mention doing embroidery that was very popular for dresses and for *bris* robes, work that could be done at home,⁶² as families were large, eight and nine children was not unusual. If women worked outside of the home, it would be in their husband's businesses.⁶³ These could be stalls on the Grand Parade (Cape Town),⁶⁴ grocery stores,⁶⁵ men's outfitting,⁶⁶ tobacconists,⁶⁷ news agents,⁶⁸ butcheries,⁶⁹ or even an antique shop.⁷⁰ On occasion men's occupations, such as traveling salesmen,⁷¹ salt merchants,⁷² or ostrich

⁶⁰ Dorothy Whitesman, (1981: p. 12), cited in Milton Shain, "Cape Town's Jewish Elite at the Turn of the Century", *Jewish Affairs*, 37(6), 1982: 31-32.

⁶¹ Marion Robertson, "Investing talent in the Witwatersrand: Jewish traders, craftsmen and small entrepreneurs" in Kaplan & Robertson, eds, *Founders and Followers: Johannesburg Jewry, 1887-1915*, Vlaeberg, Cape Town, 1991, p. 122.

⁶² Esther Wilkin, 198-, p. 12

⁶³ In Parow Jane Kushlick said that it was customary for wives to help out in their husband's stores. Jane Kushlick, interviewed by Fern Sacks, Cape Town, 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0147, p. 15.

⁶⁴ Annie Washkansky, 1983, p. 21.

⁶⁵ Helene Rachel Isaacson, interviewed by L. Robinson, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0113, p. 9.

⁶⁶ Blume Cohen, 1982, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Lena Yudelma, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0278, pp. 2-3.

⁶⁸ Lily Roy, 1981, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Betty Herman, interviewed by Fern Sacks, Cape Town, 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0100, p. 4.

⁷⁰ Goldie Ackerman, 1981, p. 32.

⁷¹ Esther Wilkin, 198-, pp. 10-11; Dina Clain, 198-, p. 8.

feather buyers,⁷³ kept them away from home for weeks and months, leaving the women to manage their families on their own.

In the 1910s Esther Bailen, who was sent to South Africa from Russia around 1900 to marry her cousin, Hyman Bailen, operated one of several cinemas that her husband established for the local Coloured population in District Six. Her daughter writes that her mother was “amazing”. She bore ten children but “still had time for everything: rose at 6, made sandwiches, got meals organized for the day, went to her ‘bio’, the Union, to see that everything was ready and so on.” To maintain order in the bioscope:

“she would walk along the aisle, to see if everything was in order and as she passed, she would smell the dagga (marijuana), and then she would say, in Afrikaans, “Wie rook daar? Wie rook daar?” (Who is smoking there?) and she would get over there, and she would say “Sit dit uit! Sit dit uit!” (Put it out!) And she would go and call this manager of hers, Jutem, and Jutem would come and then she’d say “Smyt hom uit! Smyt hom uit!” (Throw him out!) and she would walk along with a stick so that when he went she would be whacking as well. They were dead scared of her!... She was a tyrant!”⁷⁴

The grandmother of Esther Wilkin (b. 1918), operated a laundry in District Six. She writes:

“My Bobba, ever the enterprising woman, built up a profitable business – she saw the need for a cleaning and ironing service – men immigrants on their own had no one to care for the little clothing they possessed. Employing a Coloured woman to help, trousers and jackets were cleaned and ironed, shirts washed, ironed and starched, The last members of the family to arrive were my mother and sister in 1914. They were excellent seamstresses and helped in the family business by mending clothes sent for cleaning – a button to be sewn on, a collar turned, a patch on trousers or jackets and they soon established

⁷² Olga Katzeff, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 1984, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0135, p. 1.

⁷³ Sybil Honikman, 198-, pp. 6-7.

⁷⁴ V. C. Malherbe, “An East European Immigrant Makes Good in Cape Town”, *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, History Department, University of Cape Town in association with the Centre for African Studies, Vol. 4., pp. 137-138.

their own businesses as well – sewing and embroidering trousseaus for brides. Trap and horses were bought and my Zayde became the delivery man.”

With immigration at a peak, a lucrative way for women to supplement the family income, was by taking in boarders or operating a boarding house. In Juta’s Street directory of 1897 there are no fewer than nineteen boarding houses in Bree Street, nine in Loop Street, five in Strand Street, four each in Long and Kloof Streets, and two in Wale Street.⁷⁵

Mrs Katzeff’s husband was a salt merchant who used to travel to the saltpans in Darling to buy salt, while she operated a Boarding house in Primrose Street in District Six (established in 1909). The house had 14 rooms, an upstairs and a downstairs bathroom, a kitchen and a large dining room that could accommodate 25 to 30 people. It was leased from the Board of Executors for £5 a month, on a monthly basis, as she was never sure that she would be able to fill it. The boarders initially paid one, then two pounds a month, and one and six for a good meal.⁷⁶

When Mrs Clain’s husband, lost his job, she began taking in lodgers. When a lodger’s cigarette set a shipment of drapery alight, that her husband was intending to sell, the Boarding House in Gordon Street became their main source of income. Mrs Clain used to serve lunches from 12-2 p.m. to 35 Jewish school children from Maitland, who were attending SACS and Good Hope Seminary.⁷⁷ Other well known Boarding establishments were Walts, a big double storey house in West Street, with 6 rooms upstairs and 4 rooms, 2 bedrooms, a lounge and a dining room downstairs;⁷⁸ Mrs Goodman’s establishment in Chapel Street; as well as Hyman’s, described as the most popular boarding house of all.⁷⁹ Mrs Chaimowitz had a boarding house in Kloof Street.⁸⁰ Lilian Dubb recalls a boarding house at the top of Maynard Street.

⁷⁵ Andrew Summers Kerkhan, *Reminiscences* <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb>

⁷⁶ Olga Katzeff, 1984, pp.3-4, 5, 12-13.

⁷⁷ Dina Clain, 198-, p. 8, 29.

⁷⁸ Sarah Zalk, interviewed by Brenda Marks, Cape Town, 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0283.

⁷⁹ Esther Wilkin, 198-, p. 12.

⁸⁰ Mrs Reitstein, interviewed by Noreen Scher, Cape Town, 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0092, p. 22

I remember... one of the larger houses on the upper part of Maynard Street, and on the other side of the road there was a boarding-house where every few weeks there was an influx of new arrivals, coming straight off the boat. We could recognize the newcomers immediately. They dressed differently, behaved differently, and mostly spoke Yiddish – loudly. They stayed there for a few weeks until they established themselves with work and later with suitable accommodation.⁸¹

At times a private home could well be mistaken for a boarding house as there were so many people sleeping over. Esther Wilkin relates that when she used to arrive home from school as a young girl, she was never quite sure where she would be sleeping that night. Abel Shaban, future editor of the Yiddish newspaper, *Di Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, in Johannesburg, describes sharing a room with three other new arrivals in a boarding house in Cape Town on arrival in South Africa.⁸² Apparently that boarding house was Esther Wilkin's home!⁸³

Johannesburg had Mrs Cohen's establishment in Leyds Street, where Rabbi Dr Joseph Hertz, the rabbi of the Old Hebrew congregation in President Street, and the Reverend S. Manne, who was the Cantor or Reader of the Park Synagogue, boarded when they first came to Johannesburg.⁸⁴ In his *Unfinished Autobiography*, Joe Slovo describes Mrs Sher's establishment in Doornfontein where he and his father shared a small attic room, when he first came to Johannesburg. Natie Belyeikin alias Nathan Bell, choir master of the Berea shul, was also boarding there at that time.

Mrs Sher's boarding house had many of the characteristics of a Sholem Aleichem shtetl. Yiddish was the official language, and even Bazaar, the African who helped serve at table developed Jewish mannerisms and used Yiddish expressions. Apart from the occasional excursions to the left-inclined Jewish Workers Club... social life for the inhabitants was restricted to the double-storey house which was ringed by a large *stoep*.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Lilian Dubb, "Shaindel", *Jewish Affairs* 53(3), 1998: 44-46.

⁸² Amos Ben Shalom, *Portrait of a Folksmensh*, Grosvenor Publishing, Johannesburg, 1974, pp. 4-5.

⁸³ Esther Wilkin, 198-, p. 11.

⁸⁴ Manfred Nathan, *Not Heaven Itself*, Knox Publishing Company, Durban, 1944, pp. 183-185.

⁸⁵ Joe Slovo, *Slovo: the Unfinished Autobiography*, Ravan Press, Randburg, 1995, p. 20.

In the country towns the women worked hard alongside their husbands who owned farms, hotels,⁸⁶ or shops.⁸⁷ In Wolsley Hessie Beder's mother worked in their café, seven days a week, day and night. They later opened a shop so she only had to work five days a week until seven in the evening.⁸⁸ In Faure Annie Abramowitz's mother helped in her father's shop that was kept open till nine or ten o'clock at night every day of the week, only closing for the High Holidays.⁸⁹ In Leslie in the Transvaal Sheina Kagan (b. 1887), whose husband had two very successful farms, worked in her husband's business for fifteen years.⁹⁰

Domestic servants

In the early twentieth century in middle class Jewish families, when grandparents were available they would help out with the children.⁹¹ But help in the home, by washerwomen, housemaids, cooks, and nursemaids, was available to the majority of Jewish and Gentile housewives in South Africa. In the earliest times at the Cape, the Malay servants did not sleep on the premises. They took the laundry to wash in the gorge, and brought it back dry.⁹² Despite the availability of cooks, even in the more affluent Jewish families, the mothers did the cooking, and some also made and mended the clothes. If they were unable to sew, dressmakers were employed. Men and boys' suites were made by a tailor.⁹³

The employment of White servants was generally the mark of Anglo-German Jews. Babies and small children were looked after by white nursemaids, who were known as "Mothers helpers."⁹⁴ Governesses were the prerogative of the rich. Nita Steinberg was brought up by a white nanny and a series of governesses. Ellen Levy had a white

⁸⁶ Rebecca East worked alongside her husband in a hotel in Morreesberg for twenty years, Rebecca East interviewed by Noreen Scher, Cape Town, 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0050, pp. 41-43.

⁸⁷ Rebecca Chodos's husband had a shop in Harrismith, Rebecca Chodos, 1986, p. 33.

⁸⁸ Hessie Beder, interviewed by Janet Green, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0013, p. 21

⁸⁹ Annie Abramowitz, 1981, p. 62.

⁹⁰ Sheina Kagan, 1985, p. 5.

⁹¹ Esther Wilkin, 198-, p. 12.

⁹² Ethel Goldberg, 1982, p. 6.

⁹³ Sybil Honikman, 198-, p. 16.

⁹⁴ Sybil Honikman, 198-, p. 15.

Scottish nurse from Australia.⁹⁵ Lily Roy had a white governess, and three servants.⁹⁶ In Stellenbosch, a small town not far from Cape Town, Millie Asherson was brought up by a European nanny and a governess.⁹⁷ On the other hand several of the eastern European respondents mention that their Coloured maids could speak Yiddish.⁹⁸ On occasion this was because they were looking after elderly parents.⁹⁹

What distinguished Johannesburg from Cape Town, was the prevalence of male domestic servants, that dated back to Johannesburg's inception as a mining camp. In his history of Johannesburg Jewry, the Yiddish writer, Leibl Feldman, describes the relationship that developed between the immigrants and their African servants. Like the Coloured maids in Cape Town, there were many who learned to speak a bit of Yiddish!

The majority of the Russian Jews were single young men, or men whose wives were in the old country. The Africans used to clean their rooms, prepare their meals, and wash their clothes. In this way a friendly relationship developed between the lonely Jews and the lonely Blacks. Not knowing any English, the Jews began to speak a kitchen Zulu. There were also many Africans who spoke Yiddish and even learnt to sing Yiddish songs. They would salt the meat for their employers, religious Jews, and learn how to observe the dietary laws as well as how to celebrate the Jewish festivals. There were even instances, when after working for several years in Jewish homes, Africans would return home, speaking Yiddish, believing it to be English.¹⁰⁰

Most commonly families employed an African to help with the rough work, and to load the stove.¹⁰¹ Children, however, were looked after by white nursemaids who were highly sought after. In 1893 the Yiddish correspondent, Meyer Dovid Hersch, writes of white nursemaids that, "there are hardly any to be had and many of our rich

⁹⁵ Ellen Levy, interviewed by Y. B. Galombik, Cape Town, 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0156, pp. 7-8.

⁹⁶ Lily Roy, 1981, p. 4.

⁹⁷ Milly Asherson, 198-, pp. 4, 8.

⁹⁸ Esther Wilkin, 198-, p. 14; Sheina Baskin, 1982, p. 50.

⁹⁹ Sybil Honikman., 198-, p. 17;

¹⁰⁰ Leibl Feldman, translated by Veronica Belling, 2007, p. 192.

¹⁰¹ Oscar Kaplan, interviewed by Thea Fleiser, Johannesburg, 1988, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, p. 8; Sadie Festenstein, 1985, p. 7.

brethren look for them and cannot find them at any price.”¹⁰² Sydney Levy, whose family came to South Africa before the South African war, relates that even though his family employed male and female African domestics, the children were always looked after by white nursemaids.¹⁰³

Domestic Judaism

Another area where the difference between the Anglo-German and east European women was evident was in the level of observance of Judaism within the home. Assimilation on the scale that it existed in Great Britain and among the early pioneer families, is not found among the *Litvaks*. In the very rare exceptional case, it is associated with very anglicized families who had arrived in South Africa long before the major wave of immigration.

In mid to late nineteenth century Bloemfontein, where there were no facilities for Jewish practice, the German Jewish family of Sophie Levisieur, never differentiated between themselves and the Christians, thinking of themselves as just belonging to another variety of faith.¹⁰⁴ In her memoirs she recalls her family’s Xmas dinners.¹⁰⁵ In the 1880s at Zwartkoppies, near Pretoria, the British born and raised, Bertha Marks, married to the eastern European mining magnate, Sammy Marks, had abandoned the dietary laws, serving shellfish at her banquets. Moreover in the way of British Jewry although the family acknowledged the Jewish festivals, they also celebrated Christmas.¹⁰⁶ Future anthropologist and President of the South African Institute of Race Relations, Ellen Hellman (b. 1908) to German immigrant parents, says that she was brought up virtually without religion and although her mother wouldn’t eat pork, she used to buy it for her father though it was served on a special plate and not with the rest of the cold cuts.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Meyer Dovid Hersch, 2005, pp. 82, 84-85.

¹⁰³ Sydney Levy, interviewed by, S. F. Jawitz, Johannesburg, 1986, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ Myer Pencharz and Dora L. Sowden, 1955, pp. 320-324.

¹⁰⁵ *Sophie Levisieur*, 1982, p. 85.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Mendelsohn, 1991, pp. 197-198.

¹⁰⁷ Ellen Hellman, interviewed by Riva Krut, Johannesburg, 1982, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, p. 6.

In Cape Town Anita Steinberg, whose forebears arrived in South Africa in the mid-nineteenth century, and whose grandfather had been the President of the Gardens Shul, relates that she was brought up on bacon and eggs for breakfast! She first encountered chopped liver and chopped herring, when she got married.¹⁰⁸ Dorothy Whitesman (b. 1903), the daughter of Mark Cohen, the British headmaster of the Hebrew Public School, said that her British cousins had Sunday dinners, rather than Friday nights, and a Christmas tree, but her family never did.¹⁰⁹ However anglicisation was not the only cause of diminished observance, it was also evident in some instances among radicalized eastern European immigrants. Bella Horwitz (b. 1899) relates that her family had not celebrated Friday nights while the children had been forced to attend school on the Jewish festivals (except for the High holidays), much to their embarrassment. Bella says that she and her husband were among the earliest members of the Reform Temple, established in 1936.¹¹⁰

However diminished observance was evident both among Anglo-German families as well as immigrant families from the earliest times, although the eastern Europeans tended to cling to the traditions much longer. Gladys Jankelow, whose father from Grimsby in England was the secretary of the Wolmarans Street shul, said that in the early days they had two tables one for *milkhik* (milk), one for *fleischik* (meat). They went to *shul* (synagogue) on Friday nights and festivals and celebrated Passover very strictly. However at a certain point her mother decided to give up *Kashrut* (dietary laws), as they were all eating out at restaurants and it was hard for her to supervise the African servant.¹¹¹

Sadie Festenstein (b. 1908) the daughter of a rabbi from Vorna in Lithuania, relates that although her mother continued to observe after her father, a rabbi, died, she and her brothers and sisters stopped observing soon after they came to South Africa. They always had Friday night supper, and when her father was alive, they said grace before and after meals. However after he died her mother did a shortened version. The children would never smoke in front of their mother on *Shabat*, but she in turn never

¹⁰⁸ Nita Steinberg, 198-, p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ Dorothy Whitesman, 1981, p.

¹¹⁰ Bella Harwood (Horwitz), interviewed by Fern Sacks, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0098, pp. 9-10, 82.

¹¹¹ Gladys Jankelow, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0123, pp.9, 11.

insisted on their going to *shul*.¹¹² When Bertha Englander from Dusat in Lithuania, lived with her sister's family, they lit candles and had a *Shabat* meal. However when she got married she did not continue this tradition in her own home, because they were not religious. Yet she says that they did observe the Jewish holidays.¹¹³ Rose Lopis (b. 1913) says that she went to *shul* every *Shabbat*, until she was apprenticed to a pharmacist and then she had to work.¹¹⁴

In Cape Town the majority of Jewish businesses were kept open on Saturdays and synagogue attendance was generally reduced to the festivals. Parents, forced to keep their businesses open on a Saturday, would nonetheless try to persuade their children not to ride or shop on Saturday.¹¹⁵ It was apparently not uncommon to see cars parked in Maynard and Harrington Street on a Saturday, to avoid being seen in front of the Roeland Street *shul*.¹¹⁶ In Johannesburg Gladys Jankelow (b. 1906) says that in the early days many businesses in Johannesburg were closed on *Shabbat*, but then it became more lax. Most of the Johannesburg respondents went to the Wolmarans Street synagogue. In the beginning, the presiding rabbi, Rabbi Dr J. L. Landau, born in Galicia and ordained in Vienna, wouldn't allow cars to park in front of the *shul*, but later that too lapsed.¹¹⁷

Cambridge educated, Reverend Bender, who ministered at the Gardens synagogue in Cape Town, from 1895 to 1937, occupies a very special place in the history of this period, and especially in the memories of the women. Comments confirm his image as an English gentleman and a scholar, who preferred to quote from the Classics than from the Bible.¹¹⁸ While Bender made it very clear that he looked down on the immigrants,¹¹⁹ at the same time he did everything in his power to help them. No matter to which congregation their parents belonged, all the children went to Bender's children services that were held between three and four on Saturday afternoons.

¹¹² Sadie Festenstein, 1985, pp. 9, 19-20.

¹¹³ Bertha Englander, 1982, pp. 9-10.

¹¹⁴ Rose Lopis, 1985, p. 13.

¹¹⁵ Goldie Ackerman, 1981, p. 39.

¹¹⁶ Sarah Zalk, 1981, p. 68.

¹¹⁷ Gladys Jankelow, 1981, pp. 26-27.

¹¹⁸ Irene Geffen, interviewed by Lulu Levine, Johannesburg, 1985, BC949, p. 5

¹¹⁹ Ethel Goldberg recounts his once saying to her that "Once we let those Russian women in, the synagogue will go to the dogs", 1982, pp. 19-20; Rachel Isaacson relates that she was never a favourite with Bender as she was too Russian for his taste!, 1983, pp. 16-17.

Bender would go to the Hope Mill school to encourage the children to come and would even offer prizes for attendance. After the service he would invite a group of about 12 girls to tea at his home.¹²⁰ It wasn't always the same crowd.¹²¹ He used to give them a gift on their birthdays that many had treasured to that day.¹²²

With businesses kept open on Saturdays and synagogue attendance reduced to the festivals, the focus of Judaism, that in eastern Europe was the synagogue, shifted to the home. The words of the famous historian of American Jewish life, Irving Howe, that, "all that we had left of Jewishness had come to rest in the family,"¹²³ apply equally to South Africa. Thus the role played by the women in lighting candles and preparing the Sabbath meal was crucial.

In Maynard Street in Cape Town, writes Lilian Dubb, "On Friday mornings you could smell the *Shabbes* preparations in the streets and in fact before *yomtoyvim*, the great Festivals, you could tell which festival was coming up just by the aromas hanging in the air."¹²⁴ Betty Herman (b.1895) described Friday night as "the loveliest night that you can ever imagine. My mother was so beautiful... and the samovar used to be put on the table and we had cholent..."¹²⁵ On Friday afternoon the mother of Lily Roy (b. 1897), would pack up food parcels for a family of five who had none.¹²⁶ Sybil Honikman's grandmother used to make the *lokshen*:

We had a very large dining room table, big oak table, it could seat twelve or fourteen people... and when she made *lokshen* that table was covered, she would roll the dough out paper thin on that table, and it looked like a length of cloth, and she would roll it up and with a sharp knife chop, chop, chop, chop, the finest cuts of *lokshen* you can think of¹²⁷

¹²⁰ Olga Katzeff, 1984, p. 25.

¹²¹ Goldie Ackerman, 1981, p. 40.

¹²² Lily Trapler, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0252, p. 28; Millie Asherson, 198-, p. 46.

¹²³ Irving Howe, *Margin of Hope*, pp. 4-5, cited in Sydney Stahl Weinberg, *World of our Mothers*, Schocken Books, New York, 1988, p. 89.

¹²⁴ Lilian Dubb, "Shaindel", *Jewish Affairs*, 53(3), Spring 1998: 44-46.

¹²⁵ Betty Herman, 1981, p. 26.

¹²⁶ Lily Roy, 1981, p. 10.

¹²⁷ Sybil Honikman, n.d., p. 22.

At Pesach Betty Herman's mother brewed her own mead from hops, made *ayngemakhts* - preserves, and *ingberlekh* - ginger carrot sweets.¹²⁸ Lily Roy's grandparents would move in at *Pesakh* (Passover) to supervise.¹²⁹

In Doornfontein in Johannesburg Rose Lopis (b. 1913) remembers "walking down Saratoga Avenue, everybody dressed in their better clothes walking towards Wolmarans Street *shul*, it was really something, you knew it was *yontef* (festival)." On the other hand, she comments that in contrast to the religious revival today, "we were normal Jewish families living a Jewish life doing the best we could under the circumstances... We weren't extreme, we didn't walk around with *payos* (forelocks) and *tsitsis* (prayer vests) hanging out and that sort of thing..."¹³⁰

Birthdays also followed the Hebrew calendar and most of the eastern European mothers didn't bother with birthdays as they didn't know their children's Christian dates of birth, and did not consider it to be their real birthday. They would say: "on Chanukkah", "*a vokh nokh Shvu'es*" (a week after Shavuoth); "*a vokh nokh dem fire*" (a week after the fire).¹³¹ Besides they had neither the time, nor the money to spend on birthday presents.¹³²

The kosher boarding houses were bastions of *Yiddishkayt* (Jewishness) for lonely immigrants lacking the support and comfort of their families. It was largely up to the women to create this atmosphere of home with all the familiar dishes. At Katzeff's boarding house they sang *zmiros* (Sabbath songs) on Friday night. Visitors would pop in after Friday supper, on Saturday afternoons and on *yontef*. After Shul on Saturday guests would come for *seudah shelishit* (third meal) – tea, herring and *kichel*, and then go off to *daven minchah ma'ariv* (recite the afternoon and evening prayers). Olga says: "life was nice, it was homely, it was a closeness, it was a friendliness."¹³³

¹²⁸ Betty Herman, 1981, p. 25.

¹²⁹ Lily Roy, 1981, p. 12.

¹³⁰ Rose Lopis, 1985, pp. 12, 6, 8.

¹³¹ Mrs Reitstein, 1981, pp. 17-18.

¹³² Dina Clain, 198-, pp. 18-19; Annie Washkansky, 1983, p. 8.

¹³³ Olga Katzeff, 1984, pp. 9, 20.

The mother of Dina Clain (b. 1900), did all the cooking herself. There was a baker nearby them who had big coal ovens, where they could leave their *cholent* to cook overnight.¹³⁴ Their maids used to come and fetch the pots the following day. According to her son, Dina's brother: "My mother was the be all and end all of everything." When his mother used to send him with a chicken to Rabbi M. J. Mirvish (the first east European ordained rabbi in Cape Town) to find out if it was kosher, Rabbi Mirvish, would deliberately defer to his mother whom he recognized as the final arbiter of Jewish practice in this case. In his words: "*Bunim vos zogt dayn muter?...Az dayn muter zogt az iz treyf, mayn kind iz dos treyf.*" (Bunim what does your mother say? If your mother says its *treyf*, my child, it is *treyf*). She knows much more about the anatomy of that fowl than I do." Mrs Clain would then give the *treyfe* animal to a needy Coloured woman in the area.¹³⁵

Despite the difficulties of obtaining kosher meat in the country towns the eastern European immigrant families would do everything in their power to observe their religion. Living remote from the assimilationist tendencies of the city frequently allowed Judaism to flourish in close and intimate small communities. In Stellenbosch, not far from Cape Town, when her mother died in 1936, the sister of Paula Jaffe (b. 1907), was obliged to leave school for a year to mind the household, as her father was not prepared to rely on the maid to observe *kashrut* without supervision. Ladies from the congregation would come around to check their pots.¹³⁶ In Malmesbury,¹³⁷ Darling,¹³⁸ Napier,¹³⁹ and Montague,¹⁴⁰ the kosher meat was delivered on the train. Without refrigeration, it was often rancid by the time it arrived.¹⁴¹ Zipora Beinart (b. 1898) who originally lived on a farm in Darling, said that they lived on fish.¹⁴² In Piquetberg they used to pay a *shoykhet* (ritual slaughterer) to come and slaughter the meat.¹⁴³ In Faure they took the chickens to the Reverend in Stellenbosch to be

¹³⁴ Dina Clain, 198-, p. 45.

¹³⁵ Bernard Clain, interviewed by Noreen Scher, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0034, p. 12.

¹³⁶ Paula Jaffe, 1982, p. 41.

¹³⁷ Zipora Beinart, 1981, pp. 21, 26-48.

¹³⁸ Betty Herman, 1981, p. 36.

¹³⁹ Dora Brown, interviewed by Fern Sacks, Cape Town, 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0031, p. 5.

¹⁴⁰ Annie Abramowitz, 1981, p. 21

¹⁴¹ Annie Abramowitz, 1981, p. 21-22.

¹⁴² Zipora Beinart, 1981, p. 3.

¹⁴³ Dora Schapiro, 198-, p. 18.

slaughtered and fetched meat from Somerset West or Stellenbosch twice a week. The rabbi from Worcester came to Montague to slaughter.¹⁴⁴

In the small village of Napier on the Cape West coast, Dora Brown's mother baked *challah* and lit candles. At *Pesach* (Passover) they put planks on the table, that they covered with a special woven cloth from Russia. They would make their own wine and bring matzos for the whole village. Her mother baked *milkhike* (cinnamon buns) and *teyglekh. Meshulachs* (emissaries) who came to collect for charities would sleep over at their house.¹⁴⁵ In Leslie in the Transvaal, Sheina Kagan was able to keep a kosher home because her husband was a *shoykhet*, so he slaughtered.¹⁴⁶

Before synagogues were built in the country towns, if there were enough men to make up a *minyan* (prayer quorum), services were held either in a private home¹⁴⁷ or in the Town Hall.¹⁴⁸ A member of the community would act as rabbi. Otherwise they would go to the nearest town where there was a *shul*,¹⁴⁹ or to Cape Town. Before there was a *shul* in Wolsley, Hessie Beder's mother would close her shop on Saturdays, and take the children out for walks, avoiding picking berries or flowers, spanning the horses or riding horseback or bicycle, that was prohibited on the Sabbath.¹⁵⁰

Jewish bookstores and kosher food stores

In the earliest days Jewish ritual requirements, such as *mezuzes*,¹⁵¹ *taleysim* (prayer shawls), and prayerbooks as well as the special Jewish food requirements, such as matzo for Passover, and even *bob*, the traditional flat bean used in the making of *cholent*,¹⁵² were imported from the Jewish booksellers of which there were at least

¹⁴⁴ Annie Abramowitz, 1981.

¹⁴⁵ Dora Brown, 1982, p. 12.

¹⁴⁶ Sheina Kagan, 1985, p. 6.

¹⁴⁷ Hessie Beder (Wolsley), 198-, p. 23; Dora Brown (Napier and Bredasdorp), 1982, p. 12-13.

¹⁴⁸ On the festivals they had a service in the Town Hall in Darling Betty Herman, 1981, p. 36.

¹⁴⁹ In Wolsley later on there was a shul in Ceres, Hessie Beder, 198-, p. 22; Bredasdorp had the nearest shul to Napier, Dora Brown, 1982, pp. 12-13; From Hopefield and Paternoster, they went to Darling, Betty Herman, 1981, p. 36.; In Faure Annie Abramowitz's mother took her brothers to a kosher boarding house in Somerset West for the minor holidays. From Montague they went to shul in Robertson, Annie Abramowitz, 1981.

¹⁵⁰ Hessie Beder, 198-, p. 22.

¹⁵¹ Parchment scroll containing Deut. 6, 4-9 and 11, 13-21 fixed to the doorpost in a wooden or metal case.

¹⁵² Miriam Green, interviewed by Veronica Belling, 2004.

four in District Six in Cape Town.¹⁵³ The best known was M. Beinkinstadt, established in 1903, that by 1920 had moved from 76 Caledon Street to 38 Canterbury Street.¹⁵⁴ They advertised themselves as: “Beinkinstadt’s Cape Town Kosher, Matzos & Grocery Store.”¹⁵⁵ Informants remember Moshe Beinkinstadt coming to their house to take their mother’s Passover order.¹⁵⁶ Their printed list of Passover foods advertises Manischewitz’s Matzos from America, cake mix from London, German potato flour, fat-goose [sic], Russian - *shmaltz*, Colonial horse radish, Palestine cognac and wine, Russian cognac, and Colonial wine and spirits. Also listed are all the favourite Jewish foods: sauerkraut and cucumbers in tins, herrings in barrels, almonds, prunes, pomegranate peel, and poppy seed. Tinned fish delicacies were imported from Arnold Sorenson in Riga, and salt herrings from Yzermans in Holland.¹⁵⁷ Beinkinstadt supplied Jewish customers all over South Africa in the cities as well as the small country towns.¹⁵⁸

The earliest Jewish cookbook found in Cape Town, *Kokh-bukh far Yudishe Froyen*, bore the stamp of Smith Jewish Booksellers in Harrington Street in District Six.¹⁵⁹ It was published Vilna in 1896, compiled by Ozer Bloshteyn (1840-1898), a Latvian *maskil*,¹⁶⁰ who translated the 668 different recipes, “from a variety of famous cookbooks in many languages.”¹⁶¹ Bloshteyn’s *Kokhbukh* contains irrefutable proof of the *Litvak* origin of the term “*kitke*”, that for some reason survived exclusively among South Africa Jews to designate *challah*, the white plaited Sabbath bread. *Gefilte* fish, designated as “Ordinary Jewish fish” is peppered, *Litvak* style, rather than sugared the Polish way. Also found are recipes for “med”, a type of beer made with a

¹⁵³ There were Smiths Jewish Booksellers in Canterbury Street, Segal and Witten Hebrew Booksellers & Stationery at the corner of Caledon and A.P. Melmed Hebrew Bookseller and Stationer at no. 62 Harrington Street, adjacent to Canterbury. I have established this from the property stamps in old Yiddish and Hebrew books donated to the Jewish Studies Library at U.C.T.

¹⁵⁴ Letter book, 1920, Beinkinstadt collection, BC 1378.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 1916.

¹⁵⁶ Ruby Kahn, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0131, p. 42.

¹⁵⁷ Letterheads, Beinkinstadt collection.

¹⁵⁸ Beinkinstadt’s letter books of 1904-1905, list customers in: Simonstown, Stellenbosch, Wellington, Worcester, Paarl, Oudtshoorn, Moorreesburg, Piketburg, Riversdale, Uniondale, Beaufort West, and Colesburg in the Western Cape; Graaff Reinet, Middleburg and Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Province, Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State, and Roodepoort in the Transvaal.

¹⁵⁹ Fanny Losman, interviewed by Veronica Belling, November 2004.

¹⁶⁰ Bloshteyn was a *maskil*, teacher, Russian translator, writer of textbooks and over a hundred Yiddish novels for Jewish women Z. Rejzen, *Leksikon fun der Yidisher literature, prese un filologye*, B. Kletskin, Vilne, 1928, bd. 1, pp. 294-295.

¹⁶¹ O. Bloshteyn, *Kokh-bukh far Yudishe froyen*, pp. 214-216.

mixture of honey and hops, which in South Africa was brewed at Passover. On the other hand there are no recipes for *teyglekh*,¹⁶² the most typical Jewish confection in South Africa. Neither are there recipes for *ingberlekh*, a sweet made out of grated carrots, ginger and sugar, and *pletzlekh*, made out of sugar, apricots or plums, that are eaten on Passover.

Before South African cookbooks were published (from about 1950), Beinkinstadts were the distributors of the *Rokeach Cook Book*, (Brooklyn, New York, 1933), that contains recipes for *kichel*, and *teygel*, exclusive to South Africa.¹⁶³ Rokeach and Manischewitz, U. S. matzo manufacturers,¹⁶⁴ distributed brochures with Passover recipes in Yiddish and in English. The British cookbook, *Dainty Dishes and Dinners for Jewish Families* (1902),¹⁶⁵ was very popular among the Anglo-German Jews, but in typical British fashion, it contains no Jewish recipes. A book with greater Jewish content, that was available in South Africa at that time, was Mildred Bellin's *Modern Kosher Meals: Recipes and Menus Arranged for Each Month of the Year Based on Current Food Supplies*, that was published in New York in 1934.

Women also clipped recipes from the American Yiddish newspapers that were sold at the Jewish bookstores. A collection of recipes clipped from a column entitled, "*Gutn Apetit: di Kikh in a Moderner Idish-Amerikanisher Heym*," 1931-1932, that belonged to a Mrs Joffe, of Victoria Road, Woodstock, include Passover meat loaf, potato *kneidlekh* (dumplings), honey cake, *homentashn* (triangular buns filled with poppy seed or cheese), pickled herring, chopped liver, *ptsha* (jellied calves hooves) and *klops* (meatloaf).¹⁶⁶

In the 1930s there were at least three kosher delicatessans in Plein Street in Cape Town, that was just down the road from Hatfield Street where the Gardens Synagogue was situated. They all specialized in the popular smoked meats - corned beef, pickled

¹⁶² *Teygel*, literally "a small pellet of dough" which is deep fried in a mixture of sugar, syrup and water, then dipped in sugar and ginger for flavour.

¹⁶³ Contains a recipe for *ingberlekh*. However this is not the same as the crystallized carrot sweat known in South Africa. Although ginger – *ingber* - is the main ingredient, it is combined with a dough made of eggs and *matzo* meal, dipped in sugar and honey and baked.

¹⁶⁴ Manischewitz's Passover cook book, *Tempting Kosher Dishes*, United States, 1940.

¹⁶⁵ May Henry and Kate Halford, *Dainty dinners and dishes for Jewish families*, Wertheimer, London, 1902, belonged to Feodora Clouts (1899-1995).

¹⁶⁶ Cookbooks, Jewish Museum files, BC1155.

tongue, polony - and like Beinkinstadt they imported all the favourite delicacies, herrings, olives, cucumber and cheeses, as well as Passover products. The Johannesburg visitors, who thronged to Muizenberg in the summer, would take the train to Cape Town to buy “kosher hampers, one side milchik, the other side fleishik” at Glantz’s Kosher Delicacy Store at no. 103 Plein Street.¹⁶⁷ Only a block away at no. 87, was Rogalsky’s Kosher Delicacy Store,¹⁶⁸ and at no. 123, the Palestine Oriental Store, which imported *matzos* from the Baron Rothschild’s Bakeries, exhorted its customers “to participate in the great National Pioneering Work towards the upbuilding of Palestine Industry.”¹⁶⁹ In February 1935 the Haifa café, that opened at no. 64, reasoned that as: “Haifa is now the port of call of our beloved Palestine. Haifa Restaurant should now be your port of call at all times locally.”¹⁷⁰ In April it was advertising meals that were strictly kosher for Passover.¹⁷¹ Higher up, on the corner of Buitenkant and Mill Street, Milly’s delicatessen, established by Simon Milner (b. 1899), an immigrant from Lithuania,¹⁷² in 1934¹⁷³, became legendary for its Jewish foods. The young people congregated on Milly’s corner, so that to determine whether you were ‘one of the gang’, it became customary to enquire: “*Bistu a Millys korner shteyer?*” (Do you hang out on Milly’s corner?).¹⁷⁴

Conclusion

It is thanks to the eastern European immigrant women that South African Jewry remained so strongly traditional. They recreated the life they left behind in eastern Europe in a South African context, preserving the Jewish customs in the home, while their husbands were forced to work on the Sabbath and on most Festivals - other than Passover and the High Holidays. While British style assimilation with Christmas celebration was virtually unknown among the *Litvaks*, a loosely interpreted Orthodoxy allowed many to remain within the fold, who might otherwise have strayed. The earliest women immigrants displayed resourcefulness and energy, taking

¹⁶⁷ Louis Glantz, ‘There was a famous store’, Highlands House news sheet, Purim/Pesach 5763, April 2003.

¹⁶⁸ SAJC, 24 March 1933, p. 190; Paula Jaffe, 1982, p. 14, mentions their smoked salmon.

¹⁶⁹ SAJC, 8 April 1932, p. 256.

¹⁷⁰ SAJC, 22 February 1935, p. 129.

¹⁷¹ SAJC, 12 April 1935, p. 267.

¹⁷² Simon Milner said that the name of Milly’s came from the fact that his name was Milner and the shop was in Mill Street, Simon Milner, interviewed by Ilana Korber, Cape Town, 1982, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0177, pp. 1, 8.

¹⁷³ Conversation with Bernard Milner, Simon Milner’s grandson, 2009.

¹⁷⁴ Lilian Dubb interviewed by Veronica Belling, 1999.

over the support of their families when the need arose, while still maintaining the traditional lifestyle and extending hospitality to the new arrivals. Coming from clusters of eastern European villages within a small radius of each other, to a community that was isolated at the tip of Africa, the women perpetuated the customs, the dishes and the terminology unique to that region, that was lost in the larger and more diverse eastern European diaspora communities in other parts of the world. As a result the South African Jewish community is widely believed to approximate most closely its *Litvak* antecedents. Supported by synagogues, Jewish booksellers and food stores in the city, and reinforced by close family networks - a result of chain migration - even in far flung country towns, Jewish immigrant women managed to keep the spirit of the tradition alive for their families.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER THREE

MARRIAGE STRATEGIES

The most crucial determinant of status, particularly for women, is marriage. However the criteria for determining the choice of marriage partner differed for different classes of Jewry. For the very wealthy, the Anglo-German pioneering families, such as the De Pass and Mosenthal families as well as the mining magnates, it meant keeping their wealth within the family. For this reason they married amongst themselves and often returned to Germany or London to find their brides.¹ However as this group was always relatively small and exclusive, and the average immigrant Jew, newly arrived from England or Germany could not afford the luxury of returning home, a marriage register of the Witwatersrand Old Hebrew congregation, for the years 1889-1909, suggests that marriages between Anglo-German and east European Jews were not uncommon from the very earliest times.²

For the majority of eastern European Jews flooding into South Africa before the First World War, religion rather than class was the top priority for choosing a marriage partner. As during the early period Jewish women were relatively scarce, particularly in Johannesburg, the services of the traditional eastern European *shadchan* - matchmaker or marriage broker - who was still thriving in eastern Europe, the United States and Palestine, in the early twentieth century - was still in demand in the early South African Jewish community. Yet very little has been written about him. The reason for his absence from the historical record is probably because as a character he first appears in early South African Yiddish literature that is largely inaccessible today.

The matchmaker makes one of his earliest appearances in the guise of *Mr Kokhelefel*,³ a satirical figure, a traveling merchant who does a bit of matchmaking on the side, who features in a column that appeared between 1912 and 1913, in the weekly Yiddish newspaper, *Der Afrikaner*, published in Johannesburg between

¹ See, Rose Norwich, "Jewish Women in Early Johannesburg", *Jewish Affairs*, 48, 2, 1993, pp. 89-90.

² Leibl Feldman, *The Jews of Johannesburg*, translated by Veronica Belling, Cape Town, 2007, pp. 231-233.

³ *Kokhelefel*, is a Yiddish term for somebody who has a finger in every pie, a busybody.

1911 and 1933.⁴ He was the creation of the sub-editor of the newspaper, Yakov Azriel Davidson, a former *yeshiva bokher*, who came to Johannesburg in 1893 from Lithuania.

In reality the early South African matchmaker was not dissimilar to Mr Kokhelefel . Like the eastern European matchmaker of that time⁵, he was generally a pedlar, or a travelling salesman of sorts, who never missed an opportunity to convince the bachelor shopkeepers that he encountered on his rounds, that he had the perfect match for them. He is the butt of a humorous Yiddish short story by J. M. Sherman, written in 1916, where a customer convinces a pedlar, trading in religious articles – *taleysim* (prayer shawls), *tsitsis* (prayer vests) and *mezuzes*⁶ - that he should rather deal in *lebedike mezuzes* (live *mezuzes*) that he can kiss on the cheeks, instead of on the wall!⁷

Two court cases concerning marriage brokers are reported in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*. The first in 1917, involved a bride who was suing her prospective groom for damages for breach of promise.⁸ The second is a case that involved the reneging on a marriage brokerage fee- a case that was reported in an article entitled “Shadchanos felt” – ‘The marriage brokerage fee was not paid’, in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* of 19 November 1920. The local English press characterized it as ‘a case of peculiar nature’ concerning the ‘customs of the Jewish community’. It concerned Goodman Davies, a commission agent of Hatfield Street, who was suing Hilly Rosenthal for £25 for ‘special services rendered’. The defendant Rosenthal denied

⁴ Yakov Azriel Davidson. *His Writing in the Yiddish Newspaper, Der Afrikaner, 1911-1913*, translated by Veronica Belling, Jewish Publications – South Africa, Isaac & Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 2009.

⁵ According to a recent study on *Jewish Marriage and Divorce in Imperial Russia*, the *shadkonim* were descendants of the illustrious intermediaries of medieval Europe who served to link the scattered Jewish communities through marriage. They were used by rich and poor alike and included rabbis, lawyers, and even women, generally rich widows. However in time, *shadkhonim* were most often traveling merchants much like Davidson’s ‘Mr Kokhelefel’, see Chaeran Y. Freeze, *Jewish Marriage and Divorce in Imperial Russia*, University Press of New England [for] Brandeis Press, Hanover, 2002, pp. 19-22.

⁶ Parchment scroll containing Deut. 6, 4-9 and 11, 13-21 fixed to the doorpost in a wooden or metal case.

⁷ J.M. Sherman, *Der Shadchan* (1916), in *Oyf Transvaler Erd: Dertseylungen un Lider*, Kayor, Johannesburg, 1949, pp. 166-179.

⁸ SAJC, 17 August 1917, p. 667.

that any agreement had ever existed between them and had refused to pay Davies the £25.

It was stated that in May last Davies entered into a verbal agreement with Rosenthal, whereby he promised to introduce to Rosenthal a lady with a view to matrimony. For these services defendant Rosenthal promised to pay £25 immediately after the espousals had been published. This was done and a lady was finally introduced to Rosenthal with whom defendant contracted an engagement of marriage and the espousals were published on August 21st.

However after pleadings and evidence had been heard, the attorney for the plaintiff was informed by the court, that even if the contract had taken place, his client had no legal claim. The reason for this was because a payment of this nature could not be enforced under South African law as it was considered to be *contra bonos mores* - prejudicial to public welfare. According to the law, 'Marriage brokerage contracts introduced 'the consideration of a money payment into that which should be free from any such taint.'⁹ Judgment was therefore awarded in favour of the defendant with costs.¹⁰ The outcome of the case only serves to confirm the vague and unofficial status that the matchmaker enjoyed in the Jewish community in South Africa, and the divide between South African law and Jewish custom.

A close knit community, South African Jews were always anxious to protect their status within their new communities and never to venture outside the community. The surest way to ensure this was through the ties of marriage. Thus whether through a marriage broker or not, until the 1940s, it was not at all uncommon for Jewish marriages in South Africa to be 'arranged'. However the arrangements were generally made informally by the parents, either through local introductions or by sending for a young woman from Lithuania. South African Yiddish fiction abounds with such tales, very often focusing on the unhappiness caused by such marriages. In *Farborgene Laydn* (Hidden Suffering) in the collection of short stories, *In Afrike: Bilder fun Yidishn Lebn in Frierdike Yorn* (Pictures of Jewish Life in the Early Years), by the South African Yiddish writer, Hyman Polsky, Reb Sholem goes to

⁹ Hahlo, (Hermann v Charlesworth 1905 KB 123 at 130) E-Mail from Amanda Barratt, 27.1.2010.

¹⁰ SAJC, 19 November 1920, p. 895.

Africa to earn money for a dowry for his only daughter. Although he succeeds in persuading a rich Jewish man to send money for his daughter's passage to Africa in return for her hand in marriage, she is unhappy because she does not love her husband. In another story in the collection, *Tsu Shpet* (Too late), a successful shop owner who has spent twenty years in Africa, sends for a young bride from eastern Europe, who, on arrival refuses to marry him and returns home.¹¹

Women often married very young. A large difference in age was not uncommon, as in those days a man couldn't marry until he had a bank balance. The well known novelist, Sarah Gertrude Millin (1889-1968), who married in 1912 was obliged to wait until her future husband, Philip Millin (1888-1952), had obtained his LLB and was earning 400 pounds a year before they were able to marry.¹² In the Kaplan Centre collection of oral interviews, conducted in the 1980s, Ida Goodman, relates that at the age of eighteen, her parents arranged for her to marry a Lithuanian immigrant almost double her age, a cattle speculator, who had a nice house in Wepenaar, a small town in the Orange Free State.¹³ Nineteen year old Dora Schapiro from Kupishik, stranded in Piketberg in South Africa by the First World War, married her brother's business partner, twenty years her senior.¹⁴ *Khavertes* (Girl Friends) by Polsky, is the story of two young women on their way to Africa, who vow never to marry older men for their money as is the custom in Africa.¹⁵

If they could not afford to send for a wife from Russia, many young men never married and became *alte bokherim*, old bachelors. The few marriageable Jewish women in Johannesburg tended to prefer the older men who were more established and who could ensure them a comfortable lifestyle in the suburbs, rather than in the cramped quarters of Ferreirastown. The Yiddish press contains a litany of complaints from young men who are unable to find wives. In *Di Yudishe Fohn* on 28 December 1911, someone remarks, "that to see a young man under the *chuppah*

¹¹ H. Polsky, "Farborgene laydn", and "Tsu Shpet", in *In Afrike, : Bilder fun Yidishn Lebn in Frierdike Yorn*, Yiddish Cultural Federation, Johannesburg, 1952, pp. 61-66, 34-42.

¹² Sarah Gertrude Millin, *The Measure of My Days*, Central News Agency, South Africa, 1955, pp.49-56; Martin Rubin, *Sarah Gertrude Millin: a South African Life*, AD Donker, Johannesburg, 1977, p. 38.

¹³ She was 20 and he was 38 years old, Ida Goodman, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 1983, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0081, pp. 28, 31-32.

¹⁴ Dora Schapiro, 198-, pp. 16-17.

¹⁵ Polsky, "Khavertes", 1952, pp. 135-138.

(wedding canopy) today is rare.” And a couple of weeks later somebody else comments that, “The young Jewish girls choose their life partners according to the size of the diamond, and according to the comforts and luxuries that they are promised.”¹⁶

In a series of mock prayers in a column in a contemporary South African Yiddish newspaper, *Der Afrikaner*, a bridegroom prays:

I beseech thee merciful father, that thou should have mercy on me, give me wealth so that my bride, thy maidservant, should have all good things, silk and satin, gold and silver, big rooms, many servants, whatever her heart desires, because if not woe is me.¹⁷

Simultaneously a bride prays for a rich husband who will satisfy all her hearts' desires:

I beseech thee again, merciful God that thy deeds be merciful, send him down sense so that he should not eat his words, and that immediately after the wedding he should rent a six room house in Yeoville, not in Ferreira where all the *peruvnikes* live, and that he should immediately employ two white servants, if not woe is him.¹⁸

On occasion there was resistance on the part of the more established immigrant parents to their daughter marrying a raw new arrival, *a grine*. In a Yiddish play, *Tsurik Aheym* (Homeward Bound) by Abel Shaban, editor of the *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, a new immigrant is welcomed by his relatives, until he falls in love with their daughter. Ambitious that their daughter should marry a rich man, they turn completely against him and helpless he decides that he has no option but to return home to Lithuania.¹⁹ In “A Romeo from Russia”, a short story by the Johannesburg author, Bertha Goudvis, a socially ambitious Jewish couple, who emigrated from

¹⁶ *Di Yudishe Fohn* (18/1/1912), cited in Leibl Feldman., translated by Veronica Belling, 2007, pp. 93-94

¹⁷ Yakov Azriel Davidson, “A Prayer for a Bridegroom”, in Yakov Azriel Davidson, translated by Veronica Belling, 2009, p. 28.

¹⁸ Yakov Azriel Davidson, “A Prayer for a Bride”, 2009, p. 26.

¹⁹ Abel Shaban, *Tsurik Aheym, Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 6, 13, 20, 27 May; 2, 9 June 1932.

London to Johannesburg, completely cut themselves off from their daughter, when she defies them and marries a ‘peruvian’²⁰, a young man recently arrived from Russia.²¹

Another way that marriages were ‘arranged’ in the years immediately following the passing of the Immigration Quota Act in 1930 that severely curtailed eastern European immigration, was by organizing tea parties where men were introduced to women, or vice versa, who had come out on a temporary visit to South Africa. They would only be allowed to remain if they were able to get a local to agree to marry them, and the aim was to arrange this as quickly as possible. Surprisingly many very successful marriages were arranged in this way.²²

On the other hand, many modern young women had absorbed the new ideas of companionate marriage, and refused the idea of an arranged marriage.²³ Annie Abramowitz’s parents did not approve of her dating. Instead, they wanted her to have a *shiddukh* (arranged marriage). Ignoring the procession of young men who arrived at her house at the bidding of her parents, she met her husband independently at the seaside resort of Muizenberg at the Cape, the most popular place to find a husband.²⁴ Martin Rubin, the biographer of the famous South African novelist, Sarah Gertrude Millin, cites a letter from her brother to their aunt, written in 1911, stressing that there should be no interference in her choice of partner on the part of *shadchanim* as she belonged to the new generation and was quite capable of making up her own mind.²⁵ In Goudvis’s one act play, “A husband for Rachel”, a woman, who has invited a prospective bridegroom for her niece, via a *shadchan*, has to pretend that the man is engaged to someone else, in order for her to agree to

²⁰ There are various explanations as to the meaning of the term, ‘Peruvian’ that refers to an unrefined and uncultured eastern European Jewish immigrant, that was used widely in South Africa in the early nineteenth hundreds. One of the explanations is: ‘Polish and Russian Union’ (Milton Shain); another attributes its origin to the Yiddish verb ‘pruvn’ meaning ‘to try’; or possibly it was because in the eyes of the Jewish immigrants, Peru was a distant, foreign and uncivilized country.

²¹ Bertha Goudvis, “A Romeo from Russia”, *Zionist Record*, 19 September 1919, pp. 39-43; 23 October 1919, pp. 33-35.

²² Lilian Dubb, interviewed by Veronica Belling, January 2004.

²³ Lavender, Catherine. Women in New York City, 1890 to 1940, *History/ Women’s Studies* 386, Fall 1998, College of Staten Island of Cuny, “The New Woman”, <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/386/newwoman.html>

²⁴ Annie Abramowitz, 1981, pp. 5, 7, 111.

²⁵ Sarah’s family were concerned that her fiance Phillip Millin (1888-1952)’s family was poor and as Phillip was only starting off as an advocate, he did not have much money, Abe Liebson’s letter to Betty Liebson (24 October 1911), cited in Martin Rubin, 1977, p. 41.

meet him. Her resistance to the idea of an arranged marriage is attributed to immigration: “that’s what the girls are like after you’ve brought them out here and given them a bit of education.”²⁶

Nonetheless even when choosing their own partners and marrying for love or companionship, the women tended to marry among their own *landsleit* - countrymen. Ada Swiel who emigrated from Birzh in Lithuania in 1912, married a man who came from the same village.²⁷ Lily Roy’s husband came from the same home town in the Old Country as her family.²⁸ Frieda Saacks from Panevysz married a man from Riteva in Lithuania.²⁹ Polly Harris from Shavel married a man from a village near Kovno.³⁰ Bertha Beinkinstadt, from Vilna in Lithuania, married Berl Padovich who had emigrated from Ponevezh in Lithuania via Palestine.³¹ Olga Katzeff and Sarah Zalk met their immigrant husbands, at their parents’ boarding houses.³² Annie Washkansky, from Slobodka in Lithuania, married a cousin whom they fetched from the boat.³³ Even if their husbands were not from the same regions in the Old Country, the women tended to marry fellow eastern Europeans. Bertha Englander from Dusat in Lithuania, married Tony Englander from Poland.³⁴ Esther Newman, from Latvia, married a man from Grodno, Poland.³⁵ Esther Wilkin, whose parents came from Dvinsk in Latvia, relates that when her father used to go down to the docks to greet the immigrants, he would shout: “Ver iz fun Dvinsk?” – “Who is from Dvinsk?”³⁶, to identify suitable marriage partners for his fellow countrymen in Cape Town.³⁷

On the other hand as was earlier cited, a marriage register of the Witwatersrand Old Hebrew Congregation, proves that marriages between Anglo-German and east

²⁶ Bertha Goudvis, “A Husband for Rachel: a Comedy in One Act”, *Zionist Record*, 14 September 1917, pp. 13-16.

²⁷ Ada Swiel, 1981.

²⁸ Lily Roy, 1981, p. 29.

²⁹ Frieda Saacks, 1981.

³⁰ Polly Harris, interviewed by L. Woolf, Johannesburg, 1985, Kaplan Centre Interviews.

³¹ Bertha Padovich, 1983, p. 28.

³² Olga Katzeff, 1984, p. 35-36; Sara Zalk, 1981, pp. 40-42.

³³ Annie Washkansky, 1983, pp. 26-27.

³⁴ Bertha and Tony Englander, 1982, pp. 4, 11.

³⁵ Esther Newman, 1981, p. 34.

³⁶ Dvinsk is the Yiddish name for Daugavpils, a city in Latvia, Gary Mokotoff and Sallyann Amdur Sack, *Where Once We Walked: a guide to the Jewish Communities Destroyed in the Holocaust*, Avotaynu, Teaneck, N.J., 1991, p. 66.

³⁷ Esther Wilkin, 198-, p. 7.

European Jews were not uncommon. For example of nine marriages that were solemnized in Johannesburg in 1899, four were between Russian Jewish young men and English- born young Jewish women. Of the nine marriages that took place in 1890, five were Russian Jewish couples; in the case of two of the couples – the men came from Russia and the women came from London, while two couples were born in England.³⁸ Gladys Jankelow, an Anglo-German Jewess, says that her mother encouraged her to marry an eastern European as they treated their wives better.³⁹

How young people met

Even before the First World War chaperones were going out of fashion among the Anglo-German Jews.⁴⁰ After the war girls enjoyed a far more independent lifestyle. In the 1920s and 1930s teenagers would get together without any form of adult supervision, lift up the carpets and dance. As almost every young girl learnt the piano there was no lack of music. Very popular were ‘surprise parties’ at different houses.⁴¹ Cape Town also had the Jewish Girls’ Association (founded by Reverend Bender in 1913), that every Jewish girl over the age of 17 was eligible to join.⁴² Besides courses in First Aid, Hebrew, elocution, physical culture and needlework, socials and an annual dance at the Railway Institute, were regular features.⁴³

In Johannesburg in the 1930s there were two very active clubs where young adults could get together to socialize. These were the Jewish Guild for the English speakers⁴⁴ and the Johannesburg Jewish Workers’ club for the Yiddish speakers who were more attracted to socialism.⁴⁵

However the most popular place for a Jewish girl to find a husband was at Muizenberg, a seaside resort only twenty kilometres from Cape Town, where Jews flocked during the summer months from all over South Africa and neighbouring

³⁸ Leibl Feldman, translated by Veronica Belling, 2007, pp. 231-233.

³⁹ Gladys Jankelow, 198-.

⁴⁰ SAJC, 2 January 1920.

⁴¹ Dorothy Whitesman, 1981, p. 68; Sara Zalk, 1981, p. 37; Bernard Clain, p. 7.

⁴² Jewish Girls Association, Minute book, 10 April 1918.

⁴³ Jewish Girls Association, Annual report for the year ending 9 December 1918 and... 18 December 1919, Minute book, 9 December 1918, 18 December 1919.

⁴⁴ Gladys Jankelow mentions that there were lot of get togethers at the Jewish Guild, 198-, p. 32, see, Isaac Goodman, 75th Jewish Guild Anniversary, [Jewish Guild, Johannesburg, 1972].

⁴⁵ See, T. Adler, "Lithuania's Diaspora: the Johannesburg Jewish Workers' Club, 1928-1948." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 6(1),1979: [70]-92.

Rhodesia. A humorous article entitled “Husband-hunting and How They Found Them: a Peculiar Manuscript” in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* in November 1921, describes the situation in biblical terms.

When the Children of Israel complain to Bernard, the “King of the Jews of Joburg”, that they are unable to find rich husbands for their daughters, they are advised to go south to ‘Muize’ where rich husbands are to be found.

...Then did Joseph raise his voice and speak unto the people, saying, “Are you all fools? Know you not that all the men of wealth and wisdom cometh from the South?

...Let therefore thy daughters array themselves in their finery, even in silks and crepe-de-chines, yea, even in Georgette and ninon, and make themselves pleasing in the sight of young men.

...Then let them journey for two days and two nights to Muize which is in the land of the Cape, even to the Kingdom of the great czar Nicholas, and there shalt they find them husbands.⁴⁶

Return of the *Shadchan*

According to an editorial in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* in January 1928, due to the rapidly increasing number of marriageable young women who were finding it more difficult to find suitable mates, the office of the *shadchan*, had made a reappearance. Economic pressures and consumerist values had caused the new notions of marriage for love to be fast replaced by the old idea of marriage for material advantage. According to the editor, the ‘ideas of love and attraction’, were giving way to a very large degree to the demand for ‘luxury and good living,’ resulting in alliances between young girls and much older middle-aged or even elderly spouses, as in the aforementioned Yiddish short stories. These materialistic young women were frightening off potential spouses, both Jew and gentile, who feared marital tragedy should they lose their money. Yet these smartly dressed young women who

⁴⁶ SAJC, 18 November, 1921, p. 1021.

appeared at the office of the marriage broker, often came from very poor homes, but this fact was concealed until the agreement was contracted.⁴⁷

However, the traditional marriage broker, the ‘old-long-bearded, cringing individual, who was a cross between a *lamdan* (a scholar) and a general agent, had now been transformed into,

a smartly-dressed young or middle-aged man who canvasses his “clients” in a smart motor-car. He has an office in up-town and a staff of assistants, and possesses an elaborate card index system recording all the information he can obtain about “likelies” and “possibles”. He advertises extensively, more particularly in the Yiddish newspapers, and has even been known to extend his announcements to the non-Jewish press.⁴⁸

This new version of the *shadchan* is no doubt referring to agencies such as Wulffahart’s Matrimonial Agency that was located at 62 Becker Street, Yeoville, corner Kenmere Road. From 21 August 1925 it was advertising in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*, claiming that:

All young people wishing to settle down cannot do better than to consult Mr Wulffahart of the above agency. Hundreds of cases, many of the best and most prominent Jewish families in Johannesburg and all over the Union, have been successfully negotiated with the best possible results. All communications strictly private and confidential. Interviews arranged by letter or telephone.⁴⁹

On 15 January 1926 it was announced in the *Chronicle*, that Mr W. Wulffahrt, the well-known “schadchan”, had moved his residence from Becker Street, Yeoville, to

⁴⁷ “Marriage and the Schadchan”, *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*, 13 January 1928, p. 24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ See adverts in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*, 21 (p. 775), 28 (p.787) August; 4 September, p. 809, 9, 16, 23, 30 October, 4, 18 December, 1925; 1 Jan 1926

82 Kilkenny Road, Parkview, and for the convenience of his clients had taken offices at 23/24/25 Becketts Buildings, corner Harrison and President Streets.⁵⁰

Weddings

With more limited means, weddings were generally much quieter affairs than they are today. Ethel Goldberg (b. 1888), who got married in 1913, said that at that time there were no halls in Cape Town, only a place on the corner of Hatfield Street where Mr Emdin used to serve teas.⁵¹ Mrs Reitstein says that weddings were held in the morning. The bridal party was transported in carriages, and the reception used to be held at Chaimowitz's boarding house in Kloof Street. The wedding went on the whole day, with lunch, afternoon tea and dinner being served. They would have a small orchestra, a piano and a violin usually organized by a music teacher. The whole family including the children were invited. She also refers to Good Hope Hall in St John's Street as being a popular venue.⁵²

***Mikvah* (ritual bath)**

To go to the *mikvah* before marriage was not mandatory in those days and attitudes varied. Minnie Benson, who came to South Africa at the age of eight from the Ukraine, fasted the day before her wedding and went to the *mikvah*.⁵³ Two informants only went to the *mikvah* at the insistence of a mother and a sister.⁵⁴ Another said that she had never heard of a *mikvah* until her mother-in-law asked her to take her sister-in-law. However the *mikvah* was closed so she dunked her in her bath!⁵⁵ When Bertha Beinkinstadt, whose father owned the local Hebrew Booksellers in Cape Town, and Sadie Festenstein in Johannesburg, whose late father had been a rabbi in Vorna in Lithuania, were asked whether they went to the *mikvah*, before their weddings, their answers were an unequivocal: "Good God, no!"⁵⁶

⁵⁰ SAJC, 15, January 1926; adverts: 22 January; 12, 19, 26 February; 5, 12, 19, 26 March; 15 June; 16 July; 6, 27 August 1926.

⁵¹ Ethel Goldberg, 1982, p. 17.

⁵² Mrs Reitstein, 1981, p. 22.

⁵³ Minnie Benson, 198, p. 39.

⁵⁴ Olga Katzeff, p. 1984, 39; Lily Trapler, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Kaplan Centre Oral History project, 0252, 198-, p. 39;

⁵⁵ Lily Roy, 1981, pp. 32-33.

⁵⁶ Sadie Festenstein, 1985, p. 23; Bertha Padovich, 1983, p. 30.

Divorce

In the early decades of the twentieth century divorce was rare among Jewish couples⁵⁷, yet it happened to a couple who was most in the public eye: Morris Alexander, communal leader and parliamentarian, and Ruth Schechter, brilliant journalist and literary critic, after twenty five years of marriage and three children.⁵⁸

In the *South African Jewish Chronicle*,⁵⁹ that reflects the views of the more acculturated Anglo-German Jews, the war is blamed for the general deterioration in standards of morality and most particularly for women, on whom the burden of morality still lay most heavily. The many hasty marriages, the unnatural separations, the nervous tension and recklessness, which were the inevitable consequences of the war, had increased the work of the divorce courts. However even though the uncertainties of war had popularized a philosophy of reckless indulgence, even before 1914, the old standards of self restraint, moderation of conduct, were being ridiculed. It was for instance already then considered to be absurd that a woman should have a chaperone and dare not ride alone in a cab.⁶⁰

Bachelor girls

Immediately after the war attitudes to marriage began to change, even among the Jewish community. As more and more women entered the work force in the wake of the First World War, many of them were, whether by choice or through bereavements during the war – leading independent bachelor lives.⁶¹ The term ‘bachelor girl’ introduced after the First World War, is a term that implies independence and a spirit of adventure, and is a far cry from the earlier term of ‘spinster’ that implied rejection and being left at the mercy of her parents or relatives. This increased independence was influencing women’s choices, in the words of the editor of the social page in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* of 9 January 1920:

⁵⁷ The Union of Orthodox Synagogues in Cape Town have not preserved records of divorces for the period prior to 1939, therefore one is forced to rely on the oral record.

⁵⁸ Baruch Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals: Ruth Schechter and her Circle, 1907-1934*, Merlin Press, Cape Town, 2001. See Chapter Eight, Varieties of Integration: Case Studies, Political

⁵⁹ SAJC, 2 January 1920, p. 480

⁶⁰ Ibid..

⁶¹ SAJC, 9 April 1920, pp. 140-141.

While most girls had initially intended to marry, she was well aware that there are not nearly enough men to go around, and they have no intention of being left in the lurch if no man turns up. So they go into some job, the work becomes interesting, their prospects improve, they find themselves comfortable, and they get used to it. In a few years time it will take a very strong emotion to persuade them to marry. A woman who begins life like that is satisfied in her job and is in no hurry to marry and when she does, she means to enjoy the same circumstances to which she has become used. The old notion of beginning in a tiny house on a minute income does not appeal to her. If marriage can't give her all the luxuries, marriage is not for her. Who does not know women like this? The result is a more practical, less sentimental view of marriage, the introduction of a system akin to the traditional marriage of convenience, but administered by the young women themselves.⁶²

Intermarriage

Intermarriage was common-place among the early Jewish pioneers, which is hardly surprising as there were so few Jewish women in South Africa at that time, and no infrastructure to maintain a Jewish home life. These marriages were generally between a Jewish man and a non-Jewish woman. In Cape Town Dr Siegfried Frankel, whose ship was stranded in Cape Town in 1808, married a local Dutch woman, and his children were baptized in the Dutch Reform Church.⁶³ While Adolf and Julius Mosenthal, pioneers of the eastern Cape, married Jewish brides brought over from Germany, Joseph, the first brother to arrive, married a succession of local Dutch women and all of his children were baptized.⁶⁴ The mining magnates Barney Barnato and his cousin, Solly Joel, sons of east European immigrants living in the East End of London, married out of the faith, but their wives were at least nominally converted to Judaism.⁶⁵ The mining magnate, Lionel Phillips, married out, but his

⁶² SAJC, 9 April 1920. p. 141.

⁶³ Clara Friedman-Spits, *The Frankel Saga*, South African Medical Association, Pinelands, South Africa, 1998.

⁶⁴ Dolores Fleischer and Angela Caccia, *Merchant Pioneers: the House of Mosenthal*, Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1983.

⁶⁵ Stanley Jackson, *The Great Barnato*, Heinemann, London, 1970; Stanhope Joel, *Ace of Diamonds: the Story of Solomon Barnato Joel as told to Lloyd Mayer*. Muller, London, 1958.

wife did not convert.⁶⁶ The Oppenheimers, both father and son, married out of the faith (Ernest's first wife, Mary Pollack was Jewish, the second Christian) and both subsequently converted to Christianity.⁶⁷

Despite the English education that he afforded his children, the mining magnate and industrialist, Sammy Marks, from Neustadt in Lithuania, was so anxious to prevent their intermarriage, that he inserted a clause into his will, excluding any of his children who married out of the faith from inheriting from his estate. Nonetheless they managed to avert this by having their wives converted before they got married.⁶⁸

Beyond the elite, however, intermarriage was relatively uncommon. When it did occur it was more likely to be between a Jewish man and a gentile woman, although the opposite did occasionally occur as well. Although there are no statistics to prove this, it is probable that intermarriage was more prevalent in the country towns than in the cities. The reason was chiefly due to the small size of the communities, and the fact that the Jews tended to be more integrated into the local population. Dora Brown commented that in Napier in the Western Cape it was very common for the old bachelors to marry *shiksas* (gentiles). This was because they seldom went to Cape Town and there were no single Jewish girls in Napier. Children of local Jewish families did not marry out of the faith, just the old bachelors.⁶⁹

In the first South African Yiddish novel, *In Land fun Gold un Zunshayn* (In a Land of Gold and Sunshine), by Jacob Max Sherman, the hero, Meyer Berg, a new immigrant from Lithuania, marries the daughter of Afrikaans farmers. The novel that was published in 1956 is reputed to be partially autobiographical. Meyer had already become a free thinker in Lithuania. He had always wanted to study further and had been very unhappy and frustrated with life in Johannesburg, where he had first worked as a *shoykhet* (ritual slaughterer) in a butchery, and then as an assistant

⁶⁶ Thelma Gutsche, *No Ordinary Woman: the Life and Times of Florence Phillips*, Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1966.

⁶⁷ Antony Hocking, *Oppenheimer and Son*, McGraw-Hill, Johannesburg, 1973; Rose Norwich, "Jewish women in early Johannesburg." *Jewish Affairs* 48(2), 1993: 89-99.

⁶⁸ Richard Mendelsohn, *Sammy Marks: the 'Uncrowned King of the Transvaal'*, David Philip in Association with Jewish Publications, South Africa, Cape Town, 1991, pp. 199-201.

⁶⁹ Dora Brown, 1982, p. 7.

in a concession store on a mine. After his father, a pedlar in Johannesburg, passes away, Meyer begins to smous in the country districts where he is attracted by the wide open spaces.

Arriving on a farm, owned by an Afrikaans family, he and his partner, recognize the potential of setting up a shop in the district and eventually help to found a town. Meyer falls in love with Linda, the only daughter of the Afrikaans family, who for many years is the only woman with whom he comes into contact. Linda is educated and enlightened and shares Meyer's intellectual interests as well as his love of farming and of life in the country. Even when the Jewish daughter of his partner arrives, who is clearly attracted to him, Meyer, free of the influence and pressures of the Jewish community, is unwilling to give up the gentile Linda for the Jewish Leah. The chief resistance to the match is from Linda's father, who is more concerned about Meyer's being a non-believer, a free thinker, than about him being Jewish. He is a staunch Christian, and has set his heart on his daughter marrying in the church, a condition that he believes will prevent their marrying as he knows that Meyer will not marry in a church as he does not believe in any form of religion. Eventually Linda and Meyer defy him by marrying in the magistrate's court, that Linda's mother, who supports her daughter's choice, points out is as valid a form of marriage as in the church. The father eventually comes round to accept the match, as Meyer is highly respected in the town.⁷⁰

Interracial marriages

It is very difficult to find hard proof of interracial marriages as it was so taboo as to be positively unmentionable, and was kept completely hidden. However its existence becomes quite obvious, when looking at the number of Jewish sounding surnames, listed in traditionally non-white areas, such as Kensington and Athlone in Cape Town. Interracial marriages generally occurred between Jews and Coloureds or Indians, rather than Africans. They were more common between Jewish men and non-White women, although the opposite also occurred. The most well known example, occurred outside of the time frame of this dissertation. This was the marriage between Communist activist, Pauline Podbrey, who came to Durban from

⁷⁰ Jacob Max Sherman, *In Land fun Gold fun Zunshayn*, Kayor, Yohanesburg, 1956.

Lithuania as a young girl, and H. A. Naidoo, leader of the Communist Party in Natal, whom she met in 1943. In 1951 after the Suppression of Communism Act, the couple were forced to flee the country.⁷¹ Similarly, while a student at the University of the Witwatersrand in the 1940s, Ruth First, the activist who was murdered in Mozambique by a letter bomb intended for her husband, Joe Slovo, dated the Indian activist, Ismail Meer, before she married Slovo,⁷² one of the facilitators of the new South African dispensation in 1994, and Minister of Housing in South Africa's first democratically elected government.

Interracial marriages were more prevalent in the country where Jewish men were distanced from the prevailing sanctions of the city. In the collection of short stories by Rabbi Jacob Newman, *With Ink in the Book*, that are based on true incidents, he tells the story of a Jew, who is hired as a *ba'al tefile* (reader), who when it is discovered that he had fathered a number of non-White children, disappears never to be heard of again.⁷³ In a story by the Yiddish writer, Jacob Max Sherman, *Tserunene Khaloymes* (Shattered Dreams), described as autobiographical, a young woman from Lithuania is invited to come to Africa to Cape Town to marry a distant cousin. Before the wedding she falls pregnant by her future husband, but the shock of the discovery that he had already fathered a child by a Coloured woman, causes her to lose the baby and she decides to leave him and to go to live in Johannesburg.⁷⁴

In the short story '*Di Vayse Kafer*' (The White Kaffir), the Yiddish writer, Richard Feldman describes an Englishman, a gentile, married to an African woman in Swaziland, who is completely ostracized from European society.⁷⁵

These stories are corroborated in the reminiscences of Harry Schrire who was living in District Six in the early 1900s. He writes:

⁷¹ Pauline Podbrey, *White Girl in search of the Party*, Haded Books, Pietermaritzburg, 1993.

⁷² Ruth First, *117 Days: an Account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African Ninety Day Detention Law*, Bloomsbury, London, 1988.

⁷³ Jacob Newman, "Out of his Place", in *With Ink in the Book: a Collection of Short Stories and Sketches of Jewish Life in Rural Centres in South Africa*, L. Rubin, Johannesburg, 19--., pp. 9-13.

⁷⁴ J. M. Sherman, "Tserunene khaloymes", *Oyf Transvaler Erd: Dertseylungen un Lider*, 1949, pp. 16-27.

⁷⁵ R. Feldman, "Der Vayser Kafer", *Shvarts un Vays*, Cyco, New York, 1957, pp. 79-96.

When a *bocher* arrived from Namaqualand or South West Africa, for the *Rosh Hashana* service, he was taken in hand by our popular *shammes*, given a *tallis*, *siddur*, a good seat and made welcome. These lads could be recognised a mile off. A large brimmed hat, yellow boots, very shy and raw, these men made it their business to visit Cape Town every few years, to meet with their own folk, after being stuck in the *bundu* amongst natives. He was invited to meals at various homes, especially those with marriageable daughters. He returned the compliment by taking them to a show (no "bioscope" to be had). The *shadchanim* got busy. Sometimes it was discovered that he had a wife in *der heim*, and had accidentally fathered a few *shochere* (blacks) back in the *bundu* (wilds). I have since heard that a few characters, who are big noises today, fitted the latter category. 'Mums the word'.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Until the outbreak of the Second World War, when the majority of the South African Jewish community were still either first or second generation immigrants from eastern Europe, they tended to cling to the customs that they brought along from the Old Country. The immigrants tended to marry among themselves, and it was not uncommon for introductions to be affected by a marriage broker. These transactions are reflected in the oral interviews, the Jewish press, as well as in the literature in Yiddish and English. The upper class English and German Jews could afford to marry among themselves, but the Anglo-German and the eastern European middle classes frequently 'intermarried' if only because they were outnumbered. Divorce was relatively rare, as was intermarriage, except amongst the exceptionally wealthy, or in the country districts where there were few young Jewish girls. Marriage across the colour line was also extremely rare, while it definitely occurred, no records exist. Weddings were far more modest affairs, although the whole family would often be invited. Attitudes to going to the *mikvah* reflect the fast diminishing

⁷⁶ Yehuda Leib Schrire, & Harry Schrire, *Jewish Travels and Settlement in South Africa, 1892-1913: the Narratives of Reb Yehuda Leib Schrire and Harry Schrire*, edited and annotated with an introduction and conclusion by Carmel Schrire & Gwynne Schrire, Isaac & Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town, Cape Town [In press].

orthodoxy evident during this period. Even before the wedding it was optional, while the more modern scoffed at the very idea.

SECTION TWO
BEYOND HEARTH AND HOME

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER FOUR

EDUCATION AND CAREERS FOR JEWISH WOMEN

Education was highly valued in the east European Jewish tradition and it was considered a privilege for a Jewish wife to go to work so that she could enable her husband to devote his life to religious study. With secular education increasingly regarded in the nineteenth century as providing opportunities to penetrate the walls of the surrounding society, great effort was made to educate their children. In the mid century the most affluent and ambitious families, such as the pioneering trader families, the Mosenthals and the De Pass's, who never settled permanently in South Africa, preferred to send their children overseas to England or Germany to acquire an education. Even some years later, wealthy Jews, such as the industrialist Sammy Marks, or the mining magnates, George Albu and Ernest Oppenheimer, who made a permanent home in South Africa, continued sending their children to Britain to enjoy the social advantages of an English public school education.

In a survey of the education of middle-class English-speaking gentile females in South Africa, from the mid nineteenth century, Edna Bradlow found that where families could not afford to send their children overseas to school, the alternative was tuition by older siblings, and more commonly by a governess, whose position in the family class structure was little better than that of a servant. The Cape Education Department's statistics for 1879 indicate that out of 40 000 white children of school-going age, 9 000 were being privately instructed. The rural areas were the main focus of governessing due to the lack of availability of schools.¹

An alternative to a governess was a proprietor owned, privately run school, such as the Dame school attended by Sophie Levisieur's older sister in Bloemfontein,² or a village school that employed several teachers. In the second half of the nineteenth century a number of good girls' schools were established by the church and private

¹ Edna Bradlow, "Women and Education in Nineteenth Century-South Africa: the Attitudes and Experiences of Middle-Class-English Speaking Females Living at the Cape," *South African Historical Journal* 28, 1993: 134, 135, 138.

² Sophie Levisieur, *Memories*, edited by Karl Schoeman, Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1982., pp. 59-65.

foundations. These included the Dominican convents (St Mary's, Sacred Heart, St Dominic's), such as that attended by Sophie Levisieur and her sister in Port Elizabeth for two years³; in Cape Town Good Hope Seminary was established by the Dutch Reform Church in 1873,⁴ and St Cyprians by Bishop Robert Grey of the Anglican Church in 1871;⁵ in Bloemfontein, Sophie Levisieur attended St Michaels Home School, an Anglican school established by Bishop Webb in 1874.⁶ Because so many people lived on farms and in rural areas – and Cape Town itself was a series of independent far flung villages⁷ - most of the schools had boarding establishments.⁸

Cape Town

From 1902, when the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* was founded in Cape Town, the question of education for girls was a recurrent topic in its pages. In August 1902, it was reported that nearly forty per cent of the girls at the Springfield Convent in Wynberg, were Jewish.⁹ The editor of "Our Ladies' letter" appealed to her sisters in England with the question: "Does it not seem peculiar to you in England to hear, that Jewish girls of all ages between childhood and womanhood should be brought up in a convent?" Although it was the best option for South African parents living up-country, who wished to give their daughters an education, "where body and mind are properly trained", with tertiary education recently made available to women, she was surprised that no Jewish lady B.A. had ever tried to start a "High School for young ladies of our denomination" in the Cape Peninsula. To her mind, the problem was the large amount required to acquire "a commodious house with suitable grounds in walking distance from the synagogue." However she believed that it was only a matter of time before the committee of the Hebrew Congregation would be obliged to take the matter in hand."¹⁰

In similar vein an editorial, "The Education of Our Girls", on 22 May 1903, bemoaned the fact that "our girls are permitted to cultivate their secular education

³ Sophie Levisieur, 1982, pp. 59-65.

⁴ Good Hope Seminary, <http://www.khanya.co.za/schools/khanyaschool.php?emisno=0103310238>

⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Cyprian's_School_\(South_Africa\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Cyprian's_School_(South_Africa))

⁶ *Sophie Levisieur* 1982, pp. 59-65.

⁷ It took three days to ride to Simonstown, stopping one night in Wynberg, next night at Rathfelders Inn in Muizenberg and the following day you would reach Simonstown.

⁸ Bradlow, 1993: 134, 135, 138.

⁹ SAJC, 22 August 1902, cited in SAJC, 8 January 1904, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰ SAJC 15 May 1903, p. 7.

without any regard for their initiation into the duties incumbent upon future Jewish wives and mothers.”

We shall probably be told that the convent is a highly refined institution and that the sisters are excellent examples of self-abnegation in women. Of these facts we have no doubt... But we are inclined to retort that unless this refinement can go hand in hand with a love of Judaism, an appreciation of its teachings, and an acknowledgement of its ritual and observances; we care little or nothing for it... in the words of the New Testament “What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and lose his own soul.”

Various factors were cited as encouraging this trend. Besides the ambition of the parents, on one occasion Reverend Bender was blamed,¹¹ and on another, it was attributed to the desire to assimilate to the dominant culture, akin to the trend towards Russification in eastern Europe. It was observed that, “In many cases if one would search in the houses of some of the people who send their children to the Convent they would probably find their top-boots that they brought from Russian-Poland.”¹²

The Kaplan Centre informants, who received their primary education at convent schools, were the exception, rather than the rule, and they mostly attributed the choice of school to its proximity to their homes. Hilda Purwitsky (b. 1901) attended the Sacred Heart Convent near her home in Somerset Road,¹³ where she was one of only a handful of Jewish children, while her older brother went to the Hebrew Public school.¹⁴ Sarah Goldblatt, future literary executrix of the Afrikaans writer, Cornelis Langenhoven, attended St Martini Schule, that was opposite her home in Mill Street.¹⁵

¹¹ SAJC, 12 February 1904, p. 204.

¹² M. Eilenberg, “Jewish girls at Christian Convents”, SAJC, 26 February 1904, p. 261.

¹³ Hilda Purwitsky, interviewed by Noreen Scher, Cape Town, 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0197, p. 2; Anita Marcus (Stodel) also went to the Sacred Heart Convent, Anita Stodel, interviewed by L. Robinson, Cape Town, 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, p. 4.

¹⁴ Hilda Purwitsky, 1981, p. 5.

¹⁵ Van Zyl, Leonie. Sarah Goldblatt: Langenhoven Letterkundige Administrasie van C. J. Langenhoven. Thesis (M. A). - University of Stellenbosch, 2003, p. 9.

Bella Horwitz (b. 1899) went to St Mary's Convent in Hope Street.¹⁶ Jane Kushlick (b. 1908) and Jessie Kaplan (b. 1909) attended the Holy Cross Convent in Parow.¹⁷

In Stellenbosch, a small town, not far from Cape Town, Jewish girls went to Rhenish, an exclusive English medium girls' school, established by the Rhenish missionaries in 1860.¹⁸ In 1902 one of their teachers was Jewish. This was Rebecca Glaser, who married Moses Zuckerman the following year who got her involved in Zionist activities.¹⁹ However, in the country districts it was not uncommon for Jewish children to attend the Afrikaans medium government schools,²⁰ as they were often the only schools available. The sisters Feodora Clouts (b.1899) and Netta Friedlander living in De Aar, were sent to board at Ellerslie High School for Girls in Sea Point, an English-medium government school.²¹

With the acceleration of eastern European immigration in the 1890s, with large families, many of whom could not afford to pay even moderate school fees, the necessity of founding a school that would be subsidized by the community, was recognized. Thus from the second half of the 1890s, Jewish girls, new immigrants from eastern Europe, could attend the co-educational Hebrew Public School established by the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation at Hope Mill,²² at the top of Government Avenue, or its offshoots in Constitution Street²³ and later in de Villiers Street in District Six.²⁴ During the period of peak immigration, it became one of the

¹⁶ Bella Harwood (Horwitz), 198-, p. 52; Jane Traub, interviewed by E. Horwitz, Cape Town, 1986, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0255, p.16, Traub mentions that St Mary's was in Hope Street.

¹⁷ Jane Kushlick, 1983, pp. 4, 7, 12-14; Jessie Kaplan interviewed by Fern Sacks, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0132, p. 40.

¹⁸ Rhenish was the oldest girls school in South Africa, <http://www.rhenish.co.za/history.htm>; Paula Jaffe and Millie Asherson attended the school. Paula Jaffe, 1982, pp. 36-39; Millie Asherson, 198-, pp. 38-40.

¹⁹ Letter from Sadie L. of the *South African Jewish Times*, to Rebecca Zuckerman, 28.6.1951, Jacob Gitlin Library pamphlet and clippings collection, Biographies T-Z, box 139-2.

²⁰ Hessie Beder in Wolsely (198-, p. 5), and Dora Brown in Napier (1982, pp. 13-14) attended Afrikaans medium schools that only went up to Standard Eight.

²¹ Letters from Wulf Friedlander to his daughters, Feodora and Anetta. Private collection, Hazel Jungbacke.

²² See M. E. Katz, *Jewish Education at the Cape, 1841 to the Present Day: a Survey and Appraisal in the Light of Historical and Philosophical Perspectives*. Thesis (M. A.) – University of Cape Town, 1973.

²³ SAJC, 15 September 1904; Esther Wilkin, (198-, pp. 31-32), Rachel Isaacson (1983, pp. 6-7), Dora Clain (198-, pp. 36-37), Rose Rabie (198-, p. 13), and Olga Katzeff (1984, pp. 16-18) and many other informants went there..

²⁴ Rozilda, "Out of the Ordinary": "Reminiscences of an Old School Master: Mr Mark Cohen", SAJC, 2 November, 1928, p. 699; "Mr E. H. Kloot Retires: a Well-Known Headmaster", SAJC, 14 June 1929, p. 380; "Jewish Children: Young Newcomers to South Africa", SAJC, 23 August, 1929, p. 533.

largest schools in Cape Town. A third of the pupils (120 out of about 350) were subsidized and did not pay fees.²⁵ The school curriculum included both secular and Jewish subjects, but its primary task was to teach the immigrant children English. It was common for older immigrant girls to attend the school for just a couple of terms in order to learn English.²⁶ As was the custom in those days, the school went up to the end of Standard Six.²⁷ School leaving age was thirteen or fourteen or at the end of Standard Six.

Boys from out of town who wished to attend the Hebrew Public School were able to board at Albert House at Hope Mill, that also catered for boys attending state schools.²⁸ However there was no boarding facility for girls. In January 1904, it was announced that the committee of the Hebrew Public School had finally decided that, “the residence adjoining the synagogue in Hatfield-street should be set apart for the purpose of receiving young ladies of the Jewish persuasion and providing them with a home while they attend the different state-aided schools in the Peninsula.” Although it was not intended to establish a school for Jewish girls at that stage, it was felt that the establishment of such a residence, would go far to silence the accusation commonly leveled against Colonial Jewry that they took no interest in the education of their female children.²⁹

In 1907 the Hebrew Public school was taken over by the Cape Education Department and became non-denominational. The Principal, Mark Cohen, originally from London, continued to teach rudimentary Hebrew, as the pupils remained 99 per cent Jewish, as did most of the teachers. Over the years, however, the school lost its Jewish character and became a purely secular school.³⁰ Future parliamentarian and activist for woman’s rights, Bertha Solomon, who attended the school as a young girl, remarks that because of the time spent on Hebrew and Jewish Studies, subjects such

²⁵ Bernard Steinberg, “From Hopemill to Herzlia”, *Jewish Affairs*, . 43(5),.September/October 1988: 29-34.

²⁶ Annie Washkansky, 1983, pp. 13-14.

²⁷ Rose Rabie, 198-, p. 13.

²⁸ SAJC, 21 February 1902, p. 17.

²⁹ SAJC, 8 January 1904, p. 3.

³⁰ I. Abrahams, *The Birth of a Community*, Cape Town, Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, 1955. pp. 88-93.

as Latin and French were not taught, and that that was a serious handicap for those who wished to go on beyond Standard Six to study for matric.³¹

After 1926 many immigrant girls in Cape Town would have attended the Central Girls School in the premises of the old Normal College in Buitenkant Street, established when the Hope Mill School separated the boys from the girls, with the boys assigned to Hope Lodge School in Roeland Street.³² Elazar Kloot, former headmaster of the Constitution Street School, was appointed headmaster of the boys school, and Roza Van Gelderen, a Dutch Jewess, who had been the kindergarten teacher at the Constitution Street school for fifteen years, was appointed principal of the girls' school. She was the first Jewess to become a principal of a government school. In 1940, however, when the Hope Lodge Boys School was amalgamated with the Central Girls' School, Roza was removed as principal.³³

Johannesburg

In the 1890s and early 1900s, in Johannesburg as in Cape Town, Catholic seminaries were patronized by Jewish pupils, both girls and boys. Girls attended the local convent schools,³⁴ while the boys attended Maritz Brothers College. Later girls also attended Johannesburg College, the Roedeian School, a branch of the exclusive English school in Parktown,³⁵ Cleveland High School for Girls,³⁶ and High School for Girls Johannesburg.³⁷

However with the influx of eastern European Jews, who could either not afford or were averse to patronizing the sectarian schools listed above, in 1890 a Jewish Public School was established jointly by the two Hebrew congregations, the Witwatersrand Old Hebrew Congregation and the Johannesburg Hebrew congregation. After the South African War when the school was taken over by the British, education became free, but by 1904 religious classes, held after school, were no longer compulsory and

³¹ Bertha Solomon, *Time Remembered: the Story of a Fight*. Timmins, Cape Town, 1968, pp. 34-46.

³² Hilda Purwitsky papers BC707, 1970, p. 3. For the full history of Roza Van Gelderen and her school, see Chapter Nine, Varieties of Integration, Case Studies, Cultural.

³³ Hilda Purwitsky, 1970, p. 3.

³⁴ SAJC, 15 April 1904, p. 436.

³⁵ SAJC, 15 April 1904, p. 436.

³⁶ SAJC, 29 April 1904, p. 487.

³⁷ Sadie Saron (198-, p.3) mentions that the Johannesburg High School was a very prestigious school in those days.

the school slowly lost its Jewish character.³⁸ The majority of the informants interviewed for the Kaplan Centre in Johannesburg had attended that school.³⁹ Besides the more affordable fees, for the immigrant children, the advantage of attending the Jewish Public School were the Yiddish-speaking teachers, who facilitated their adaptation to the new language.⁴⁰

Matric

Before the First World War it was very unusual for young girls to continue their studies until matric, the final year of schooling. In 1902, the fact that two Jewish girls, Miss Edna Hartogs and Miss L. Ginsberg, had successfully passed their matriculation exam, First Class, was so exceptional, that it was announced in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*. It was hoped that they would continue their studies at the South African College, the forerunner of the University of Cape Town.⁴¹

When they finished Standard Six at the age of thirteen or fourteen, girls had the option of taking a job, going to a Commercial College to do Shorthand and Typing,⁴² or doing their T3 Third Class Teaching Certificate at a Teachers' Training College. If household finances required, it was not uncommon for a girl to leave school even earlier.⁴³ Sarah Goldblatt, future literary executrix of Cornelis Jakob Langenhoven, among the most intellectually gifted of the women, was forced to leave school to help in her father's printing shop at the end of Standard Four. However she continued to study privately and eventually obtained her matric.⁴⁴ Another informant had to leave school after Standard Five to look after her sick mother.⁴⁵

³⁸ Marian Robertson, 'The Care and Education of the Jewish Children of Johannesburg', in *Founders and Followers: Johannesburg Jewry, 1887-1915*, pp. 231-250; Katz, Meyer E. *The History of Jewish Education in South Africa, 1841-1980*. Thesis (Ph. D.) – University of Cape Town, 1980.

³⁹ Rose Lopis (1985, pp. 8-10), Rebecca Chodos (198-, pp. 14-15), Bertha Englander (1982, pp. 5-7).

⁴⁰ Tilly Whiteman said she far outstripped her brother as she had a Yiddish speaking teacher. Tilly Whiteman, 1985, p. 11.

⁴¹ "Our Ladies' Letter", SAJC, 17 February 1902, p. 17.

⁴² Esther Newman, interviewed by Sara Pascal, Cape Town, 1981, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0185, pp. 29-31; Rose Rabie, 198-, pp.16-20, Dora Clain 198-, pp. 38-44.

⁴³ Anny Washkansky (1983, pp. 24-25), Dora Clain (198-, p. 37), and Sarah Zalk (198-, p. 56) had to help in their parents' business.

⁴⁴ Hilda Purwitsky, 1981, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Zipora Beinart, 1981, p. 14.

In Cape Town those girls who continued to matric, did so either at Normal College or at the Good Hope Seminary for girls,⁴⁶ while boys went to SACS School.⁴⁷ Esther Wilkin (b. 1919) said that it was the ambition of every immigrant mother that her daughter should go to Good Hope and her son to SACS.⁴⁸ Another option was to attend Palmer's University classes, a college situated in Hof Street, where it was possible to complete matric in one year instead of two.⁴⁹ In 1928, besides classes in Science, Mathematics, Afrikaans, Botany and German, Hebrew was also taught by a Mr. S. D. Rutttert.⁵⁰

Johannesburg also had Hillel College for boys in Yeoville (established in 1919),⁵¹ that three years later moved to the upmarket suburb of Parktown.⁵² Hillel College was established by Israel Levinson, former principal of the Hebrew High School, and Jewish chaplain to the forces in East Africa during the First World War. It was described as "A place where children from the country may receive a sound general education in a thoroughly Jewish environment."⁵³ It embraced all subjects up to and including the London and Cape matriculation.⁵⁴

In August 1922, a girls branch, described as a "Select Jewish Boarding and Day School for Girls", was opened in St Andrew's Road under the supervision of Mrs Levinson assisted by "a staff of qualified and competent teachers."⁵⁵ However by 1927 the girls school seems to have closed down and the Boys school was offering a "Reduced scale of fees" as an inducement for registration.⁵⁶

In December 1933 a branch of Hillel College for girls was advertised in Muizenberg. Like its counterpart in Johannesburg, it was a boarding and day school,⁵⁷ that

⁴⁶ Informants: Ethel Goldberg, Paulina Wittenburg, Irene Geffen, Sybil Honikman, Fanny Losman and Fedora Clouts obtained their matric there, Kaplan Centre interviews..

⁴⁷ Max Geffen, 1955, pp. 50-52.

⁴⁸ Esther Wilkin, 198-, p. 38.

⁴⁹ Fanny Harris, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, Cape Town, 198-, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, 0097, p. 10.

⁵⁰ SAJC, 27 January & 4 May 1928.

⁵¹ *Zionist Record*, 21 January 1920, p.12.

⁵² SAJC, 15 December 1933, p. 885.

⁵³ Letter from A. M. Abrahams, *Zionist Record*, 18 February 1919, p. 47.

⁵⁴ *Zionist Record*, 19 March 1919, p. 30; 21 January 1920, p.12.

⁵⁵ *Zionist Record*, 30 April 1922, p. 8.

⁵⁶ Advertisement, SAJC, 29 April 1927. p. 8.

⁵⁷ SAJC, 14 April, 1939, p. 270.

combined secular education with daily instruction in Hebrew and Religion, where Jewish scholars could do their matric.⁵⁸ In January 1938 it was advertised that “The School provides not only a sound English education, but also a religious training and a Jewish home life for the future Mothers in Israel.”⁵⁹

Phyllis Friedlander attended the school from Sub A to the end of Standard 2. She described it as the first Jewish boarding school [in Cape Town]. Afrikaans was not taught and when Friedlander subsequently continued her schooling at Muizenberg School she had to have extra Afrikaans lessons to catch up. She described the school as:

... a stone building, one house away from what is today the Labia Museum. It was a boarding school but there were some day students as well. There must have been 20, 30 children I think, with about three or four in a dormitory. We had classrooms in what was the dining room, there were classrooms all over downstairs and we played in the grounds. My mother felt that I should be in a Jewish atmosphere and that was one of the reasons, I think, why my parents sent to me as a boarder to Hillel College. And I must say that, whatever Jewish education we had, came from those years, maybe that’s why I still feel so intensely Jewish. I don’t remember how many teachers there were but I know that the older Levinson children also taught. Levinsohn’s older children were Saul and Julie and Ruth...⁶⁰

It is possible to gauge the number and the sex ratio of the Jewish matriculants as they were on occasion published in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*. Unfortunately the results are either for the Cape or the Transvaal (never for both), depending on where the *Chronicle* was published at that time. The earliest results were published in the Transvaal.

⁵⁸ Besides a three year matriculation program from Standard VI, it also offered a one year matriculation course after the Junior Certificate. SAJC, 15 December 1933, p. 885. Ethel Goldberg and Dina Clain remember boys being sent to Hillel College in Muizenberg to study for their barmitzvahs, Kaplan Centre Interviews.

⁵⁹ SAJC, 21 January 1938, p. 56.

⁶⁰ Phyllis Friedlander interviewed by Gwynne Robins, 2008.

Jewish Matriculants in the Transvaal, 1911-1913

	Boys	Girls	Total
1911	19	2	21
1912	28	10	38
1913	19	11	30

Between 1911 and 1913 the total number Jewish matriculants, varied between 21, 38 and 30. From 2 female matriculants in 1911, the number rose to almost a quarter of the total in 1912, and just over a third in 1913. In 1911 of the two girls who matriculated, one had attended the Convent of the Holy Family in Johannesburg, and the other had attended evening classes.⁶¹ In 1912 and 1913 the girls were pretty evenly divided between Girls High School Johannesburg, Jeppe High School, Roedeane and an assortment of convent schools.⁶²

In 1912 the 38 Jewish matriculants constituted 28 percent of the total of 135 matriculants in the Transvaal, with the ten girls constituting 31 percent of the total number of girls, and the boys constituting 27 percent of the total of boys.⁶³ In 1912 the top Jewish matriculant was female, Muriel Sophia Lazarus, who had attended Girls High School Johannesburg.⁶⁴ In 1913, the 30 Jewish matriculants constituted 33 percent of the total of 91, with the girls constituting 65 percent of the total number of girls and the boys 26 percent.⁶⁵

Number of Jewish Matriculants at the Cape

	Boys	Girls	Total
1925	47	25	72
1927	106	22	128

In 1925 out of a total of 25 Jewish girls in the Province, seven matriculated at Good Hope. In that year the 72 Jewish matriculants constituted 9 per cent of the total

⁶¹ SAJC, 2 February 1912, p. 80.

⁶² Convent of the Holy Family, Parktown Convent, Convent of the Sacred Heart, Belgravia, SAJC, 2 February 1912, p. 80; 31 January 1913, p. 74.

⁶³ Total: 135: 32 girls, 103 boys. Transvaal Education Department. Report for the Year Ending 31st December 1912. Government Printers, Pretoria, 1913, pp. 420-422.

⁶⁴ SAJC, 31 January 1913, p. 74.

⁶⁵ Total: 91: 17 girls, 74 boys. Transvaal Education Department. Report for the Year Ending 31st December 1913. Government Printers, Pretoria, 1914, pp. 308-309.

number of successful matriculants.⁶⁶ Half of the boys had attended SACS school, and over a third of girls had attended Good Hope. A third of the boys had matriculated in the country towns of Stellenbosch, Somerset West, Robertson, Aliwal North, Ladismith, East London and Kimberley; while only four of the girls had matriculated outside Cape Town - in Stellenbosch, Somerset West, Kimberley and Kingwilliamstown. Four of the girls and one of the boys had studied at Palmers University Classes in Hof Street.⁶⁷

In 1927, the number of Jewish girls to matriculate at the Cape had decreased to 28 per cent of the total.⁶⁸ The 128 Jewish students who passed the Joint Matriculation Board examination in that year, constituted 8 per cent of the students in the Union.⁶⁹

Jewish education

During this period Jewish education for girls was extremely neglected. Like the boys it alternated between private tutors and afternoon classes at the Talmud Torah schools, attached to the various Hebrew congregations. However, in Cape Town before 1905, while boys had the option of attending the *Talmud Torah*, attached to both the Roeland Street⁷⁰ and the Constitution Street Shul,⁷¹ there was no *kheyder* for girls.

In 1905, the Cape Town Bnoth Zion, the Women's Zionist Association, established in 1901, rebelled against the status quo, and introduced Hebrew classes for girls, that were held in the afternoon at the Zionist Hall at 47 Hope Street.⁷² The move was instigated by Rebecca Schrire,⁷³ who relates:

⁶⁶ Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, *Official Year Book of the Union and of Basutoland, Bechuanaland Protectorate and Swaziland*, Government Printing and Stationery Office, Pretoria, 1926?, p. 148.

⁶⁷ 'Matric Results for the Cape Province', SAJC, 29 January 1926, p. 107.

⁶⁸ 'Matric Examination: List of Successful Jewish Candidates', SAJC, 20 January 1928, p. 43.

⁶⁹ *Zionist Record*, 25 January 1929, p. 27.

⁷⁰ Max Geffen, 1955, pp. 50-51.

⁷¹ B. Clain, 198-, p. 3.

⁷² D. Clain (198-, pp. 24-25), Bella Harwood mentions learning to read and write Hebrew as well as Bible classes (198-, p. 53), Minnie Benson (198-, pp. 11-12), and Lena Yudelman (1983, p. 15) attended.

⁷³ She practised what she preached and only spoke Hebrew to her children, who only learnt English when they started school, Gwynne Robins (Schrire).

Right from the very start the Committee realised that the first thing they had to do was to find members whose young daughters might be suitable pupils for the Hebrew classes. It was agreed that each member of the newly established committee (Mrs Schrire, Mrs M. Zuckerman, Mrs I. Zuckerman and Miss Radin) undertook to canvass a certain area of the city in order to interview mothers of potential pupils. When a canvasser found a Jewish woman her next difficulty was the breaking down of the mother's resistance to the new idea. There were many reasons why 'dear Rachel' could not attend classes. She had to practice the piano, do her homework, take part in sports and above all, what need was there for a girl to know Hebrew.... These committee Ladies not only had the courage, they also had lots of patience and perseverance and they kept knocking at the doors." They enrolled fifteen pupils.⁷⁴

Despite parental resistance and financial difficulties the girls' Hebrew classes continued independently until 1912, when they were finally amalgamated with those of the boys.⁷⁵ However tales of the *kheyder* in those days are extremely negative, ranging from teachers who are characterized as 'pathetic old men',⁷⁶ to an incident of a *rebbe* throwing a chair at a child,⁷⁷ to having to endure the sight and sounds of a chicken being slaughtered by the Reverend-*shoykhet*.⁷⁸ Most of the girls say that they never learnt anything.⁷⁹

Even when girls were given a Hebrew education, it would inevitably be inferior to that given to their brothers who had to have a barmitzvah. While in Johannesburg the

⁷⁴ Gwynne Schrire, History of the Bnoth Zion in Cape Town, unpublished manuscript.

⁷⁵ D Zuckerman, Notes on the Bnoth Zion Hebrew Classes Association, David Zuckerman in Jewish Museum papers, BC1315, Manuscripts and Archives, UCT Libraries.

⁷⁶ Gladys Jankelow, 198-, p. 19.

⁷⁷ "I went to the cheder a few times but I did not like the rebbe... he had a violent temper he picked up a chair and threw it at a child, so I picked [myself up] took to my heels and he never saw me again, I never came back." Bertha Padovich (Beinkinstadt), 1983, p. 12.

⁷⁸ "The teacher also doubled up as the ritual slaughterer and classes would be interrupted by a Black woman or man knocking at the door and showing the chicken that he or she was holding by the leg, our teacher would then disappear to the back of the shul and do his business that I was far too squeamish ever to watch, but many of the boys rushed out to observe, and then would come back, and to give him credit he would wash his hands before he resumed..." Phyllis Lewsen, Johannesburg, 198-?, Kaplan Centre Interviews, BC949, p. 6; See also Phyllis Lewsen, *Reverberations: a Memoir*, UCT Press in association with the Kaplan Centre, Cape Town, 1996.

⁷⁹ Gladys Jankelow who went to the Hebrew High School two afternoons a week, says that the teachers, old Jewish men, were pathetic, the little Hebrew she knows is thanks to her paternal grandfather, 198-, p. 19.

brothers of Rose Lopis (b. 1913) went to *kheyder* (Hebrew school) every afternoon, she went to *Shabbes* (Sabbath) and Sunday classes at the Hebrew High School.⁸⁰ A few of the girls from more prosperous families had their own private Hebrew tutors.⁸¹ Some of the girls listened in on their brothers' lessons,⁸² while others learnt from their parents.⁸³ Some learnt Yiddish instead of Hebrew,⁸⁴ and others had no Jewish education at all⁸⁵

According to a census of Hebrew education in Cape Town drawn up by the Cape committee of the South African Board of Jewish Education in 1933, only 284 girls were being taught Hebrew as opposed to 693 boys. And almost four times as many girls as boys had never received any tuition in Hebrew and Jewish history.⁸⁶ In an editorial in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* of 20 July 1934, the implication of the widespread neglect of the Jewish education of girls was considered.

The community is to-day paying a heavy price for their neglect in the past. If we had devoted to the Jewish education of our girls the care and attention which the task deserves this community would have been in a far better condition than it it [sic] to-day. It is not too much to say that a community has to pay far heavier a penalty for the neglect of its womanhood than for the neglect of its manhood, and this is especially true of a Jewish community where the task of promoting "Jewishness," to use the most convenient if still ambiguous phrase, depends far more on the influence in the home than on any other factors. Indeed, one might almost say that if a Jewish community were faced with the unpleasant choice of deciding whether its limited resources were to be devoted to the Jewish education of its boys or its girls it ought, if

⁸⁰ Rose Lopis, 1986, p. 7.

⁸¹ Irene Geffen, 1985, pp. 3-4; Ellen Cecily Levy, 1981, p. 21; Bertha Padovich (Beinkinstadt), 1983, p. 16.

⁸² Lily Goldberg, 1982, p. 24; Lily Roy, 1981, pp. 20-21.

⁸³ Olga Katzeff's brother "of course" went to *kheyder* but she learnt from her father, 1984, p. 18; in Wolsley Hessie Beder's father taught her to read Hebrew in order to read the *siddur* (prayer book), 198-, p. 35.

⁸⁴ Dora Brown (Napier), 1982, pp. 8-9.

⁸⁵ Paulina Wittenberg, 1983, p. 16; Zipora Beinart, 1981, p. 4.

⁸⁶ South African Jewish Board of Education, cited in, Terri Strauss, "The Child of My Heart and Mind": the History of the Union of Jewish Women, Cape Town, 1932-1997, p. 7. Unpublished manuscript, Toni Saphra papers.

present difficulties and future needs were properly realized, to decide to devote its resources to the education of the girls...⁸⁷

Tertiary education

Education of sons took priority over daughters and quite a few of the women interviewees had been forced to sacrifice their ambitions for their brothers. While Dina Clain left school after Standard Six to help in her parent's boarding house, her two younger brothers became a doctor and a dentist respectively.⁸⁸ Rachel Isaacson would have liked to have gone to university but there was no money as both of her brothers had gone. One became a doctor, another an engineer.⁸⁹ Sarah Zalk, who left school at the end of Standard Seven to help in her parent's boarding house, did a year of Latin hoping to study medicine, but gave up the idea as she knew that her parents could never afford it.⁹⁰ Esther Wilkin won a scholarship to study teaching at university but it was at a time when her father was out of a job and she had to go out to work to help to support the family.⁹¹ Fanny Losman wanted to study dentistry, but her parents did not have much money and her brothers took precedence. So she did a commercial course and worked in an office. Many years later when her own children had finished university she went to take a degree.⁹²

In 1902 the only university in South Africa was that of the Cape of Good Hope which was a governing and examining body only. Students were prepared for its examinations at five colleges⁹³ of which the South African College was the oldest and the largest, established in 1829. Women were first admitted to the College in 1887. However of the first nine women to be admitted, none were Jewish. The earliest Jewish female to attend the College, was probably Esther Gordon (1890-1891)⁹⁴.

⁸⁷ "Innovations in the Synagogue", SAJC, 20 July 1934, p. 509.

⁸⁸ D. Clain, 198-, p. 37.

⁸⁹ B. Clain comments on the high percentage of immigrant children among the first South African doctors, 198-, p. 10..

⁹⁰ Sarah Zalk, 1981, p. 38.

⁹¹ Esther Wilkin, 198-, p. 34.

⁹² Fanny Losman, 1983, p. 21.

⁹³ In 1904 the other colleges were: Victoria College in Stellenbosch, Diocesan College in Rondebosch, St Andrew's College in Grahamstown, Gill College in Somerset East, Huguenot Ladies' College in Wellington, School of Mining in Kimberley. W. Ritchie, *The History of the South African College, 1929-1917*, Maskew Miller, Cape Town, 1918, pp. 477-478.

⁹⁴ W. Ritchie, 1918, v. 2, p. 867.

Later came Miss D. [Dora] Buirski (1897) and Miss A. Buirski (1897-1898).⁹⁵ Dora Buirski was the first Jewish woman teacher in South Africa.⁹⁶

In 1900 Selina Hirsch (Gordon, 1897-1900) became the first South African Jewish woman to graduate with a B.A. degree at the old SACS College. She later became a member of the Transvaal Provincial Council.⁹⁷ Ellen R. Behrman completed her M.A. being awarded the Governor's prize in 1906, and the gold medal for science in 1908.⁹⁸ She did equally brilliantly at Cambridge, becoming a Wrangler in two years instead of the usual three.⁹⁹ Irene Antoinette Geffen (Newmark), studied for her BA and her MA at the South African College, winning a bursary to study at University College, London.¹⁰⁰ Bertha Solomon was one of the first two young women to be awarded scholarships to study at the Diocesan College, an Anglican institution, and one of the five colleges where it was possible to prepare for the examinations of the University of the Cape of Good Hope. She completed a B.A. and an M.A. in Classics.¹⁰¹ Music teaching was a popular career for women in those days, and several of the women did their licentiate at the College of Music.¹⁰²

Once the University of Cape Town opened in 1918, a Bachelor of Arts degree was by far the most popular course for women. The *Zionist Record* in 1927, 1929, and 1930,¹⁰³ and the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* between 1933 and 1939 list all the names of the Jewish graduates at the University of Cape Town. The two most common degrees were a Bachelor of Arts for women and Medicine - M.B.Ch.B for men.¹⁰⁴ In 1933 the

⁹⁵ W. Ritchie, 1918, v. 2, p. 855.

⁹⁶ Hilda Purwitsky, "A Chat with Cape Town's Old-timers", *Zionist Record Annual*, September 1952.

⁹⁷ W. Ritchie, 1918, v. 2, p. 867; George Aschman, "Oudtshoorn in the early days", in Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz, eds, 1955, p. 131. According to *Women of South Africa: a Historical, Educational and Industrial Encyclopedia and Social Directory of the Women of the Sub-Continent*, edited and compiled by Thomas H. Lewis, Le Quesne & Hooten Smith, Cape Town, 1913, p. 31, Selina Behrman was the first Jewish woman graduate, but her name is not listed by W. Ritchie..

⁹⁸ Etaine Eberhard, "Women at SAC and UCT: the Early Years", in *Centenary of Women on Campus, 1886/7 – 1986/7*, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 1987, pp. 7-9; W. Ritchie, 1918.

⁹⁹ Bertha Solomon, 1968, p. 27.

¹⁰⁰ Irene Geffen, 1985, p. 8.

¹⁰¹ Bertha Solomon, 1968, pp. 34-46; Ritchie, 1918, v. 2, p. 891. Her life and work will be examined in Chapter Eight, *Varieties of Integration: Case Studies, Political*.

¹⁰² Ethel Goldberg, 1982, pp. 25, 28; Paulina Wittenberg, 1983, pp. 16-17; Millie Asherson, 198-, p. 42

¹⁰³ *Zionist Record*, 23 December 1927, p. 33. *Zionist Record*, 27 December 1929, p. 23
Zionist Record, 26 December 1930, p. 23

¹⁰⁴ Statistics taken from the SAJC, 15 December 1933, p. 882; 4 December 1934, p. 926; 13 December 1935, p. 362; 11 December 1936, p. 900; 16 December 1938, p.; 15 December 1939, p. 924.

Jewish M.B. Ch.B.s constituted over a third of the total number (14/34), and in 1939 this percentage had risen to a half (33/67).¹⁰⁵ The proportion of women is not quite as dramatic. Whereas in 1933 the one Jewish women medical graduate was one of only three, in 1939 she was one out of seven females to complete the M.B. Ch.B degree.¹⁰⁶ The only female law graduate during all these years was Margaret Oblowitz in 1930.

The picture was similar at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Amelia Levy, daughter of Ita Hersch, was one of the earliest women to register at the university when it opened in 1922, acquiring a Bachelor and Masters degrees in Philosophy.¹⁰⁷ In 1927 of 1 362 students, 43.5 per cent – 550 - were Jewish. of which nearly a third - 175 - were women students.¹⁰⁸ In 1927 of 61 Jewish graduates, 26 were women. Of these 16 had graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree (as against 8 males); two of the nine M.B. Ch.B graduates were female, one of whom, Sophie Schiller, was awarded the British Medical Association (Wit.) Branch medal. Out of

Jewish Graduates at the University of Cape Town

Year	Total	Men	Women	B.A.	M.A.	B. Soc. Sc.	B. Com.	B. Sc.	M.B. Ch.B.
				w: m					
1927	45	33	12	8: 12	1			1	0: 6
1929	46	29	17	12: 11	3		1		0: 6
1930	36	27	9	7: 6					1: 7
1933	46	39	7	4: 6	1			1	1: 13
1934	59	45	14	7: 4	1		1		0: 16
1935	48	35	13	6: 5	1			1	3: 17
1936	55	40	15	6: 3	1	1		1	1: 15
1937	40	33	7	4: 7		1		1	2: 11
1938	46	34	12	6: 6	1		1		1: 15
1939	56	45	11	5: 1		3	1		1: 32

¹⁰⁵ In her Honours dissertation, "Moving Up: Adaptation and Change amongst the Cape Town Jewish Community, 1920-1939", (B. A. History Hons, University of Cape Town, 1990, pp. 55- 57) Lauren Brenner has calculated the average percentage of Jewish graduates in the Faculties of Law, Medicine, Commerce, and Bachelor of Arts, at the University of Cape Town between 1920 and 1930. Her findings that are based on the names listed in the University calendar, reinforce the former table, with Medicine as the favoured degree for Jewish men and a Bachelor of Arts for Jewish women.

Percentage of Jewish Graduates at the University of Cape Town, 1920-1939

	Jewish F	Non-Jewish F	Jewish M	Non-Jewish M
Law	1 %	4 %	32 %	63 %
Medicine	3 %	9 %	34 %	54 %
Commerce	3 %	6 %	28 %	63 %
B. A.	9 %	36 %	14 %	41 %

¹⁰⁶ Statistics of total number of medical graduates obtained from the lists of Graduates, in Howard Phillips, *The University of Cape Town: the Formative Years, 1918-1948*, University of Cape Town in association with the University of Cape Town Press, 1993.

¹⁰⁷ Joshua Levy, 2009, p. 14.

¹⁰⁸ In the 1930s H. F. Verwoerd dubbed Wits as 'a Jewish University with an appendage of Indian and native students', cited in B. K. Murray, *Wits: The 'Open' Years, 1939-1959*, Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1997, p. 3.

seven Bachelor of Science graduates, four were women; and the only Master of Science graduate, was also a woman.¹⁰⁹

The first South African woman ever to attain the degree of Doctor of Philosophy was Jewish - Rose Goldstein (Sass), a B. Sc. Hons. student in Chemistry, from the University of the Witwatersrand, who was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy at Cambridge University in 1927. This was believed to be the highest degree ever won by a South African woman and was claimed as a first by officials at the University of the Witwatersrand. Rose and her husband Sidney Goldstein, lived in England and were described as keen Zionists and leaders of the Jewish youth movement.¹¹⁰

In 1940, Ellen Hellmann (1908-1982), the daughter of German Jewish immigrants, who emigrated to Johannesburg in 1894, became the first woman to obtain a D. Phil. Degree at the University of the Witwatersrand. Hellmann was the first anthropologist to research the urban Africans, and the first female social anthropologist. She was an executive member of the South African Institute of Race Relations (1952-1953), and its president from 1954-1956.¹¹¹

Employment

It was very common for young Jewish girls to work before they got married, but not afterwards, unless they were helping in their husband's businesses. The most common employment was that of shop assistant. All the informants mentioned the difficulty that a Jewish woman experienced finding employment. One said that for seven years she was the only Jewish employee at Garlicks departmental store in Cape Town,¹¹² and in Johannesburg another related that she only succeeded in finding a position as a sales lady through her father's influence, and only worked for Jewish firms.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Adelina Miriam Abrahams, *Zionist Record*, 4 April 1928, p. 20.

¹¹⁰ *Zionist Record*, 28 October 1928, p. 22.

¹¹¹ Her dissertation was entitled, "Early School Leaving among African School Children and the Occupational Opportunities Open to the African Juveniles – published as *Problems of Urban Bantu Youth* (1940). *New Dictionary of South African Biography*, edited by E. J. Verwey, 1995-1999, pp. 96-97. See Chapter Eight, Varieties of Integration: Case Studies, Political.

¹¹² Mrs Reitstein, 1981, pp. 36-40.

¹¹³ Gladys Jankelow, 198-, pp.28-30.

According to the 1904 Cape census, the proportion of white females in the category of ‘Shorthand Writer, Typist, Reporter’, accounted for 85.23 percent of this category of workers.¹¹⁴ Even though the number of Jewish women entering the workplace was doubtless still very small in 1907 their appearance was nonetheless perceived as a direct threat to the well being of home and family, to quote the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*.

... the home *as a place of rest for man* is becoming daily more rare. Soon... there will be no such thing as the old fashioned home left. Women are swarming out of all doors, running hither and thither among the men, clamouring for arms that they may enter the fray with them, anxious to lay aside their tenderness, their modesty, their womanliness, that they may become hard and fierce and self-asserting like them, thinking it a far higher thing to leave the home and family to take care of themselves, or under the care of some incompetent hireling, while they take up the manly professions and make themselves the rivals in trade of their husbands and brothers.”¹¹⁵

While in 1916 the employment of a women clerk in Johannesburg was still considered cause for mirth,¹¹⁶ after the First World War thousands of women entered the workplace changing the nature and status of women’s employment irrevocably. In 1920, it was reported that, “Tens of thousands of women, are by choice or of necessity, cutting out careers for themselves in professional or business life.”¹¹⁷ They were working as typists, clerks and personal secretaries. Shorthand typing was considered to be a cut above working behind a counter in a shop, and was considered essential for any girl who wanted to work in business, even if she were a Cambridge

¹¹⁴ Cheryl Walker, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement in South Africa*. Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 1979, p. 323.

¹¹⁵ “Womanliness”, SAJC 22 July 1907, cited in Krut, 1985, p. 223.

¹¹⁶ The article humorously describes the trials of a young woman, who was asked to add a long column of cheques, a task that she tackled “courageously, without flinching”. Apparently she did not carry over the shillings and pence, and came to a grand total of 2 430 pounds 442 shillings and 765 pence! The writer concluded that, “Wherefore it would seem that among the many things that the war has changed is our system of compound addition. And this lady bank clerk has incidentally made history in the realm of arithmetic,” “The experiment of the local banks to employ women clerks”, “Social and Fashionable”, SAJC, 7 January 1916, p. 623.

¹¹⁷ SAJC, 9 Jan 1920, p. 8439.

graduate! A job as post mistress in the civil service was unusual for a Jewish woman. It was a cut above a plain typist, and carried a far larger salary.¹¹⁸

Yet in 1920 the number of women in the job market was still quite small compared to that of men, and they tended to hold lowly clerical positions. A woman in control was considered ‘something of a curiosity.’¹¹⁹ By the end of 1926, however, despite the fact that many offices were being run by women,¹²⁰ women were advised to conceal their true abilities so as not to antagonize their male colleagues.

She might try to hide a little of that sharp-thinking. She is quicker witted than man who is more thorough. But she need not show it. She should not let people feel that she thinks that she is frightfully clever. She should be businesslike but not aggressively so.¹²¹

School Teaching

In 1891 almost 75 per cent of white teachers at the Cape were women.¹²² On graduating with an M.A. in Classics, in 1912 Bertha Solomon took a temporary post teaching Latin at the well known Milburn House School for Girls in Claremont.¹²³ A decade later the teachers interviewed as part of the Kaplan Centre Oral History project, comment on the difficulty that a Jewish woman teacher had finding work in Cape Town.¹²⁴ This opinion is confirmed by the leader article in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* of 4 April 1928, that states that:

“Ever year .the possibility of Jewish teachers obtaining posts in Government schools in the Cape Province becomes more remote; numbers of young people who have qualified with the highest distinctions find that their time and labour have been entirely wasted and after making numerous applications for

¹¹⁸ Rachel Isaacson, 1983, pp. 18-20.

¹¹⁹ In contrast it was reported that in the United States, many women had got to the top of the great drapery and general stores and restaurants. In some cases they ran the whole organization and were paid fabulous salaries. SAJC, 20 May 1927, p. 483.

¹²⁰ SAJC, 14 January 1927, p. 128.

¹²¹ SAJC, 3 December 1926, p. 14.

¹²² Cheryll Walker, 1990, p. 322.

¹²³ Bertha Solomon, 1968, pp. 34-46.

¹²⁴ Goldie Ackerman, 1981, p. 48.

positions give up in despair and direct their energies into other channels (if possible).”

The article goes on to speculate whether this was due to antisemitism. While the teaching profession was over crowded, there were numerous cases where Jewish candidates with higher qualifications were passed over for less accomplished gentiles. Moreover there were schools with a majority of Jewish scholars where there had never been a Jewish teacher on the staff. Even girls who had passed through the school from kindergarten with flying colours were passed over. In the Free State Jewish girls were advised not to take up teaching as a profession as “their ability to teach religion and scriptures renders them unfit for appointments”.¹²⁵

Many Jewish teachers in Cape Town were forced to take up posts in the country. Feodora Clouts taught for a year at Boshof in the Orange Free State and in Cradock¹²⁶; Sarah Goldblatt took a position in Oudtshoorn.¹²⁷ Others either went overseas or studied further to enhance their qualifications. Hilda Purwitsky was not able to secure a permanent position until she went back to Training College to get her T2 - Second Class Teaching Certificate. After that she got a post at the De Villiers Street School.¹²⁸ After her degree Sybil Honikman went to England for 18 months where she was attached to the London County Council’s Education Section. She taught Biology at Observatory Girls for 15 years, but felt that she was unfairly overlooked for the post of headmistress because she was Jewish.¹²⁹ Goldie Ackerman was the first Jewish teacher at the Westcliff School in Tamboerskloof.¹³⁰ Amelia Levy taught at the Jewish Government School in Johannesburg, before leaving to study for her Bachelor and Masters degrees in Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1922.¹³¹

¹²⁵ “Jewish teachers”, SAJC, 20 December 1929, p. 811.

¹²⁶ Fedora Clouts, 1981, pp. 18-20

¹²⁷ Leonie Van Zyl, 2003, p. 41.

¹²⁸ Hilda Purwitsky, 1981, pp. 6-8.

¹²⁹ Sybil Honikman, 198-, pp. 45-50, 66-67.

¹³⁰ Goldie Ackerman, 1981, pp. 49-50.

¹³¹ Joshua Levy, 2009, p. 14.

Academics

Ellen Behrman lectured in Pure Mathematics at the South African College from 1912 to 1914. However, she resigned on her marriage, that according to her close friend, future parliamentarian and women's rights activist, Bertha Solomon, was a waste of a brilliant mathematical mind.¹³² Irene Geffen, who studied Classics at U.C.T., lectured in psychology in the Philosophy Department at the University of Cape Town and at the University of the Witwatersrand before studying Law.

The professions

From the 1920s, the movement of university-educated women into the hitherto 'masculine' fields of science, law and medicine represented an important softening of attitudes to women's traditional roles. In 1923, after a lengthy campaign, in which the Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union played an active part, the statutory bars against women entering the legal profession were finally removed by parliament. Although the number of women in 'masculine' professions remained tiny – a mere 4 research chemists and 8 dentists in 1926, and 35 attorneys, 5 advocates and 144 doctors and surgeons in 1936¹³³ - their social significance as alternative models for women, visibly challenging the presumption of female intellectual inferiority and dependence on male breadwinners, was considerable.¹³⁴

Where Jewish women stand out in the professions is in the field of law. Four of the five advocates, mentioned above, were Jewish: Irene Geffen, Bertha Solomon, Rose Makepeace Franks and Maggie Oblovitz (Taylor). After legislation was passed in 1923 permitting women to practice law, three of the first four women to be admitted to the bar, were Jewish. The first was Irene Geffen. Although her career at the bar was brief, owing to resistance to the briefing of women advocates, she was the author of the book, *The Laws of South Africa Affecting Women and Children* (1928). The book was commissioned by the International Council of Women in 1925, and published under the auspices of the National Council of Women of South Africa. It is believed

¹³² She married Aaron Abelheim, a medical doctor in Johannesburg, Bertha Solomon, 1968, p. 27

¹³³ Cheryl Walker, 1979, p. 63.

¹³⁴ Walker, 1990, p. 332.

to be the first legal work of any considerable size to be written by a woman in the British Empire.¹³⁵

The second woman to be admitted to the Bar, Bertha Solomon (nee Schwartz), later Member of Parliament and an indefatigable fighter for women's rights,¹³⁶ stands out as one of the few women of this period who combined marriage with a successful public career. The third woman, Rose Makepeace Franks, who was admitted in 1929 at only 22 years of age after a brilliant scholastic career, was educated at the Parktown Convent and at the University of the Witwatersrand.¹³⁷ Maggie Taylor (Oblowitz) was the first woman advocate to be registered at the Cape. According to well known advocate, David Meyerowitz, her career was very short, severely hampered by discrimination against women – “pure male chauvinism”.¹³⁸ In November 1930, it was observed that of the eight women practicing law in South Africa, six were Jewish. Of these three (Irene Geffen, Bertha Solomon and Rose Makepeace Franks) were advocates, while three (Hannah Greenberg and Pauline Pertz in Johannesburg and Bertha Lowenstein in Springs), were at the side-bar.¹³⁹

Literary careers

The other area where Jewish women have made their mark in South Africa is in literature. Sarah Gertrude Millin was South Africa's foremost novelist before the Second World War.¹⁴⁰

Dora Sowden, born in Lithuania in 1907, matriculated at the Dominican Convent in Germiston, and graduated with a B. A. Hons in English literature and Music from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1926, at the age of 19. She became the music and

¹³⁵ *Zionist Record*, 4 May 1928, p. 29.

¹³⁶ Ina Ackerman and Tanya Barben, “Women and the Law Faculty at UCT”, in *Centenary of Women on Campus, 1886/7 – 1986/7*, 1987, p. 35.

¹³⁷ *Zionist Record*, 19 July 1929, p. 25.

¹³⁸ David Meyerowitz, cited in Lauren Brenner, 1990, p. 60; David Meyerowitz, Some Recollections (possibly inaccurate) of a Long-time Member of the Cape Bar, <http://www.sabar.co.za/law-journals/2004/april/2004-april-vol017-no1-pp08-09.pdf>, p. 2.

¹³⁹ Hamabit, “Current Communal Comments”, *Zionist Record*, 7 November 1930, p. 15.

¹⁴⁰ Her life and work will be examined in Chapter Eight, Varieties of Integration: Case Studies, Political.

the dance critic for the *Rand Daily Mail*.¹⁴¹ She was also a regular contributor on the arts to the periodical, *Jewish Affairs*, and she contributed a chapter to Saron and Hotz's seminal history of the Jews in South Africa.¹⁴² Bertha Goudvis (1876-1966) came to South Africa from England at the age of five. Self educated, on account of a childhood spent trekking across the country with her parents by ox-wagon, she enjoyed a long career in journalism and creative writing as a correspondent for the *Natal Mercury*, a journalist for the Johannesburg's *The Star*, as well as the *Zionist Record* (several of her plays and stories from *the Zionist Record* are cited in the Chapters, *Marriage Strategies* and *The Feminization of Zionism*). In 1949 she published a bestselling novel, *Little Eden* and a collection of short stories, *The Mistress of Mooiplaas and Other Stories* in 1956.¹⁴³

Bertha Beinkinstadt, the daughter of Moshe Beinkinstadt, who came to Cape Town from Vilna, Lithuania, in 1903,¹⁴⁴ became an accomplished translator of Hebrew poetry that were published in an anthology in 1939.¹⁴⁵ She also wrote poems in Yiddish, one of which, *Der Soldat* (The Soldier) is one of only two Yiddish poems by a South African Jewish woman, to be included in Ezra Korman's anthology of Yiddish poems by women, published in Chicago in 1928.¹⁴⁶ Daughter of Ita Hersch,¹⁴⁷ Amelia Levy, future editor of *Common Sense*, the monthly magazine of the Society of Jews and Christians, and of *Jewish Affairs* the organ of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (1952-1968),¹⁴⁸ also translated poetry from Hebrew, Yiddish and German.¹⁴⁹ In 1932 Marcia Gitlin (b. 1909), a B. A. graduate¹⁵⁰ and the

¹⁴¹ Helen Kaye, "Dance On: Long Time *Post* Dance Critic Dora Sowden, Who Won Rave Reviews From Artists For Her Devotion to Their Field, Has Retired at Age 89", *Jerusalem Post: International Edition* [1996?].

¹⁴² Dora L. Sowden, "Transvaal Jewry, 1902-10", in Saron & Hotz, eds, *The Jews in South Africa*, 1955, pp. 213-225.

¹⁴³ Marcia Leveson, "About this book", in Bertha Goudvis, *South African Odyssey: the Autobiography of Bertha Goudvis*, edited by Marcia Leveson, Picador Africa, Johannesburg, 2011, pp. xi-xii.

¹⁴⁴ See Chapter Two, A Women's Place: the Neighbourhood.

¹⁴⁵ Bertha Beinkinstadt, *An Anthology of Poem Translations from the Hebrew and the Yiddish*, City Printing Works, Cape Town, 1930. They were first in the *Zionist Record*, 29 February 1924, p. 30; 30 May 1924, p. 54; 30 June 1924, p. 4, 44; 17 June 1927, p. 25. See also Jonathan Boiskin, "Benkinstadt [sic], 1903-1993", *Jewish Affairs*, 48(3), 1993: 39-42.

¹⁴⁶ Ezra Korman, 1928, p. 180.

¹⁴⁷ See Chapter One, Women's Journeys from Eastern Europe to South Africa.

¹⁴⁸ Joshua Levy, 2009, pp. 21-23.

¹⁴⁹ Segalowicz, Z. *They Are No More*, translated from the Yiddish poem "Nishto" by A. Levy, Ophir, Johannesburg, [19-?]; Amelia Levy, *Translations: from the Yiddish, Hebrew and German poets into English Verse, 1896-1989*, Ammatt Press, Johannesburg, 1999; Amelia Levy, *Yiddish Holocaust*

daughter of Jacob Gitlin, the leading exponent of Zionism in Cape Town,¹⁵¹ became the youngest editor to be appointed to the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*.¹⁵² In 1938 she joined the *Zionist Record* as assistant editor.¹⁵³

South African Jewish women have also made huge contributions to the theatre as actresses and directors, with women such as Muriel Alexander of the Repts, Leontine Sagan, co-founder of the National Theatre Organisation, and Sarah Sylvia who kept Yiddish theatre alive. However due to the singularity of their careers, their lives will be examined in Section Three. Varieties of Integration: Case Studies, Cultural.

Conclusion

This period witnessed huge changes in the status of women. Worldwide women were gradually entering a male world. This was achieved both through education and employment. No longer were women obliged to stay at home dependent on her family, waiting for the right man to come along. It is difficult to determine how South African Jewish women fared in comparison to their gentile contemporaries. The little statistical evidence that is available suggests that she outstripped them in the field of education, nonetheless her choices and her sites were still very limited. Her education still took second place to that of her brothers, and even when she achieved a university degree or a career, it would be abandoned midstream in favour of marriage and children. Brilliant mathematical student and teacher, Ellen Behrman gave up her university career for marriage; Irene Geffen, the first female advocate, did not pursue her career for very long, forsaking it for hearth and home. Only a very small minority were sufficiently independent minded or had the courage to break the mould. Three of them, Roza Van Gelderen, Hilda Purwitsky, Sarah Goldblatt (whose life and work will be examined in Chapter Nine, Varieties of Integration: Case Studies, Cultural) and Sybil Honikman were single women, who chose not to marry. Sarah Gertrude

Poetry: Translated into English Verse, with a foreword by Jocelyn Hellig, compiled and annotated by Joshua Levy, Ammatt Press, Johannesburg, 2007.

¹⁵⁰ Howard Phillips, *History of the University of Cape Town, 1918-1949: the Formative Years*, University of Cape Town in Association with the University of Cape Town Press, Cape Town, Cape Town, 1993, p. 406.

¹⁵¹ In the *South African Jewish Year Book, 1929*, he is described as “the driving spirit of Zionism in the Cape Peninsula”.

¹⁵² Joseph Abraham Poliva, *A Short History of the Jewish Press and Literature of South Africa from its Earliest Days Until the Present Time*, Vereeniging, [1960]. p. 13.

¹⁵³ Marcia Gitlin, “The ‘Zionist Record’ Has Remained True to its Ideals”, *Diamond Jubilee Issue, supplement to the Zionist Record and S. A. Jewish Chronicle* 21 March 1969, p. 37-39.

Millin, Amelia Levy, and Bertha Goudvis, who pursued successful literary careers, as well as Bertha Solomon, who made a career in politics, and Ellen Hellman who served on the Board of the South African Institute of Race Relations were exceptional for their time, managing to combine marriage with a successful career.

CHAPTER FIVE

JEWISH WOMEN AND WELFARE

Charity - *tzedekah* - plays an important part in Judaism. It is written that charity and acts of compassion are equal in importance to all the rest of the *mitzvot*. Maimonides said that he had never seen or heard of a town [wherein dwelt ten Jews] that did not have a charity fund.¹ It is not surprising therefore that the Jewish congregation, established in Cape Town in 1841, maintained a charity box, the funds collected being used for the relief of “shipwrecked sailors, stranded passengers and impecunious widows,”² not that there were many such widows in the Cape at the time - Jewish women were a scarce commodity.

Before 1918 welfare work in South Africa was chiefly voluntary, undertaken primarily by white middle class women, such as German Jewish housewife, Caroline Baumann, who dispensed clothes, food or money to the Blacks in her back garden in Bloemfontein every Saturday afternoon in the 1860s.³

With the flood of eastern European immigrants from the 1880s to 1914, about two dozen Jewish welfare organizations sprang up at the Cape to care for their needs. The oldest welfare organisation in Cape Town was the Cape Jewish Philanthropic Society, founded in 1859. Its Committee, consisting of twelve elected members and the Minister of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, met monthly. If cases involved women and children, they would be referred to the Ladies Association of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation.⁴ In Johannesburg the Chevra Kadisha, the Jewish Burial and Helping Hand Society, founded only two years after Johannesburg was declared a city in 1888,⁵ employed lady helpers to attend to Jewish women.⁶ The Chevra

¹ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Zeraim*, Gifts to the Poor 10:7, cited in “Social Justice”, <http://jewishveg.com/JudaismAndGlobalSurvival/SocialJustice.html>

² Israel Abrahams, *The Birth of a Community*, Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, Cape Town, 1955, p. 31.

³ Myer Pencharz & Dora L. Sowden, “In the Orange Free State”, in Saron & Hotz, eds, *The Jews in South Africa*, 1955, p. 322.

⁴ Gwynne Schrire, “Adapting to a New Society: The Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society c1900”, in *Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Conference*, South African Association of Jewish Studies, 4-7 September, Durban, 1988, pp. 26-27; Israel Abrahams, 1955, pp. 31, 100.

⁵ Marian Robertson & Mendel Kaplan, “The Chevra Kadisha – Jewish Helping Hand and Burial Society: Johannesburg’s First Social Welfare” in Kaplan & Robertson, eds, *Founders and Followers: Johannesburg Jewry, 1887-1915*, 1991, pp. 92-114.

Kadisha was followed by the establishment of organisations specifically for women, such as the Jewish Women's Benevolent Society, established in 1893 and the Jewish Ladies Communal League in 1898.

Jews were also the beneficiaries of local Christian organizations, such as the Salvation Army, first heard of in South Africa in 1883,⁷ while they also participated in the Guild of Loyal Women, established in the Cape Colony in 1900 in the wake of the South African War (1899-1902) to promote patriotism and to attend to the graves of fallen soldiers, both Boer and Briton. After the War, the Guild devoted itself to welfare and education among women and children, erected Cottage hospitals in the Cape Province and the O. F. S., and the Queen Victoria Hospital, the Alexandra Convalescent Home and the Guild Cottage for Destitute Women and Children in Johannesburg.⁸

The participation of upper middle class Anglo-German Jewish women in the Transvaal and in the Cape in the activities of the Guild of Loyal Women, described as "extremely smart, of socio-political status",⁹ is recorded in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*.¹⁰ In October 1905, Jewish members in Johannesburg included Mrs Henry Frames (Vice-President), Mrs Brodie (Treasurer), as well as Mesdames Anshell, Solomons, and Blumenthal.¹¹ The author of the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle's* "Social and Fashionable's Diary of "Jessica", was herself an active member.¹² On February 1907, a list of prominent Jewish workers of the Guild included: Miss Rogaly,¹³ and Mesdames Anshell, E. Marks, Green, Davis, Robinson, Mallinick, and others.¹⁴

⁶ These women are called "Lady Missakos", see *Witwatersrand Jewish Helping Hand and Burial Society*, First Annual Report and Balance Sheet, 1889, Johannesburg, 1889, p. 5, cited in Riva Michal Krut, "Building a Home and a Community: Jews in Johannesburg, 1886-1914"; Thesis (Ph. D) - University of London, 1985, p. 204.

⁷ "Salvation Army", *Standard Encyclopedia of Southern Africa*, Nasou, Cape Town, 1970-1976, vol. 10, p. 481.

⁸ "Short History of the Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa", in *Women of South Africa Who's Who, 1913*, p. 302.

⁹ "Social and Fashionable: the Diary of Jessica", SAJC, 13 October 1905, p. 629; 25 March 1904, p. 359.

¹⁰ Ibid, 12 May 1905, p. 41; 19 May 1905, pp. 67-68; 16 June 1905, p. 170; 28 July 1905, p. 228; 23 February 1906, p.207; 13 April 1906, p. 271, p. 469; 13 July 1906, p. 41; 17 August, 1906, p. 167; 29 August 1906, p. 189; 12 October 1906, p. 423; 9 November 1906, p. 523; 16 November 1906, p. 551; 21 December 1906, p. 669; 22 February 1907, p. 199.

¹¹ Ibid, 13 October 1905, p. 629.

¹² Ibid, 23 February 1906, p. 207; 13 April 1906, p. 469.

¹³ First mentioned in "Social and Fashionable", SAJC, 12 October 1906, p. 423.

¹⁴ SAJC, 22 February 1907, p. 199.

At the Cape Jewish women were urged to support a ‘Creche’, (a day nursery where infants of working mothers were fed and cared for until evening), until such a time as the community had established its own asylum for poor orphans and invalids.¹⁵ They were also urged to become associates of a Clothing Guild under the patronage of Lady Hely-Hutchinson, wife of the Governor of the Cape, that distributed items of clothing among the hospitals and orphanages of the Cape Peninsula just before the rainy season.¹⁶

The appearance of women on the communal scene must be viewed in the general context of the rise of feminism at the turn of the last century, that witnessed the emergence of the ‘new woman’, a term first used to describe a new generation of career-oriented middle class American women, many of whom were active in reform causes.¹⁷ During this period, women’s moving out of the purely domestic realm, into the ‘public’ world of organizations always required them to demonstrate some ‘usefulness’, some ‘purpose’. They had to make it very clear that they were not abandoning their homes, or abrogating prior domestic duties, but rather taking those duties to a logical conclusion. However as this period progressed, woman began to demand autonomy and the right to an independent public identity, claiming the right to control of their own destinies.¹⁸

These developments did not go unnoticed, and criticism was expressed in both the South African English and the Yiddish press. In 1905 the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* felt strongly that women’s first and sole responsibility was to ‘arranging her home’ and tending to the needs of her husband and children. Women’s communal activity was perceived to be “midway between the life of self-indulgence and the life of home activity, as Judaism understands the term “home”; more laborious than the one, but less exacting than the other.” Anything outside of the home, no matter how worthy the cause, was considered an unnecessary distraction, given the “trials and difficulties which a city like Johannesburg presents in maintaining a Jewish home life.”¹⁹

¹⁵ SAJC, 26 June 1903, p. 14.

¹⁶ SAJC, 10 July 1903, p. 11.

¹⁷ See Jacob Rader Marcus, *The American Jewish Woman, 1654-1980*. Ktav, New York, 1981.

¹⁸ Krut, 1985, p. 214.

¹⁹ SAJC, 16 June 1905, p. 168.

From the start the most popular form of fund raising was the society ball. In 1903 in Cape Town the lady reporter, Naomi, observed that “dancing is more enjoyable in the first half of winter when the young people have not got tired of it yet.”²⁰ According to the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*, writing in 1913, “The lives of the Johannesburg Jewish middle class became a regular step-in-time to the fox trot, the ragtime, and by 1914, the tango.”²¹ As Krut puts it: “The greater the destitution downtown in Ferreira’s or in the *shtetls* in the Pale, the more they danced in the ballrooms of Johannesburg.”²²

This new custom, totally alien to former *yeshiva bokherim* (rabbinical students) from eastern Europe, was looked at askance in the South African Yiddish newspaper, *Der Afrikaner* in 1912, by the Yiddish journalist, Yakov Azriel Davidson, writing under the pseudonym, “Der Shtodt Kokhelefel” (The City Busybody).

Why should the Jews of today not be like the Jews of yesteryear? Jews have already, thank God, lived four and a half thousand years, they are regarded as a “charitable people” without society balls. In the old country Jews supported their charitable societies, their *Talmud Torahs*, their *Botey Medroshim*, without balls, why should we be different? Why should we not give charity in the manner of our forefathers, without involving our physical pleasure? Why is this? Holding society balls makes us forget the fine Jewish values of mercy, charity, good deeds, the values that sustained us, that preserved us as Jews.²³

Women’s participation on the communal scene was facilitated by her position as a white woman in South Africa, whose domestic tasks were largely undertaken by servants. The invisible support supplied by cheap domestic labour, black domestic servants, released their employers for the management and supervisory aspects of

²⁰ SAJC, 17 April 1903 cited in Gwynne Schrire, “How Cape Town’s Jewish Community Cared For Its Sick Poor A Century Ago”, *Jewish Affairs*, 56, 2, 2001, pp. 6-7.

²¹ “Social and Fashionable: Everyone is More or Less Tango-mad”, SAJC, 24 December 1913, pp. 179, 182.

²² Krut, 1985, p. 215.

²³ Der Shtodt Kokhelefel, 1 March 1912, Yakov Azriel Davidson, *His Writings in the Yiddish Newspaper, Der Afrikaner, 1911-1913*, translated by Veronica Penkin Belling, Jewish Publications – South Africa, Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town, 2009, p. 67.

community work.²⁴ For the women fund raising was a serious business. Although several women were independently wealthy most of their budgets (even Bertha Marks) were allocated to them by their husbands, and they were therefore reliant on donations and voluntary work. Catering was done by the committees themselves. This meant appealing to local bakeries for donations, extending their kitchens to produce vast volumes of food, and arranging flowers.²⁵ In Cape Town it was customary for the married ladies to provide the refreshments while the unmarried ladies sold the tickets and amused the children on the following day.²⁶

The organizational skills, acquired in this way, vastly increased women's confidence, and by the mid 1920s, the 'new woman' was boldly giving voice to new assertive attitudes. In an address to an audience of over 120 ladies at a meeting of the Council of Jewish Women in New South Wales, Australia, in 1925, about "Women's influence on Communal Matters", a Miss Jean Barrkman of Johannesburg, characterised men as "Excellent door keepers" and "handy for the loan of a lorry". Her words outraged the editors of the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*, who indignantly responded that:

If men had the leisure time the ladies have they no doubt would go about and do much of the work done now by our weaker sex. Who is it who buys the tickets, gives the money donations in kind yes, and even loans lorries, acts as doorkeeper, why just man, mere man...²⁷

Jewish Ladies Association, Cape Town, 1895-1921

Despite the fact that women were always active in formal and informal welfare work, men found it necessary to 'encourage' or to initiate women's organizations at various times.²⁸ Reverend A. P. Bender, of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, never lost an opportunity to promote women's causes. On 8 December 1895, not long after his

²⁴ Jacklyn Cock, *Maids and Madams: a Study of the Politics of Exploitation*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1980, pp. 182-228, cited in Krut, 1985, pp. 217-218.

²⁵ Krut, 1985, pp. 216-217.

²⁶ SAJC, 17 April 1903, cited in Gwynne Schrire, "How Cape Town's Jewish Community Cared For Its Sick Poor A Century Ago", *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2001, pp. 5-6.

²⁷ SAJC, 3 April 1925, pp. 317, 319.

²⁸ Marcus notes that men frequently took these positions as powerful office holder in Jewish women's organization in late nineteenth century America. Jacob Rader Marcus, *The American Jewish Woman, 1654-1980*, Ktav, New York, 1981, pp. 68-81, cited in Krut, 1985, pp. 210-211.

arrival to take up office as the minister of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, Bender established the first Jewish Ladies Association. The aims and objects of the Association were extremely comprehensive, combining the needs of the synagogue and the congregational school, together with those of the community. They were to:

Beautify the synagogue and to promote the attractiveness and impressiveness of the services, to supervise the training of an efficient choir,²⁹ to decorate the *Succah*, to provide for the adequate equipment of the schools, and to supply prizes for the pupils; to visit the sick in their homes and in the hospitals, and to minister to their wants; to search out and enquire into cases of distress, and to obtain means for their relief; to provide vestments for the dead and flowers for the graves in the cemetery.³⁰

After only six months the Ladies' Association had a membership of 117 and a bank balance of 70 pounds. Two years later the Association received public recognition for their work in the form of a grant from the estate of a gentile, J. C. Hofmeyr.³¹

The members of the Ladies' Association, were the same upper middle class Anglo-German Jewish women, who patronized the Guild of Loyal Women, which was frequently held up as an example for them to emulate. A Mrs Gabriel was the first Lady President. In 1903 the committee members included Mrs Hartogs, a Dutch Jewess who was the President, and Mrs Eilenberg, the Vice President, the wife of Maurice Eilenberg, the German Jewish President of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation. Other members were: Mrs Leon Melekov (Hon. Treasurer), Miss Saber (Hon. Secretary), and Mesdames R. Rothkugel, S. Isaacs, Hammerschlag, W. Isaacs, I. Friedlander, Myers, W. Wolf, John Gabriel, Seltzer and Springer.³²

The Ladies Association assisted the work of the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society. Whereas the latter dealt with male cases, the former assisted distressed and ailing women and children. However the Ladies Association also had reciprocal

²⁹ After a time this function was taken over by a choir master, a Mr Karetzky, Israel Abrahams, 1955, p. 120.

³⁰ Abrahams, 1955, p. 100.

³¹ Ibid, pp. 100-101

³² SAJC, 9 January 1903, p. 12.

arrangements with other local institutions that ministered to the alleviation of suffering in Cape Town.³³ In 1904 the Clothing Guild included the Jewish Ladies Association in its distribution of close to 1 600 items to various institutions.³⁴ In 1906 the Association acknowledged their indebtedness to the Citizens Employment and Relief Committee.³⁵ When in 1904 attendance at the half yearly meetings dropped to between twenty and twenty five out of a possible 250, because of the difficulty women living in the suburbs had in coming to town, it was suggested that the Ladies Association follow the example of the Guild of Loyal Women, and establish branches all over the country.³⁶ In March 1904 it was declared:

“So many among us have time as well as money to devote to charitable purposes and don’t even attend a general meeting of our only charitable institution. Where is a hospital for our sick? Where is a house for our aged and destitute? Is there not something entirely wrong somewhere if we have to beg the Christian ladies to give us garments for our maternity cases? The pity of it is, that there is no one to take the lead, not one Jewish lady beckons us others to follow her on the rough road to our emancipation in this new land with a grand future...”³⁷

The name of Toni Saphra, (recorded as ‘Mr Saphra’) who was destined to play a pivotal role in South African Jewish women’s communal life, appears for the first time among the names of the committee members in January 1906.³⁸ An immigrant from Germany, Saphra first came to Cape Town together with her husband and child in 1900 at the time of the South African War. Influenced by the *Judische Frauenbund* in Germany,³⁹ she joined the committee of the National Council of Women⁴⁰ when it was first established in Cape Town in 1911, chaired by Lady Rose Innes. For many years she was the only Jewess on the committee. For fifteen years (1915-1930) she

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ SAJC, 25 March 1904, p. 358.

³⁵ The annual number of cases totaled 241, “Jewish Ladies Association”, SAJC, 2 February 1921, p. 102.

³⁶ SAJC, 15 January 1904, pp. 65-66.

³⁷ SAJC, 25 March 1904, pp. 358-359.

³⁸ “Jewish Ladies Association”, SAJC, 26 January 1906, p. 102.

³⁹ See Marion Kaplan, *The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany: the Campaigns of the Judischer Frauenbund, 1904-1938*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1979.

⁴⁰ “National Council of Women”, *Standard Encyclopedia of Southern Africa*, 1970-1976, vol. 8, p. 76a.

served as an officer of the St. John's Ambulance Brigade's Nursing Division. She worked tirelessly all through World War I, in the military hospital in District Six and at the Somerset Hospital, as well as tending to the sick and dying during the influenza epidemic of 1918. She taught first aid and nursing to the Jewish Girls' Association (established in 1913), the Jewish Girl Guides, and the Y.M.C.A.⁴¹ Saphra recalls her fellow committee members on the Jewish Ladies Association, as "middle-aged or elderly women (I was the exception) who had come from England or Germany." The applicants, on the other hand, all came from Eastern Europe, and a knowledge of Yiddish was absolutely essential in dealing with them.⁴²

Although a so-called independent and autonomous organization, the Association was chaired by Reverend Bender and was expected to defer to the men of the Cape Jewish Philanthropic Society, who made frequent referrals to them. Usually they were asked to contribute half the money granted by the men's welfare sub-committee to clients who had wives and children. On occasion the women challenged the presumptuousness of the Philanthropic Society. In August 1897 when the women were instructed to pay the fares back to Europe for a recently widowed mother from Bloemfontein and her children, the ladies wrote back that they were only prepared to pay £8 and that in future they were to be consulted "before any amount is voted for any special case or object". The men subsequently apologized, with the excuse that they had not consulted the Ladies' Association beforehand in order "to save them the expense through prompt action as it was believed the clients were entirely without means" but "in future the case [shall be referred to them] and left in their hands to dispose of as they may think best".⁴³

In 1908, the address of the Jewish Ladies Association was listed as Synagogue House in St Johns Street, and its function described as "Assists and relieves distress amongst the Jewish poor, especially women and children and the sick".⁴⁴ A directory,

⁴¹ Sarah R. Sloman, "Toni Saphra, 1887-1967: Memorial Meeting, May 18, 1967, at Zionist Hall.", Toni Saphra: autobiographical and biographical writings, BC 1390; Interview with Mrs Toni Saphra, 21.8.1953, by Dora Sowden, Jewish Museum papers, BC 1315, Manuscripts and Archives, U.C.T. Libraries.

⁴² Toni Saphra, "Looking Back", *Jewish Affairs*, 10 (3), 1955: 30.

⁴³ Gwynne Schrire, "Women and Welfare: Early Twentieth-Century Cape Town", *Jewish Affairs*, 48(2), Winter 1993: 86-87.

⁴⁴ Spivey Woodhead, W.J.P., *Classified Directory of the Cape Town and Suburban Charities*, Cape Town, 1908, cited in Gwynne Schrire, 1993, p. 86.

Charities of the Peninsula by one Macpherson, notes of the Jewish Ladies' Association that "the ladies carefully investigate the cases brought to their notice and visit the hospitals and nursing homes and the lunatic asylums. The committee meets once a week but to deal with the urgent cases there is a subcommittee in each district. The expense of administration is almost nominal."⁴⁵

In March 1917, Reverend Bender was still functioning in the capacity of President of the Jewish Ladies Association. At their AGM, held in the Old Synagogue, the co-operation of the Philanthropic Society in providing for joint cases and for cases of women and children, that were far more numerous than in previous years, was gratefully acknowledged. They were assisted in their work by a number of local charity organizations including the Somerset Hospital, the Salvation Army Maternity Home, the Free Dispensary (Ladies' Branch), Eaton and McGregor Convalescent Homes, Child Life Protection Society, and the Cape Town and Suburban Clothing Guild.⁴⁶

The Jewish Ladies association continued as a separate organization until 1921 when it merged with the Cape Jewish Philanthropic Society to form the Cape Jewish Board of Guardians. The new organization had a committee consisting of seven men and seven women. Toni Saphra was on the committee with Amelia Stodel, another stalwart of the Jewish communal welfare scene, as Vice-president.⁴⁷

Cape Town Jewish Girls' Association

A training ground for future lady welfare workers, was the Jewish Girls' Association, that was founded on 18 October 1913, in the Old Gardens Synagogue under the patronage of Reverend Bender. Every Jewish girl over the age of 17 was eligible for membership, subject to the approval of a committee. The aims and objects combined the strengthening of Jewish consciousness with welfare, 'physical and intellectual culture' and 'social intercourse'. The Association met once a week and the subscription was one shilling and sixpence per quarter.⁴⁸ With Reverend Bender as

⁴⁵ Macpherson, *Charities of the Peninsula*, probably 1913, cited in Gwynne Schrire, 1993: 87.

⁴⁶ SAJC, 16 March 1917, p. 137.

⁴⁷ The Cape Jewish Board of Guardians, is mentioned as incorporating the Jewish Ladies Association of the Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society", SAJC, 17 June 1921, p. 567.

⁴⁸ Membership card, Cape Town Jewish Girls' Association, BC 938.

patron the Association was very anglicised with every meeting ending with the singing of 'God save the King.'⁴⁹ However from the names and addresses found in the register, many of which are in District Six, one gauges that unlike the predominantly Anglo-German elite in the Jewish Ladies' Association, the majority of the members of the Jewish Girls Association were the daughters of east European immigrants, who were aspiring to take their place among the inner circles of Cape Jewish Society.⁵⁰ The association provided instruction in first aid, home nursing, Hebrew, elocution, physical culture, swimming and needlework, as well as socials, *conversaciones* (concerts) and an annual dance at the Railway Institute. During the First World War, the Association organised concerts, socials, *conversaciones* and physical culture displays in aid of the Russian, Palestine and Belgian Relief Funds and various local charitable institutions.⁵¹

In 1916 the first Jewish Girl Guide Company was inaugurated, called the Third Company, Cape Town Jewish Girls' Association. This proved such a great success that at the end of the year a junior section was formed. In 1934 this Guide Company was still carrying on valuable work under the leadership of Miss Freda Charnass, one of the organizers, and then also Vice-President of the Jewish Girls' Association.⁵²

By 1927, however, many active members were falling away through marriage. Their absence created a gap and the rise of a new society catering for both sexes greatly impaired the progress and growth of the Jewish Girls' Association. Although small in numbers, the members kept together and transformed the group into a Sewing Guild, the Jewish Board of Guardians and the Peninsula Maternity Hospital being recipients of large parcels of clothing. Later the Association attached itself to the Jewish Board of Guardians and in conjunction with Mrs Saphra, a strong supporter of the work of the Association, a Clothing Depot was inaugurated. This work was carried on for a while with great success.⁵³

⁴⁹ Jewish Girls Association, Annual report for the year ending 9 December 1918 and... 18 December 1919, Minute book, 9 December 1918, 18 December 1919.

⁵⁰ Jewish Girls Association, Minute book, 10 April 1918.

⁵¹ Jewish Girls Association, Annual report for the year ending 9 December 1918 and... 18 December 1919, Minute book, 9 December 1918, 18 December 1919.

⁵² SAJC, 26 October 1934, p. 783.

⁵³ Ibid.

In June 1932 after a lapse of three years the Jewish Girls' Association was rescuscitated. The Association raised money for the "S. A. Jewish Chronicle", Seaside Camp, Jewish Board of Guardians, the Community Chest, Somerset Hospital, the Mayor's Fund and the "Cape Times", and the Fresh Air Camp. It organized a fete to raise funds for the Zionist Hall and sent parcels of clothes to the Cape Jewish Orphanage, and assisted in street collections for the Jewish Board of Guardians and the Jewish Sick Relief Society.⁵⁴ In the late 1930s the Association was still active under the patronage of the new rabbi of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, Israel Abrahams, and his wife Ethel.⁵⁵

Founding of the Cape Jewish Orphanage

Unlike the two aforementioned associations, that were founded by a man, the initiative to found an orphanage in Cape Town came from a woman, a member of the Ladies Association, Mrs Natalie Friedlander. It was her discovery at the end of 1909 of three Jewish children, two boys and a girl, aged eight or nine, living with a Coloured family in Piquetberg, and of another little boy on a farm in Namaqualand, that led to the founding of an Orphanage two years later.⁵⁶ Friedlander persuaded her friend, Joseph Kadish, to convene a meeting on 15 July 1911, where the decision was taken to found an orphanage,⁵⁷ and an all-male committee, chaired by Joseph Kadish, was elected.⁵⁸

It took another four months, however, before a Ladies Committee was appointed,⁵⁹ that consisted of 15 women, chaired by Natalie Friedlander. Five of the women were the wives of male committee members: mesdames Stodel, Policansky, Ochberg, Lentin and Bernstein. Two were also active in the Jewish Ladies Association, Mrs Hartogs and Mrs Stodel. Mrs Zuckerman also served on the committee of the Bnoth Zion Association. Others were S. Solomon, A. Goldberg, Stern, Pepper, E. L. Davids,

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Membership card, Cape Town Jewish Girls' Association, BC 938.

⁵⁶ Eric Rosenthal, *The Story of the Cape Jewish Orphanage: Golden Jubilee, 1910-1961*, Cape Jewish Orphanage, Cape Town, 1962, pp. 1, 3.

⁵⁷ Oranjia minutes, 15 July 1911.

⁵⁸ It consisted of Joseph Kadish as President, with Morris Alexander, the well known communal leader as Vice President, and P. Policansky and Wittenberg as Honorary Secretaries. Committee members included M. Lentin, S. Frank, Harry Stodel, Dr S. E. Kark, R. Barnett, M. Davis, L. Gradner, M. Bernstein, R. Weinberg, N. Papert, I. Ochberg; and ex-officio Revs Bender, Weinberg and Strod. Oranjia minutes, 15 August 1911, 22 August 1911.

⁵⁹ Oranjia minutes, 10 October 1911.

Rosen, Greenberg, and Misses Pepper and Davids.⁶⁰ Predictably the first task that the Ladies Committee was called on to perform, was to suggest any alterations to the renovation and decoration of the Home.⁶¹ They were also required to make the occasional purchases of necessities for the home.⁶² However as the years went by the Ladies took over most of the case investigations, as well as the lion's share of the collections of the subscriptions.⁶³

In 1919 Natalie Friedlander was succeeded as chairlady by Amelia Stodel, the British wife of the impresario, businessman and sportsman, Harry Stodel, who had come to South Africa as a young woman in 1892. She was the longest serving chairlady, 1919-1939. Together with her husband, she was associated with many welfare organizations in Cape Town, both Jewish and non-Jewish. They included the Cape Jewish Aged Home, the Great Synagogue, and Astra, a hostel for Jewish girls. To enable Jewish women to participate in the street collections, first for the Somerset Hospital, and later for Groote Schuur Hospital, she initiated the mid-week street collections, that were very successful.⁶⁴

Johannesburg

With proportionately larger numbers, Jewish women were more visible in Johannesburg than in Cape Town. Writing in the early twentieth century, Miss M.C. Bruce, observed that of the “three distinct societies among Johannesburg women, the British, the Dutch and the Jewish”, Jewish women most resembled English women in the sense that they participated in many of the same organizations. However unlike Englishwomen, Jewish women shared a characteristic with Dutch women: their work *was* ‘political’, especially when it came to ‘women’s work’ like welfare and education, mothering and childcare.

“Like the Dutch, [Jewish women] believe in the bending of the twig, and they keep their young together by means of many social institutions. The women are bright, ... and they have an extraordinary influence over their men and

⁶⁰ Ibid, 3 December 1911.

⁶¹ Ibid, 22 November, 3 December 1911,

⁶² Ibid, 28 February 1912.

⁶³ Ibid, 1912-1939

⁶⁴ “Obituary: Amelia Jane Stodel”, Oranjia report and Balance sheet for year ended 31 December, 1961, p. 20.

their children, on whom they lavish the best possible educational advantages... In a city like that of Johannesburg where there are very many poor Jews, and a large, pushing middle class, and a few refined and cultivated people, it is difficult to generalize, but they form an intelligent, thrifty, loyal and law abiding asset.’⁶⁵

Although the *Chevra Kadisha*, the major welfare institution for pauper immigrant Jews in Johannesburg, was a male institution serving a predominantly male city, it was also reliant on women workers, ‘lady helpers’, who saw to the proper burial of Jewish women.⁶⁶ In addition, in response to economic distress in the Jewish population following the first depression of 1890-1891, the Jewish Ladies Benevolent Society, concerned specifically with poverty and related problems among Jewish women, was formally constituted in 1893. Within a year the society boasted 212 paid up members.⁶⁷

The Jewish Ladies Benevolent Society conducted free education classes for adult Yiddish speaking immigrants to teach them English. In addition, they embarked on an active programme of home visiting to women in need of help, particularly single mothers, pregnant women, recently widowed women, and sick women. The Society saw its role as helper to the *Chevra Kadisha*, making donations and arranging special benefits that raised impressive amounts of money. In the midst of the 1898 depression the women of the Benevolent Society raised over £1,500 that was distributed both by their Society and by the *Chevra Kadisha*.⁶⁸

During the South African War when the majority of the white population left the Transvaal as refugees the few thousand people who remained in the Transvaal were cared for by a handful of welfare agencies, among which was the Jewish Ambulance Corps and the Jewish Soup Kitchen,⁶⁹ operated by the Jewish Benevolent Society

⁶⁵ M. C. Bruce, *The New Transvaal*, London, 1908, p. 64, cited in Krut, 1985, p. 201.

⁶⁶ Morris Abrahams, *Jews of Johannesburg, 1886-1901*, Scarecrow Books, Johannesburg, 2001, p. 19.

⁶⁷ ‘Johannesburg: First Annual General Meeting of the Jewish Ladies’ Society,’ *London Jewish Chronicle*, 2 November 1894, cited in Krut, 1985, pp. 205-206.

⁶⁸ ‘Johannesburg: Jewish Ladies Society,’ *London Jewish Chronicle*, 5 August 1898, and 2 September 1898, cited in Krut, 1985, p. 206.

⁶⁹ Abrahams, ‘A Sketch in Modern Jewish history’, pp. 31-33, cited in Krut, 1985, pp. 204-205; Louis Rabinowitz, ‘The Transvaal congregations’, pp. 176-177, cited in Krut, 1985, pp. 204-205.

under the indefatigable direction of Vice President, Mrs Klagsbrun.⁷⁰ Rebecca Klagsbrun was one of the five children of Golda and Woolf Miller, the first Jewish family in Johannesburg, who came to South Africa from eastern Europe via London in 1885.⁷¹ Elected to office in 1897,⁷² she was among the few thousand Johannesburgers who remained in the city when war broke out. Like many of the other women of the Benevolent Society, Klagsbrun was active in more than one organization. She was a founder member of the Jewish Ladies Communal League, and one of its first committee members.⁷³

With the reality of increasing poverty during the South African War, Klagsbrun appealed to the Jewish elite with a mammoth fund raising ball to celebrate the Jewish festival of Purim. The funds collected were sufficient to see the society through the war. The women continued their campaign in the post-war period and by 1903 had raised £1,700. Except for a sum of £612 that they kept for the society, the entire amount was donated to the *Chevra Kadisha*. Thus it was thanks to the efforts of the women welfare workers of Johannesburg that a powerful internal welfare network was put in place in Johannesburg in the early years of the nineteenth century.⁷⁴ Throughout its existence, the *Chevra Kadisha* has been critically dependent on the work of women within the organization and separate women's societies who offered additional voluntary help.⁷⁵

In 1917 at the 24th Annual General Meeting of the Johannesburg Jewish Women's Benevolent Society it was still going strong. It was reported that 220 cases had been assisted and the Dorcas Society had made and distributed no less than 450 garments during the year. The committee had visited hospitals and the annual benefit at the

⁷⁰ For details on Mrs Klagsbrun, see 'Johannesburg: Fourth Annual Meeting of the Jewish Ladies Society', *London Jewish Chronicle* 1 January 1898, cited in Krut, 1985, p. 205.

⁷¹ Rose Norwich, "Jewish Women in Early Johannesburg", 1993: 89.

⁷² *London Jewish Chronicle*, 14 April 1901, reports that Rebecca Klagsbrun was elected President of the Jewish Ladies Society at the Fourth Annual General Meeting in 1901. According to her daughter, Cecile Bass, she was only twenty years old at the time. Rose Norwich, 1993, footnote 4, p. 97.

⁷³ Percy Cowen, *Golden Jubilee Souvenir: South African Jewish Orphanage, 1906-1956*, pp. 2-3, cited in Krut, 1985, pp. 205-206.

⁷⁴ 'Johannesburg: Jewish Ladies Society', *London Jewish Chronicle*, 16 October 1903, cited in Krut, 1985, p. 207.

⁷⁵ See for example the *Witwatersrand Helping Hand and Burial Society, Thirty-Fourth Annual Report and Balance Sheet, 1923-1924*, Johannesburg, 1924,5, which thanked the Jewish Women's Benevolent society, the Johannesburg Jewish Ladies' Association' for their co-operation', cited in Krut, 1985, pp. 206-207.

Empire Theatre had resulted in a profit of £368/15/7d. Rebecca Klagsbrun was still the President, Mrs Nathan Vice President, and Mrs A. Solomon was Hon Secretary.⁷⁶

Jewish Ladies Communal League, 1898

In response to the persistence of ‘immorality’ among the immigrant Jewish population, and more particularly the problems of the seduction of young girls and the international White Slave traffic, the Jewish Ladies’ Communal League, was founded by Reverend Hertz of the Witwatersrand Old Hebrew Congregation in November 1898.⁷⁷

Despite the fact that the majority of the thirty-nine founder members of the Jewish Ladies Communal League were female (31 women and 8 men), the committee was chaired by Sam Goldreich, President of the South African Zionist Federation, with Mr E. M. Davis-Marks as Honorary Secretary. All the other members of the committee were women. They were the wives of George Albu, Naph Cohen, D. L. Freeman; Arthur Goldstone, Leopold Graham, K. Klagsbrun, J. Rosenthal, E. Rubenstein, M. Seltzer, A. Solomon, M. Davis-Marks, J. Jacobs; B. Marks, M. Langermann, Vallentine and B. Alexander.⁷⁸

Initially the women were content that the men should maintain control. However, participation by the elected male officers, the President and the Honorary Secretary, was irregular, while the women members seldom missed a monthly meeting. Moreover, the women’s welfare work, visiting the sick in their homes and in the hospital, and trying to find employment for people leaving hospital,⁷⁹ was far less ambitious than that envisaged by Dr Hertz in November 1898, and was treated with a certain amount of skepticism by the men.⁸⁰ The League was also a forum for women to meet and talk, activities that to the men who set up the League seemed flippant and

⁷⁶ ‘Jewish Women’s Benevolent Society: a Satisfactory State’, SAJC, 30 November 1917, p. 1066.

⁷⁷ Speech quoted in ‘Minutes of the Meetings of the Jewish Ladies’ Communal League’, 30 November 1898, cited in Krut, 1985, footnote 77, p. 210.

⁷⁸ This list is taken from the first meeting of the Jewish Ladies’ Communal League, 30 November 1898; their half-yearly meeting, 26 June 1899, and from readings of the Minutes for the first years of the twentieth century. In the postwar period, the committee activists included the wives of men on the Board of Deputies. The prominent women were the wives of Max Langermann and Sammy Marks; and A. Solomon, A. Goldstone, B. Alexander and J. Jacobs, cited in Krut, 1985, footnote 78, pp. 210-211.

⁷⁹ Riva Michal Krut, 1985, p. 212.

⁸⁰ Marcus comments that whereas men’s clubs and organization were taken seriously, women’s were disparaged, *American Jewish Women*, 1981, pp. 49-50, 88, cited in Krut, 1985, footnote 82, p. 213.

flighty, but for the women members were probably as important as the philanthropic.⁸¹ Barely six months after its establishment, at the beginning of June 1899, Hertz suggested that the League be dismantled.⁸²

Matters come to a head at the end of June 1899, when Goldreich ignored the women's decision not to use funds to buy a lamp for the synagogue (owing to the imminence of war), and the women voted to remove the funds from his discretion, placing it under the direct control of the women, demanding his resignation.⁸³ Although he refused to resign, he was effectively discharged and the League became an entirely women's organization, freed from the control of the men.⁸⁴

By far the most important achievement of the Jewish Ladies' Communal League was their establishment in 1903 of the South African Jewish Orphanage. As in the Cape Town case, where action had been prompted by the discovery of Jewish children living with a Coloured family, in Johannesburg, the admission of the six children of a recently widowed Russian Jewish immigrant tailor from London, to the Catholic Nazareth Home,⁸⁵ fuelled a decision to found a local Jewish Orphanage. At a special meeting of the Jewish Ladies' Communal League, it was resolved that rather than sending the six children to the Anglo-Jewish Orphanage in West Norwood in London at a cost of £600, a Jewish Orphanage should be established in Johannesburg.⁸⁶ A home was rented in Pretoria Street, and this was opened on 18 August 1903.⁸⁷ In June 1906, a permanent building, that could accommodate fifty children and which could readily be enlarged to accommodate double this number, was formally opened on the Kensington Estate by the President of the League, Mrs Max Langermann.⁸⁸

⁸¹ Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist*, p. 23, cited in Krut, 1985, footnote 83, p. 213.

⁸² Jewish Ladies Communal League, 14 June 1899, cited in Krut, 1985, pp. 213-214.

⁸³ JLCL, 4 July 1899, cited in Riva Michal Krut, 1985, pp. 221-222.

⁸⁴ JLCL, 11 July 1899; New structure set up at the meetings of JLCL 24 July 1899 and 4 August 1899, cited in Krut, p. 222.

⁸⁵ In "A warning to Jewish parents," SAJC 27 October 1905, p. 670, the *Chronicle* printed a circular published by the Anglo-Jewish establishment to warn East-Enders of the dangers of proselytism, and appended a warning to South African Jewish parents, cited in Krut, 1985, p. 254.

⁸⁶ Jewish Ladies' Communal League, 6 November 1903; 13 January 1903; 9 June 1903; 20 July 1903, cited in Krut, 1985, footnote 64, p. 256.

⁸⁷ SAJC, 3 June 1904, pp. 618-619.

⁸⁸ 'Great Accomplishment of the Ladies' Communal League: the Opening and Consecration' SAJC, 11 May 1906, pp. 517, 519.

The Jewish Ladies Communal League retained autonomous control over the South African Jewish Orphanage until 1920, when it was challenged for the first time, on the eve of its 21st Annual General Meeting. The challenge emanated from an objection to women's safeguarding the teaching of religion to the children rather than men. Despite the fact that for seventeen years the women had conducted the Orphanage "with prudence and generally with good effect", that the Orphanage's financial situation had prospered and that there were three male trustees and four male advisors on the committee,⁸⁹ it was felt that as the Institution was growing rapidly, caring for 58 orphans, it warranted an independent existence, and not simply that of a branch of a society which also dealt with other matters. At a special meeting on 24 October 1920, a decision was taken to separate the League and the Orphanage, and on Wednesday, 19 January 1921, the first meeting of the South African Jewish Orphanage as an independent institution was held.⁹⁰

At the 22nd annual meeting of the Johannesburg Jewish Ladies' Communal League in February 1923, it was reported that since the decision that the Orphanage was no longer controlled by the League, their work had decreased very considerably. They were now devoting all their energies to the protection of the Jewish children of Johannesburg. They had worked with the Probation Officer in several cases brought to their notice. They had intended to found a crèche where mothers would be able to leave their young children during the day while they went out to work, but as they had been unable find suitable premises to hire or purchase, the scheme had to be shelved for the time being. At Passover time and *Rosh Ha-Shanah* (New Year), they distributed foodstuffs and other gifts to about 30 families of children. The League had affiliated with the National Council of Women Workers.⁹¹

The Union of Jewish Women

The Union of Jewish Women was borne out of the need for a co-ordinating body to facilitate the work of the various women's organizations in South Africa that were working separately and often overlapping, and to extend their scope beyond that of the Jewish community. The originator of the idea was Toni Saphra, the immigrant

⁸⁹ SAJC, 25 June 1920, pp. 393-394.

⁹⁰ Sheila Aronstam, *The Historical Development of Jewish Welfare in the Republic of South Africa*. Thesis - M. Soc. Sc. – University of the Orange Free State, 1967, pp. 179-180.

⁹¹ SAJC, 15 February 1923, p. 125.

from Germany, who first came to Cape Town together with her husband and child in 1900, and who had served on the committee of the Jewish Ladies Association, the Jewish Board of Guardians, the Jewish Young Women's Residence, and the Kosher Kitchen.⁹² A member of the National Council of Women from its establishment in Cape Town in 1911, for a time she acted as its honorary secretary, representing it at two international conferences in Oslo, 1920, and Vienna, 1930.⁹³

In 1929 Saphra had attended a Congress of the World Union of Jewish Women in Hamburg that had inspired her to found a Union of Jewish Women in South Africa. Founded in Rome in 1912, the World Union of Jewish Women addressed a wide range of issues including the amelioration of the legal position of the Jewish woman, the protection of women and girls, support for Jewish educational and cultural organizations, and the building of a national home in Palestine. Saphra together with Edna Nussbaum, who was to become the first president of the Union of Jewish Women in Cape Town, attended the congress in an individual capacity since there was no unified body representative of Jewish women in South Africa. The fact that the meeting had been ignored by the Jewish press, made Saphra aware just how isolated South African Jewish women were, not only from each other, but also from the rest of the world. She felt that a South African Jewish Women's Council would benefit enormously from affiliation to such a union.⁹⁴

Encouraged by the communal leader and parliamentarian, and staunch advocate of women's rights, Morris Alexander, Saphra approached the Jewish Board of Deputies for their support. Although a resolution to convene a meeting for the purpose of forming a Union of Jewish Women was passed at its annual meeting, it was never implemented.⁹⁵ Undaunted Saphra took the matter upon herself and, "At a time when travel was difficult she went all over the country and began branches in all the major

⁹² Sarah R. Sloman, "Toni Saphra, 1887-1967: Memorial Meeting, May 18, 1967, at Zionist Hall.", Toni Saphra: autobiographical and biographical writings, BC 1390; Interview with Mrs Toni Saphra, by Dora Sowden, 21.8.1953, Jewish Museum papers.

⁹³ Sarah R. Sloman, "Toni Saphra, 1887-1967: Memorial Meeting, May 18, 1967, at Zionist Hall", for an account of her earlier activities, see, Jewish Ladies Association, 1895-1921.

⁹⁴ Terri Strauss, "The Child of my Heart and Mind": the History of the Union of Jewish Women, Cape Town, 1932-1997", Toni Saphra: autobiographical and biographical writings.

⁹⁵ Sarah R. Sloman, "Toni Saphra, 1887-1967: Memorial Meeting..."; Strauss, "The Child of my Heart and Mind".

centres, starting with Johannesburg in 1931.”⁹⁶ Then on 13 May 1932, she appealed to the Jewish public in a letter in the *S.A. Jewish Chronicle*, announcing a meeting that was to be held on Wednesday 18 May with regard to the establishment of the proposed Union of Jewish Women, in which she enumerated its objects.

The objects of the proposed Union are, to unite all existing Jewish women’s organizations. To link up with the World Union of Jewish Women, to work amongst other things for the amelioration of the legal position of the Jewess, and for the protection of women and girls. I would like to point out that this central organization of Jewish women is not a fund-collecting venture, that only a nominal subscription of, say, 2s. 6d. per year will be required for administration expenses, and that the proposed organization will not interfere in the work of any of our existing Jewish societies.”⁹⁷

This letter was in part an attempt to overcome the considerable opposition which existed among the women themselves, many of whom thought that between the National Council of Women and the Bnoth Zion Association, such a body was superfluous. Others were apprehensive of losing their power and authority, not to mention voluntary workers and funds. Despite this opposition, a large number of women gathered in the Zionist Hall in Hope Street at 3.30 p.m. on the afternoon of Wednesday, 18 May. Saphra, Morris Alexander and the Rev. Bender addressed the meeting.⁹⁸

A constitution was drawn up which included among its aims the promotion of the social, educational, spiritual and moral welfare of the Jewish woman, the co-ordination of Jewish organization, linking up with similar Jewish organizations in other countries, the reform of discriminatory Jewish laws, equality of status between man and women in the Jewish community, support for a Jewish national home in Palestine, and participation in general social welfare work. Edna Nussbaum was elected president; J. Frenkel, Amelia Stodel and Ray Gradner, vice-presidents; and

⁹⁶ Diane Cassere, “Kaleidoscope: Fedora Clouts was ahead of her time.” *Cape Times or Cape Argus*, 1993?

⁹⁷ *S.A. Jewish Chronicle*, 13 May 1932.

⁹⁸ “Union of Jewish Women”, *Zionist Record*, 27 May 1932, p. 23. Terri Strauss, “The Child of My Heart and Mind”.

Feodora Clouts, Helen Lewis and Maggie Oblovitz, Joint Honourary secretaries. Roza van Gelderen was included on the committee of six.⁹⁹ Subscription rates were fixed at five shillings per annum, and meetings were to take place on the second Tuesday of each month.¹⁰⁰

The Union of Jewish Women, SA, was built, its founders insisted, on three principles – Judaism, feminism and a broad humanitarianism. Judaism implied the Judaic tenet of *tsedakah*, or charity, that meant serving all those in need.

The UJW worked tirelessly to promote Jewish women's cause. An understanding was reached with the Immigration Officer at the docks that he should pay special attention to immigrant women and girls. It sought to raise the status of women through education, hosting local and international speakers, lectures and discussion groups. It addressed the issue of discrimination against women in Jewish law, particularly in the matter of the *Agunah* (deserted wife) and *Chalitzah*.¹⁰¹ Advocate Maggie Oblovitz was appointed as the UJW's legal correspondent, working closely with the Council for the Amelioration of the Legal Position of the Jewess in London, as well as the International Council of Jewish Women.¹⁰² Within weeks of its inception, the UJW was tackling the issue of women's rights in the synagogue. It fought and won representations on the local committees of Jewish communal institutions such as the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (1940) (although the inner councils of the Board remained closed to them), as well as on the executive committees of various synagogues.¹⁰³

The third principle, a broad and inclusive humanitarianism, was manifest in the all-embracing undenominational, educational and philanthropic work undertaken amongst the needy of all races, colours and creeds. In the non-Jewish sphere their interests extended to the care of the sick, child welfare that incorporated the non-

⁹⁹ The other five committee member were mesdames Smollan, Weinreich, Berezowsky, Rubin, Gottlieb.

¹⁰⁰ "Union of Jewish Women", *Zionist Record*, 27 May 1932, p. 23; Strauss, pp. 1-4.

¹⁰¹ Jewish custom in Levirate law, that obliges a widow to remove the sandal of her brother in law to free her from the obligation of marrying him.

¹⁰² Union of Jewish Women of South Africa, Cape Town Branch, Sixth Annual Report and Financial Statement, October, 1937 – October, 1938.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, see Chapter Seven, Jewish Women and the Franchise.

European sector of the population, including: the National Council of Women, the S. A. National Council for Child Welfare, the Care Committee for T. B. patients, and the Non-European Convention (subsequently referred to as the “Coloured People’s Parliament”), a group of organizations interested in the welfare of Coloured people, relating to problems of education, health, housing, employment and wage and industrial legislation.¹⁰⁴

The earliest activities of the Union responded to the needs of the moment as other than their representation on the aforementioned committees, they did not have an organized program of their own. With the rise of Nazism in Germany, increasing numbers of German Jewish refugees began arriving in South Africa. In 1935 the UJW took the lead in assisting their integration into the community with the establishment of a German Hospitality Committee, English classes, and socials at the Zionist Hall. In 1937/1938, besides assisting in the running of Astra, the Jewish Young Women’s Residence, most of their activities consisted of fund raising for various causes.¹⁰⁵ In 1938/1939 as conditions for the Jews in Europe deteriorated, the Union helped to establish a committee of Ort-Oze,¹⁰⁶ participated in the Austrian-Polish Relief Campaign, the Joint Emergency Appeal for Refugees and Ort-Oze, as well as the Ort Guardianship Plan, designed to provide a three year course of vocational training for Jewish girls and boys from provincial towns in Eastern Europe.¹⁰⁷

In October 1936 a Union of Jewish Women of Southern Africa was formally constituted at a national conference in Johannesburg. A central executive was elected,

¹⁰⁴ Union of Jewish Women of South Africa, Cape Town Branch, Sixth Annual Report and Financial Statement, October, 1937 – October, 1938.

¹⁰⁵ These included the furnishing of the newly erected Talmud Torah at Hope Street, the Jewish Chronicle Seaside Fund, and a science laboratory at the Jerusalem University. They provided the bulk of the collectors for the regular street collection for the benefit of the local hospitals, organized by Mr and Mrs Stodel, as well as assisting in the street collection for disabled soldiers on Armistice Day and helping to sell Christmas Stamps for the Christmas Stamp Fund at Muizenberg in December, and organizing a rummage sale to raise funds for the Pieter Moll Hostel, that provided after-care for crippled children who had been treated at the Lady Michaelis and Princess Alice Homes. Union of Jewish Women of South Africa, Cape Town Branch, Sixth Annual Report and Financial Statement, October, 1937 – October, 1938.

¹⁰⁶ Ort was an organisation founded in Russia in the twentieth century to promote economic and occupational change for Jews. It spread worldwide and still today provides vocational training for Jewish people. Oze was a Russian society founded in 1912 to protect the health of the Jewish people who were living in dire poverty.

¹⁰⁷ Union of Jewish Women of South Africa, Cape Town Branch, Sixth Annual Report and Financial Statement, October, 1938 – October, 1939, pp. 8-9, 11-14.

that alternated between Johannesburg and Cape Town for twenty years before settling permanently in Johannesburg. Individual branches retained complete autonomy while having certain financial obligations to the central executive and were required only to conform to the principles laid down in the constitution. Toni Saphra was elected its first president. While between 1931 and 1936, only three branches, in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Bloemfontein, had been established, within months of the conference, branches were established at East London, Bethlehem, Durban, Pretoria, East Rand, Krugersdorp and Oudtshoorn. Ten years later some fifty two branches had been established throughout the country with a membership of over 7,000.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

During this period women made great strides. They had thrown off the yoke of male control, and insisted on the right to determine their own affairs. While it was logical that some of their organizations ultimately combined with their male counterparts to avoid overlap, others remained independent. With the establishment of the Union of Jewish Women, however, South African Jewish feminism and welfare had come of age. For the first time they had an organization that was neither controlled or at the very least, monitored by men, an organization that represented them both nationally and internationally, and that was an advocate for their cause. The benefits were felt immediately. Moreover no longer were women's efforts focused exclusively on caring for their own, but they had grown sufficiently in self confidence to turn outwards as full participants in the surrounding society. In the period following the Second World War the Union would turn its attention increasingly to the indigent black population of South Africa, transforming its social feminism into a budding political feminism.

¹⁰⁸ Strauss, pp. 7-8.

CHAPTER SIX

THE FEMINIZATION OF ZIONISM

“Zionism is not a charity” wrote women’s activist and future parliamentarian, Bertha Solomon, in a letter to the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* in 1932, defending the Women’s Zionist Campaign¹ Based on an ancient messianic hope, the modern day Jewish nationalist awakening of the 1880s that responded to Jewish persecution in eastern Europe, was a spiritual revival and not merely a charity to alleviate the plight of indigent Jews. As the daughter of one of South Africa’s leading Zionists, Idel Schwartz, Bertha Solomon understood that the establishment of a national home in the Land of Israel was vital for the continued existence of the Jewish people.

If eastern European Jewish immigrant women in South Africa were reluctant to join local Jewish women’s welfare organizations, because of the predominance of Anglo-German Jews, where they came to the fore was in the Zionist movement, the grassroots movement of South African Jewry. As Marcia Gitlin, the earliest chronicler of South African Zionism writes: “Almost from its inception the Zionist movement in South Africa had the support of the Jewish women in the country.”²

Yet the beginning of the Zionist movement in South Africa was fraught with difficulty. The Anglo-German establishment led by Reverend Bender of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, believed that it showed disloyalty to the British throne. Bundist sympathizers were committed to striving for a classless society wherever they were living, while the Territorialists believed in a Jewish homeland but it did not have to be Palestine. However many years later very few of the women respondents interviewed for the Kaplan Centre Oral History project, testified to themselves or their families having been anti-Zionist,³ or even apathetic to Zionism. The few anti-Zionist women, who became prominent in the 1920s, were more likely to have been Communist sympathizers than Bundists.⁴

¹ Bertha Solomon, “Zionism is not charity”, SAJC, 12 February 1932, p. 121.

² Ibid., p. 34.

³ Sybil Honikman’s British father opposed Zionism, 198-, pp. 60-62; the father of Paulina Wittenberg from Kiev in the Ukraine was a Territorialist, 1983, p. 24.

⁴ Esther Wilkin, who joined the Young Communist League, was influenced by her father who was a Bundist, and a grandfather who was a Chosid. Both were anti-Zionist. Other than a few individuals

Besides prejudice on the part of the Anglo-Jews, working class women were often too occupied with housework and children to contribute much.⁵ With the dire economic conditions that prevailed before and after the South African War (1899-1902), money was required for desperately struggling local Jewish families, and many felt that charity should begin at home. So despite the early appearance of Zionist groups in South Africa, attributed to the *Litvak* origins of the community, many groups did not survive that long, and very soon went into decline.

Like the welfare societies discussed in the previous chapter, the first women's Zionist societies were founded by men. The first Zionist society, the *Dorshe Zion*, founded in Cape Town in 1897, was an exclusively male organization, that barred women from attending their lectures and public meetings. When the idea of founding a women's organization was first brought up, the men were "skeptical in regard to the need of or the possible accomplishments of a women's society". But Moses Zuckerman, a foundation member of the *Dorshe Zion* was more enlightened, believing that if an organization was to be successful, it must involve the women as well. This would not be easy though. According to Zuckerman, "It was no easy task to interest the women. Reverend Bender exerted a lot of influence on the women of the Gardens Congregation, and there was also the so-called Socialist Group. It was just after the birth of the Bund, and everyone coming from London was imbued with all sorts of isms – everything but Zionism." Nonetheless Zuckerman persisted. Together with Rostowsky and Turbowitz (who had been the SAZF secretary in Johannesburg) he canvassed the signatures of 160 women, in support of the idea.⁶

On the 19th of August 1901 Zuckerman called a general meeting for Jewish women in the Masonic Hall. "Sixty women turned up, listened to Mr Turbowitz give a stirring speech, pledged themselves to work towards the goal of a Jewish National Homeland on the soil of Palestine and thus was the Bnoth Zion Society established..."⁷ Within a short period its membership stood at 160, almost half of that of the *Dorshe Zion*

there was no formal Bundist group in South Africa, 198?-, pp. 23-24; See also Chapter Eight, Varieties of Integration: Case Studies, Political.

⁵ Olga Katzeff, 198-, p. 27; Dina Clain, 198-, pp. 45, 49.

⁶ Letter from Sadie L of the *South African Jewish Times* to Mrs Rebecca Zuckerman, 28.6.1951, Jacob Gitlin Library pamphlet and clippings collection

⁷ Ibid.

membership of 350.⁸ Zuckerman took a personal interest in the society, attending all their meetings, until the women began to act with independence and self confidence.⁹

Mrs B. Millin, (future mother-in-law of Sarah Gertrude Millin) was the President of the first committee. In 1903, the President, Mrs Shanban, was sent to the Sixth Zionist Congress, as one of only two South African delegates (the other being a man, Chaim Yankel Kark).¹⁰ The office of President of the society changed hands frequently in the early years: Mrs Pepper (1905), Ruth Schechter Alexander (1906-1908). Dinah Zuckerman, wife of Joseph Zuckerman (1909-1910). However from 1911 the office was held by Rebecca Zuckerman (Glaser), the wife of Moses Zuckerman, until 1927 when Mrs M. Schrire took over.¹¹ However Rebecca Zuckerman remained Honorary Life President until her death in 1958.

Rebecca Zuckerman, the longest serving President, claimed that she was recruited by her enthusiastic husband, who was part of Stellenbosch's band of young Jewish intellectuals. Rebecca said that, "Her friendship with Moses Zuckerman flourished on an interchange of views, literature and Zionist ideologies..." Their house at 15 Wesley Street, Gardens, became the meeting place for the young intellectuals. Fifty years later she recalled: "The samovar was never empty in our house. All through the night we talked. Everything then was a burning *meise* (story)"¹² Together with Rebecca Schrire, she used to collect funds for the Zionist cause. It was said that, "When people saw Mrs Schrire coming they would cross the street, because they knew she was going to ask them for a donation. When they saw both Mrs Schrire and Mrs Zuckerman coming they would close their doors and draw the curtains because they knew they were going to ask them for a big donation."¹³ People remember tiny Mrs Zuckerman who was all of four foot six inches high, being hoisted up in order to kiss the *mezuzeh*¹⁴ on the doorpost.¹⁵

⁸ *The South African Jewish Year Book*, 1929, p. 73.

⁹ Letter from the *South African Jewish Times*, 28.6.1951.

¹⁰ Gitlin, 1950, p. 112.

¹¹ *The South African Jewish Year Book*, 1929, p. 73, 75.

¹² *The South African Jewish Times*, 28.6.1951.

¹³ Cited in Gwynne Schrire, unpublished history of the Bnoth Zion in Cape Town.

¹⁴ Parchment scroll containing Deut. 6, 4-9 and 11, 13-21 fixed to the doorpost in a wooden or metal case.

¹⁵ Bernard Clain, 198-, pp.11-12.

That the earliest group consisted of both east European and Anglo-German Jewish women, is witnessed by the fact that the balance sheet and the report of the Annual General Meeting in 1904, that was held in the Zionist Hall in Hope Street was read out both in English and in Yiddish.¹⁶

The most important achievement of the Cape Town Bnoth Zion at that time was their introduction in 1905 of Hebrew classes for girls that lasted until 1912.¹⁷ In 1916, in the first Yiddish book published in South Africa, *The Jews of South Africa: of All Matters Concerning Jewish and Judaism in South Africa*, N. D. Hoffman writes that in the matter of these classes, the women of the Bnoth Zion, “have earned the praise of the Psalmists: “The women have done valiantly” and in their practice of the ideals of Zionism they have excelled.”¹⁸ The focus on children and education remained a central feature of women’s Zionist work in Cape Town until 1939.

Yet despite a fairly promising beginning, in 1921 attendance at the regular Bnoth Zion meetings was poor. In her annual report Mrs Zuckerman deplores,

The general lack of interest in Zionist work especially at the present time when the future welfare of Palestine rests so largely on us... And are we going to appeal in vain for a little sacrifice and a little public spirit? The race is nearly run, the prize is within our grasp; are we to lose it and draw upon us the scorn of a watching world, or are we to succeed and gain for our sorely stricken people, a home and a haven of rest? The choice is yours and I have no doubt what it will be.¹⁹

Johannesburg

In Johannesburg which would later become the most active women’s Zionist centre, a Ladies Zionist Society was established relatively late, in 1904. The newly formed Society rapidly enrolled some 150 members, and by 1905 this number had risen to 400. While in Cape Town the support for the movement was fairly evenly divided

¹⁶ SAJC, 15 April 1904, p. 437.

¹⁷ See Chapter Four: Education and Careers for Jewish Women

¹⁸ N.D. Hoffman, *Book of Memoirs: Reminiscences of South Africa Jewry*, translated from the Yiddish by Lilian Dubb and Sheila Barkusky, Jewish Publications – South Africa, Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 1996, p. 28.

¹⁹ SAJC, 20 May 1921, p. 472.

between the east Europeans and the more anglicized, in Johannesburg the predominance of east Europeans was more marked. The founder of the first Ladies' Zionist group in Johannesburg, was the teenager, Edith Treisman (Adelson), newly arrived from Ponevezh in Lithuania, while her co-worker, Tilly Michalisky (Moross), had also been active in the Lithuanian Zionist Socialist movement.²⁰

Katie Gluckmann (1884-1968), who in 1928, would become the first woman to be elected to the Executive of the Zionist Federation in her own right, and not as the representative of a constituency, came to South Africa from Lithuania with her mother as a teenager after her father died. They settled in Cape Town, but moved to Vrededorp in Johannesburg when her mother married. Katie had already become an enthusiastic Zionist in Cape Town and, despite her youth and being a female in a male dominated movement, she rapidly became a prominent propagandist for the movement.²¹

Katie relates how at the age of only eighteen, she was approached by Benzion Hersch to take over as secretary of the group, as the incumbent was incapable of writing a decent English letter. "The committee members... were all Russian women and girls, and they spoke mostly Yiddish. They hardly knew English." They lived in Fordsburg and Ferreira, where "practically all the Zionists lived". Doornfontein was then "upper class" and Parktown was completely beyond their reach.²² In 1904 both the Johannesburg Ladies' Zionist Society and the Johannesburg Zionist Association met at the Zionist Hall, that Gitlin describes as "a world apart, self-contained, cut off from the rest of life in Johannesburg. It was situated at 24 Commissioner Street in the heart of Ferreirastown. Hardly a Jew from Doornfontein (then the most fashionable suburb) or Parktown ever entered its doors."²³ In an article, published in the South African Yiddish newspaper, *Di Yudishe Fohn* in 1911, the editor, Benzion Hersch, satirises the English speaking women.

The Bnoth Zion was originally founded by newly arrived Russian Jewish women, who arranged lectures and created a library. When the English and the

²⁰ Gitlin, 1950, pp. 80-81.

²¹ Gillon Philip, "Katie Gluckmann, 1884-1968", <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/gluckmann-katie>

²² Interview with Mrs Katie Gluckmann, Johannesburg. Jews in Johannesburg/ Bnoth Zion, J.N.F. etc.

²³ Gitlin, 1950, pp. 79, 81.

anglicised ladies, joined the organisation, the lectures and the library were replaced by socials, balls, and picnics.²⁴

By 1910 the society had virtually disbanded. Johannesburg was without a Ladies' Zionist society until 1914, when the Women's Zionist League was inaugurated by the wife of Rabbi Dr J. L. Landau.²⁵

Women's Zionist League

As with other ladies societies the idea to found the League was that of a man, Chief Rabbi Dr Judah Leib Landau, who initially invited a few ladies to the Hebrew High School to discuss the idea.²⁶ Like Reverend Bender in Cape Town, Rabbi Landau occupies a very special place in the history of Johannesburg Jewry during this period. Arriving in Johannesburg in 1903, until 1915 he served as rabbi of the Johannesburg Hebrew Congregation and after that as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation.²⁷

Unlike Reverend Bender, who did not initially support the Zionist movement, Rabbi Landau was an ardent Zionist, one of the founding fathers of the early Zionist movement in his native Zamosc in Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian empire and a pioneer of modern Hebrew literature, the author of six Hebrew dramas. He was also the first to have a Hebrew drama performed on the stage in modern times. For many years he served as Vice President of the South African Zionist Federation and from 1931-1942, as Honorary President. He was appointed as the first Professor of Hebrew at the University of the Witwatersrand. The strength of the Zionist movement in Johannesburg owes much to his support and inspiration. He was married to Annie Cotton from Manchester, whom he met while serving as Rabbi in Manchester in 1902.²⁸ She was an active participant on every committee in the community and the President of the Women's Zionist League from its inception in 1914 to 1930.²⁹

²⁴ Benzion Hersch, "Anti-Yiddish", in Leibl Feldman, 2007, p. 169.

²⁵ Gitlin, 1950, pp. 181-182.

²⁶ SAJC, 27 February, 1914, p. 325.

²⁷ John Simon, "Pulpit and Platform: Hertz and Landau", in Kaplan & Robertson, eds, *Founders and Follower*, 1991, pp. 182-196.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *Zionist Record*, 20 June 1930, p. 14.

This meeting resulted in the formation of a provisional committee.³⁰ A few weeks later at a general meeting, members were enrolled, a constitution adopted, and honorary officers and an executive appointed. Unlike the earlier Zionist societies, the Women's Zionist League was led by anglicized Jewish women. Annie Landau, Rabbi Landau's wife from Manchester, became Chairman and Mesdames Greenberg and Bernstein were Vice-Chairmen Mrs E. L. Salamon was Honorary Treasurer, and Mrs L. Goudvis, Honorary Secretary.³¹ Within the first two years the League had enrolled 200 members.

Along with Annie Landau, Bertha Goudvis (Mrs L.Goudvis) was one of the longest serving Zionist women, often taking over the leadership, when Annie Landau was away. Born in Lancashire, England, Goudvis grew up in South Africa. She was a journalist and story writer for the *Natal Mercury* and for the Johannesburg press.³² Between 1916 and 1926, Goudvis wrote stories, plays and essays, reflecting her proud Jewish identity and Zionist ideals, for the local *Zionist Record*, that are not included in her published collections that deal with general themes.³³ In stories, such as "Her Own People"³⁴ and "Sally of the Cohens"³⁵, the young female protagonists, are tempted to marry, in the one case a gentile, and in the other, an assimilated Jew, but they ultimately prefer their proudly identifying and Zionist Jewish suitors.

Initially the Johannesburg Women's Zionist League had no organized programme. During the war period the League was closely associated with the Jewish War Victims' Fund, organizing special functions in its aid, helping to send food parcels to the starving in Russia, raising funds for the relief of the Jews of Salonica, etc.³⁶

³⁰ SAJC, 27 February, 1914, p. 325.

³¹ Ibid, 27 March 1914, p. 387.

³² "Bertha Goudvis", in *Women of South Africa: a Historical, Educational and Industrial Encyclopedia and Social Directory of the Women of the Sub-Continent*, edited and compiled by Thomas H. Lewis. Le Quesne & Hooten Smith, Cape Town, 1913.

³³ *The Way the Money Goes and Other Plays* (Sterling Printing, 1927); *Little Eden* (Central News Agency, 1949); *The Mistress of Mooiplaas and other stories* (Central News Agency, 1956).

³⁴ Goudvis, "Her Own People", *Zionist Record*, 20 September 1916, pp. 17- 20.

³⁵ Goudvis, "Sally of the Cohens", *Zionist Record*, 25 April 1921, pp.54-57; 31 May, 1921, pp. 39-42.

³⁶ Gitlin, 1950, pp. 181-182,

Women's status in the Zionist movement

Despite the fact that women's voluntary work was of fundamental importance, women were regarded as second class citizens in the Zionist movement, whose religious roots in eastern Europe, made it a male preserve for even longer than the Welfare scene. Women's fundraising activities especially, sponsored its projects, and were a central factor that gave the South African Zionist community such a remarkably strong presence and force, and its 'overwhelmingly Zionist character' that made it such a 'distinctive community.' It was the painstaking and laborious work of the 17000 women Zionists who were responsible for the consistently high contribution of South African Jewry to Zionist funds, that after and before 1948, exceeded per capita that of all major communities in the world'.³⁷

While communal affairs were conducted by the men, the women organised concerts, balls and collected money.³⁸ Feodora Clouts, prominent communal worker, claims that if women were slow in joining Zionist ranks, this may have been due to the fact that women's share in the movement was limited to the valuable but unobtrusive and arduous tasks of secretarial work, blue box clearance, fund-raising functions and such other duties as were assigned to them by the men who regarded them as the "handmaidens" of the movement.³⁹ Zionist author and feminist, Marcia Gitlin, argues that although women's work was critical in the functioning of the organization, they were discouraged from stepping out of their 'proper' sphere.

Seldom did they feature as chairmen, but it was they who served as the secretaries without whom no chairman can survive. Rarely did they make speeches, but they arranged the meetings at which speeches were delivered by men. And whilst it was unusual to see a woman on a public platform, it was a common enough sight to see one making her way from house to house with a J.N.F. box in her hand. The bulk of the tedious J.N.F. box work in South Africa was carried out by the women, and so efficiently did they perform it that at the thirteenth Zionist Conference in 1931 a resolution was adopted entrusting them "wherever practicable, with the organization of the placing and clearing of National Fund

³⁷ Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism*, 1984, p. 27, cited in Krut, 1985, pp. 180-181.

³⁸ Paula Jaffe, 1982, pp. 52-54

³⁹ Feodora Clouts, "Women on the Community Scene", *Jewish Affairs*, 15(5), 1960: 70-75.

boxes.” The “whenever practicable” had been inserted in deference to Gitlin who, skeptical about the capacity of women to take complete charge of any undertaking, had opposed this motion.

Gitlin’s skepticism was not exceptional. It was shared by the majority of male Zionists in South Africa. They freely acknowledged the work which the women did behind the scenes. They were eager to see more women enrolled in the ranks of organized Zionism, and they welcomed the formation of special women’s groups which would help to bring this about and “which would inculcate in our young the ideals of Zionism and the tenets of Judaism.” All this was “women’s work.” But let women encroach but one step on what was considered a masculine province, and eyebrows were raised and questions asked.⁴⁰

In the early 1900s women were often limited from taking on public roles for practical reasons, because of domestic and family constraints. Edith Treisman, who, as a young immigrant woman, trudged from house to house in Fordsburg and Ferreira in Johannesburg canvassing support from friends and *landslayt*, eventually had to resign from her work because of parental anxiety about a single woman going off to meetings at night. Tilly Michalisky (later Moross), the daughter of an orthodox beadle was forbidden from associating with the Socialist Zionists because of their ‘corrupting influence.’ Nonetheless she continued her political work and got to meetings by escaping through her bedroom window.⁴¹

Male antagonism to women taking on leading public roles in Zionist organizations was prefaced by their fear that if women entered the ‘male’ sphere, they would abandon their vital work as mothers and home makers. In 1914 in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*, a Mr Shaksnovis protested that “at one time his wife was so active a worker in the Zionist cause that he had no home!” He felt that as the first duty of a wife was to her home, she should promote the cause of Zionism in her home, “by maintaining, for instance, a Jewish and Zionist atmosphere... by instilling a

⁴⁰ Gitlin, 1950, pp. 258-259; see also “Woman’s Work: Domestic and Communal”, SAJC, 9 May 1913, p. 36.

⁴¹ Gitlin, 1950, pp. 80-81.

consciousness of Jewish nationalism and a self-respecting pride in their religion and race into the minds and hearts of her children...⁴²

Men knew that they were dependent on the volunteer work of the women as secretaries and fund raisers and on their unpaid work as wives and mothers. Consistent with this, was their disparagement of women's demands for independence, dismissing 'women's issues' like crèches and childcare from the concerns of the organization, thus making it difficult for women to participate in the public side of Zionist activities.⁴³

While the old guard accepted these attitudes as a fact of life, the young Feodora Clouts, a B.A. graduate and part of the new generation of educated women, who took over the chair of the Bnoth Zion in Cape Town in 1929, had the confidence to challenge male domination. When the men refused the women's request to use some of their own funds to support their recently established Hebrew Nursery school, as it was being spent on the upkeep of the Zionist Hall, the women protested that no other Zionist organization contributed towards its upkeep. Shortly afterwards the Dorshe Zion held a function for a visiting dignitary from which the women were excluded. Simply ignoring Gitlin's blatant refusal, Mrs Clouts, declared that as chairman of the Bnoth Zion, she would sit in the gallery whether he liked it or not.⁴⁴

A few years later the women again decided to challenge the men's authority. Chief Rabbi Gold was to visit Cape Town and the *Dorshe Zion* were planning a reception for him. The Bnoth Zion received a letter asking them to provide tea. Mrs Clouts describes their response:

I said to the ladies of the committee, 'I think we must now demonstrate our ability to stand up for ourselves,' and we wrote that we had no part in arranging the reception and we had no intention of providing tea! After these little demonstrations of our will to be on our own, the men got the message and they decided to have a representative of the Bnoth Zion at their meetings

⁴² SAJC, 20 March 1914, p. 369.

⁴³ Gitlin, 1950, pp. 263-264.

⁴⁴ Interview with Feodora Clouts by Gwynne Schrire, 6 November 1992, cited in Schrire, "Women and Welfare: Early Twentieth Century Cape Town", *Jewish Affairs*, Winter 48(2), 1993: 87-88.

and in this way we came into the management of Zionist affairs. The women had no difficulty in deciding and arranging what to do with the money they were able to raise.⁴⁵

After 1920: Johannesburg

Zionist activity gained momentum in the years after the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and in the wake of the First World War. The revival of the movement that had declined during the war years, was influenced by the renewed immigration from Lithuania of women who had studied in the network of Hebrew Tarbut schools⁴⁶, who were imbued with Zionist fervour. With the establishment of the Palestine National Restoration Fund in 1920, the Women's Zionist League organized their first large scale effort: the Restoration Fund Ball in June 1920, was reported to be the most brilliant and successful Zionist function ever held in Johannesburg that realized some 650 pounds.⁴⁷

Two developments that were initiated in 1924 served to transform the Women's Zionist League. The first was the inauguration by the Keren Hayesod, of a separate Women's Campaign, and the second was the initiation of branch committees in the suburbs. The first Women's Keren Hayesod campaign, inaugurated on 25 March 1924, by Dr Alexander Goldstein, collected 4,200 pounds in pledges.⁴⁸ The honorary organiser of the Campaign, was the same Miss Jean Barrkman, who had the men of the community up in arms with her public description of them as "Excellent door keepers" and "handy for the loan of a lorry."⁴⁹

The formation of branches in the suburbs fulfilled a very important social function for the women, holding readings and lectures, musical and literary afternoons,

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ "A Visitor from Lithuania: Special Interview for the Zionist Record with Dr Miriam Bernstein-Kahan", *Zionist Record*, 8 March 1929, p. 7; Miriam Bernstein-Kahan, "Lithuania: My Impressions", *Zionist Record*, 29 March 1929, p. 9; "The Tarbut Campaign Opens: Mass Meeting in Johannesburg: Eloquent Appeal by Dr Miriam Bernstein-Kahan", *Zionist Record*, 22 March 1929, p. 11.

⁴⁷ Gitlin, 1950, p. 202.

⁴⁸ "Jewish Ladies Campaign for the Keren Hayesod: fine Work in Johannesburg: Dr Goldstein's Appeal to the Jewish Women of South Africa, *Zionist Record*, 31 March 1924, p. 37.

⁴⁹ SAJC, 3 April 1925, pp. 317, 319. See Chapter Five, Women and Welfare

discussions and debates, socials and “At homes.”⁵⁰ Each branch was given an annual quota to be raised from functions that included cabarets and dances, surprise parties and treasure hunts, cinema and dramatic performances, tableaux and mannequin parades, garden parties and jumble sales. In 1933 the net income derived by the National Fund from these functions was approximately £1 650.⁵¹ Each branch had its own executive, represented on the Central committee, and each carried out its own collections of subscriptions and donations. The placement and quarterly clearance of Jewish National Fund boxes from every Jewish home became synonymous with the Women’s Zionist League in Johannesburg⁵² and spread to the other centres.

While the women were so visible, the men’s Zionist society, on the other hand, had disappeared. In October 1927 the Women’s Zionist League was reported to be the only Zionist society in existence in Johannesburg. In the 1927 *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* it was remarked that: “It is a startling commentary on the alleged sincerity of the local Zionists that they cannot get even one male Zionist formation running”.⁵³ And in November on the occasion of the tenth anniversary celebration of the Balfour Declaration, it was observed that the only Zionist Association in Johannesburg, was that of the Ladies, “which is being kept alive by the fact that it meets in the different houses of the more opulent members and so provides a means of social intercourse which would otherwise be lacking”.⁵⁴

By 1929 the Women’s Zionist League could boast 800 members, making it by far the largest and most active Zionist society in the whole of South Africa. At the same time the men’s association, the Johannesburg Zionist Association (established in 1928) had only 380 members.⁵⁵ By 1934 on the occasion of its 21st anniversary, the League’s membership had grown to 850, recruited from every suburb of Johannesburg and from every section of the Jewish population. There was a Central Executive and fifteen branch committees covering practically every district of Johannesburg from

⁵⁰ “Annual Meeting of Women’s Zionist League: Branches being Formed”, *The Zionist Record*, 17 June 1927, p. 26; “Johannesburg Women’s Zionist League: Branches throughout Johannesburg”, *The Zionist Record*, 16 December 1927, p. 23; “Women’s Zionist League”, SAJC, 8 June 1928, p. 383.

⁵¹ SAJC, 6 April 1934, p. 231.

⁵² Gitlin, 1950, p. 244.

⁵³ SAJC, 14 October 1927, p. 885.

⁵⁴ SAJC, 11 November, 1927, p. 949.

⁵⁵ *The South African Jewish Year Book*, 1929, insert opposite p. 3, p. 279.

Belgravia to Saxonwold, from Booysons to Parktown, and from Doornfontein to Houghton.⁵⁶

In a letter to the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* in 1931, Zionism like Judaism,⁵⁷ was acknowledged to be more effectively fostered by Jewish women than by anyone else. “Personal Zionism and its effect on the revival of a real Jewish spirit can be fostered by Jewish women more than by anyone else, and who is there who will not agree that this spirit is the basis of all our work and hopes.”⁵⁸ Even Hebrew education, traditionally regarded as the purview of Jewish fathers, was deemed to be the responsibility of the mothers.

The contributions in the first four Women’s campaigns of the Keren Hayesod, that increased from £4 200 in 1924 to 4,700 in 1928, and approximately £3 600 in 1930 and 1932, were earmarked for the maintenance of Kfar Yeladim, a children’s village in the Jezreel Valley in Palestine, established by the South African War Reconstruction Fund in 1924, to cater for 250 Ukrainian pogrom orphans.⁵⁹ Although initially welcomed by the League as a special project for the women⁶⁰, akin to those of the WIZO and the Hadassah organisations in England and in the United States, from the outset the Federation came up against the gravest difficulties in running it. The moneys received from the Reconstruction Fund fell far short of covering the period of its commitment and the income of the women’s Keren Hayesod Campaign was never sufficient to meet the budget. Moreover the number of children was diminishing every year, and an even more insurmountable problem was the lack of underground water for the cultivation of the land.⁶¹ In December 1931 Kfar Yeladim was handed over to the Zionist authorities in Palestine.⁶²

⁵⁶ SAJC, 6 April 1934, p. 231.

⁵⁷ See ‘Domestic Judaism’ in Chapter Two, A Women’s Place: the Neighbourhood.

⁵⁸ “South African Women’s Work for Zionism”, *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*, 18 September 1931, p. 62.

⁵⁹ Gitlin, 1950, pp. 226-228; SAJC, 10 June 1927, p. 571.

⁶⁰ Johannesburg Women’s Zionist League: Successful Year”, *Zionist Record*, 10 January 1927, p. 13; Mrs J. L. Landau, “An Appeal to Our Women”, *Zionist Record*, 24 June, 1927, p. 13; “Notes and comments: a “Mitzvah” for Women Zionists”, *Zionist Record*, 4 July 1927, p. 5; “Notes and comments: Kfar Yeladim: the Women’s Part”, *Zionist Record*, 11 November 1927, pp. 3-4.

⁶¹ SAJC, 10 June 1927, p. 571; “The Future of Kfar Yeladim”, *Zionist Record*, 19 April 1929, p. 3; “Report on Kfar Yeladim”, *Zionist Record*, 17 May 1929, p. 23; “The South African Children’s colony in Palestine: Full Report of Kfar Yeladim”, *Zionist Record*, 23 May 1929, pp. 27-30; “The Upkeep of Kfar Yeladim”, *Zionist Record*, 16 January 1931, p. 45.

⁶² “The Women’s Campaign”, SAJC, 29 January 1932, p. 65; Marcia Gitlin, 1950, pp. 232.

After 1920: Cape Town

In Cape Town the influence of the new immigrants from Lithuania and Latvia, in the 1920s, was felt in the formation of the first Hebrew Nursery School by the Bnoth Zion Association in August 1930, the fore-runner of the Hebrew Nursery School movement.⁶³ This venture was a revival of the Hebrew Kindergarten, established by the United Hebrew Schools, that had closed down eight years before.⁶⁴ It was run by the same Mrs S. Gordon, “whose genius in this work is mirrored by the love that every child who passes through her hands, bears to her.”⁶⁵

It appeared on the scene at the very same moment that Hadassah⁶⁶ and the W.I.Z.O.,⁶⁷ those two great achievements of American and English Jewish women, were about to take over the management of educational matters in Palestine. At a time when the Jewish girl in the Diaspora received little or no instruction in her history, traditions, language or literature, the interest of Jewish women in education in Palestine and in Cape Town, was regarded as having the potential to help stem the flow of Jewish assimilation.⁶⁸ Moreover Hebrew education was deemed all the more necessary after the Quota Act of 1930 that had stemmed the flow of eastern European migration.⁶⁹

The kindergarten was designed to imbue the children with a love of the homeland and of Jewish traditions and values. It was run along Froebel principles that stressed the importance of the correct atmosphere to stimulate the creative faculties of the child. Only Hebrew was spoken to the children so that they should imbibe the true Jewish spirit. It was hoped that it would be but one of a chain throughout the Peninsula. In the annual review of the work of the Zionist movement in 1930, pride of place was accorded to the Bnoth Zion Association’s establishment of the Hebrew Kindergarten at Molteno Road in Oranjezicht.⁷⁰

⁶³ Feodora Clouts, *Jewish Affairs*, 15(5), 1960: 70-75.

⁶⁴ SAJC, 15 August 1930, p. 521.

⁶⁵ “The Hebrew Kindergarten: a Bnoth Zion Venture”, SAJC, 30 May 1930, p. 357.

⁶⁶ See Nelly Las, “Women and Zionist Activity in *Erez Israel*: the Case of Hadassah, 1913-1958”, in Shulamit Reinhartz & Mark A. Raider, eds, *American Jewish Women and the Zionist Enterprise*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, Mass., c2005, pp. 159-183.

⁶⁷ See “WIZO Womens Zionist Organisation” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 16, Keter, Jerusalem, 1972.

⁶⁸ SAJC, 15 August 1930, p. 521.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 12 September 1930, p. 590.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 5 September 1930, p. 581.

The only serious objection to the school was raised by Principal of the Central Girls School and Kindergarten teacher par excellence, Roza van Gelderen, who valued Jewish nursery school education, but felt that the school, that was located in Molteno Road in the comfortable suburb of Oranjezicht, should rather have been located in a poor area, such as District Six, where mothers lived in crowded houses without the advantages of gardens and parks and who were often forced to work and could not afford to employ nannies to look after their children.⁷¹

In 1934, ten years after a Branch system had been introduced in Johannesburg, it was finally introduced in Cape Town, initiated by the chairman of the Bnoth Zion, Maggie Oblowitz.⁷² In January 1935 it was reported that the seven branches,⁷³ with a combined membership of well over seven hundred, had served to heighten interest in Zionism in general, and increased the amount collected in subscriptions, and for the Keren Hayesod Campaign. The placing and clearing of the J. N. F. boxes continued to bring in much needed revenue and the Hebrew Kindergartens had finally been placed on a sound financial basis. The Association had become affiliated with the S. A. Jewish Board of Deputies and the Women's International Zionist Organisation (WIZO).⁷⁴

Virtually all of the women interviewed for the Kaplan Centre Oral History project, had participated in the Bnoth Zion Association whether actively holding office or passively paying their subscriptions, some were among the leaders.⁷⁵ In the country districts such as Stellenbosch and Paarl in the Boland, part of the reason for the very wide appeal of the Zionist movement, was that it was the favourite place for boys and girls to mix. In Stellenbosch, Paula Jaffee dreamt of going to Palestine to the Hebrew University. A map of Palestine hung in the passage of her home. Her mother presided over the first Women's Zionist Society and Paula was the first secretary.⁷⁶ The

⁷¹ Roza van Gelderen, "A Hebrew Kindergarten for District Six", SAJC, 6 June 1930, p. 366.

⁷² SAJC, 17 August 1934, p. 583.

⁷³ Rondebosch-Weinberg, Tamboerskloof, Gardens-Oranjezicht, Muizenberg, Maitland, Sea Point, Woodstock, SAJC, 25 May 1934, p. 360.

⁷⁴ SAJC, 5 April 1935, p. 221.

⁷⁵ Jane Traub, 1982, p. 30; Rachel Isaacson, pp. 1983, 8-11; Feodora Clouts, pp. 27-29, pp. 35-39; and Pauline Abramowitz, 198-, pp. 16-17, 30-32, 47.

⁷⁶ Paula Jaffe, 1982, p. 23.

writer's mother wrote poems about Zionism and participated in the Yiddish plays produced by the Paarl Young Israel Society.⁷⁷

Women's Zionist Council

The formation of a separate Women's Zionist Council - "a South African Hadassah or something on those lines." - was first suggested at the time of the first Women's campaign in 1924. Having previously resisted affiliating to the WIZO, the Women's International Organisation,⁷⁸ in 1928 at the Eleventh Zionist Conference, when for the first time a woman, Mrs Katie Gluckmann, was elected as a member of the Executive of the Federation in her own right (not because she represented any specific section of the community as had Lily Mechanik twelve years earlier), the matter of the formation of a Women's Zionist Council was brought up again. However due to their commitment to Kfar Yeladim, the women couldn't take on anything more.⁷⁹

In 1932, after the liquidation of Kfar Yeladim,⁸⁰ the matter was broached again with the assistance of Vera Weizmann, one of the founders of the WIZO, who was in South Africa together with her husband, Dr Chaim Weizmann, to launch the Keren Hayesod Campaign. It was favourably received by the two female members of the Zionist Executive, Katie Gluckmann and Ethel Hayman,⁸¹ as well as by the President, Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Johannesburg Women's Zionist League - Annie Landau, Clara Patley and Dr Hedwig Reinhold. But it was strongly opposed by the majority of the men, who felt that the establishment of a women's Federation would lead to a disruption of the movement and some feared that the women would eventually break away entirely.⁸²

⁷⁷ Veronica Belling, Private collection.

⁷⁸ The women had on occasion made contributions to the WIZO, and had delegated Mrs Harry Lourie to attend the WIZO Conference in Vienna in 1925 on its behalf, but they found certain clauses in the WIZO's constitution incompatible with membership of the Federation, "Congress of Women Zionists: Report by Mrs Lurie", *Zionist Record*, 26 February 1926, p. 29.

⁷⁹ Gitlin, 1950, pp. 261-262.

⁸⁰ "The Women's Campaign", SAJC, 29 January 1932, p. 65.

⁸¹ Ethel Hayman was an assimilated Anglo-German Jew from a wealthy family who discovered Zionism quite late and became one of its most ardent supporters, Marcia Gitlin, 1950, pp. 262, 265, 266. Hayman attributed her conversion to Zionism to a Sokolow meeting in Johannesburg that she attended together with Sarah Gertrude Millin, Bernard Sachs, *South African Personalities and Places*, Kayor, Johannesburg, 1959, p. 194.

⁸² Gitlin, 1950, pp. 262-263.

What the opponents of the scheme realized full well, was the fact that the women were the backbone of the movement in the country. On the Executive the two women members were among the most energetic in canvassing for funds during campaigns, and of the rank and file, it was the women who carried out the lion's share of the routine work, particularly for the J. N. F. At the Fourteenth Zionist Conference in 1933, it was reported that eighty percent of the £25 000 raised in Johannesburg for the South African tract in Palestine, had been secured by the Women's Zionist League.⁸³ In the smaller places, in particular, the women were generally the more active members of the small societies, and they too initially raised objections to separating, objecting to the "segregation of the sexes".⁸⁴

The South African Women's Zionist Council was founded in early June 1932. Although an autonomous body, it deferred to the Federation in matters of major policy.⁸⁵ The Council aimed to arouse the national consciousness of Jewish women in all parts of the Union of South Africa; to organize them so that they should become an effective force in the councils of the Zionist Organisation; to take an active part in the upbuilding of Palestine; and generally to co-ordinate women's work for all purposes, such as the Keren Hayesod, the National Fund, organization and propaganda, the formation of new Societies, to ensure uniformity in women's Zionist work and the preparation of programmes of activity.⁸⁶

On 6 June 1932 a decision was taken to affiliate to the WIZO, and an Executive was elected consisting of Dr Hedwig Reinhold as chairman, Mrs Clara Patley and Mrs Jenny Greenberg as vice-chairmen, Mrs Ray Jacobson as Honorary secretary, and Dr Deborah Katzen, Mrs Katie Gluckmann and Mrs Ethel Hayman as the committee, the two last-named representing the Federation on the Council. The following year Mrs Greenberg was elected to the chair, an office which she held for the next eight years.⁸⁷

By 1939 the number of women's groups had risen to 42, and the Women's conference held that year was attended by over seventy delegates as against the twenty who were

⁸³ Ibid, p. 263.

⁸⁴ Hedwig Reinhold, "Messages...", *News and Views*, 15(3), May/June, 1962.

⁸⁵ Gitlin, 1950, pp. 264-265.

⁸⁶ SAJC, 24 June 1932, p. 429.

⁸⁷ Gitlin, 1950, pp. 264-265.

present at the first Conference convened by the Council in 1933. The Council initiated a comprehensive educational programme, and the bulk of the regular J.N.F. income continued to be provided by them. By 1944 the three largest fund-raising departments of the Federation were headed by women – the J.N.F. by Mrs Gluckmann, the Keren Hayesod by Mrs Haymann, and the Youth Aliyah by Dr Katzen.⁸⁸

Conclusion

Although initially excluded from the Zionist movement, supported by the men, it did not take long for women to establish their own Zionist groups, that became known as the Bnoth Zion in Cape Town and as the Women's Zionist League in Johannesburg. In contrast to the Welfare societies, discussed in the previous chapter, the women's Zionist groups not only facilitated the entry of the eastern European women on to the communal scene but enabled them for the first time to play leading roles.

In Johannesburg, in particular, the Women's Zionist League soon outstripped their male counterparts in their activities and contributions. In Cape Town the major contribution of the Bnoth Zion was the introduction of Hebrew classes for young girls⁸⁹ and later in the field of early childhood education. Both in Johannesburg and later in Cape Town the success of the women's groups was enhanced by the establishment of local branches in the suburbs.

The establishment of an independent identity, allied to the Women's International Zionist Organisation, WIZO, was first initiated with the introduction of a separate women's campaign in 1924. By 1932 this had culminated in the establishment of an independent Women's Zionist Council that became one of the most powerful forces in the Zionist movement in South Africa, bringing thousands of women into its ranks. By the end of this period the promotion of Zionism, much like Judaism, had been relegated to the sphere of Jewish women.

⁸⁸ Ibid, pp. 265-266.

⁸⁹ See Chapter Four, Education and Careers for Jewish Women.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH WOMAN AND THE FRANCHISE

Jewish women, like all women in South Africa before 1930, were excluded from any formal involvement in the political process. However, unlike Black, Coloured and Indian women, Jewish women were regarded as insiders within South Africa's racially divided society, even if their presence was relegated to the margins. Within the context of their own religious and communal organisations, all Jewish women shared the status of outsiders, second class citizens, denied representation or roles in the male-dominated synagogue. In Orthodox Judaism, the most prevalent form of Judaism practiced in South Africa, men only are counted in the *minyan*, the religious quorum necessary for prayers to be conducted. Only men are allowed to lead the prayers or to read from the Torah scroll while women are hidden from view. Jewish women's struggle for the political franchise coincided with and impacted on their struggle for representation within Jewish communal organizations, both religious and secular. Ironically Jewish women received the parliamentary franchise before they were granted the right to vote in their own religious organizations. However when the franchise was eventually awarded to white women, and to white women only, the victory was tainted in the eyes of those women who were committed to the achievement of an egalitarian society with a colour-blind franchise.

The first Women's Enfranchisement League was established in Durban in Natal in 1902. Branches soon followed in the major cities,⁹⁰ and with the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, they united to form the Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union (WEAU). There were two other women's organizations that supported the suffrage movement, the Women's Citizen Club in Cape Town and the Women's Reform Club in Johannesburg, both established in 1911.

⁹⁰ Branches were created in Durban, followed by Port Elizabeth (1905), Cape Town (1907), Johannesburg, Pretoria and Bloemfontein (1908), Pietermaritzburg (1910) and Kimberley, Grahamstown, East London and Somerset East in 1911. Cheryl Walker, *The History of the Women's Suffrage Movement in South Africa*, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 1979, p. 25.

Two factors served to delay women's enfranchisement in South Africa: the first was the diverse ethnic origin of the women of South Africa resulting in the complete absence of any transcendent sex loyalty, and the second was the different basis of the franchise in the four provinces. While in Natal and in the two independent Boer Republics, the South African Republic and the Orange Free State, a whites-only policy applied, in the Cape Colony a formally non-racial but qualified franchise allowed a small number of black men who met statutory educational and property qualifications to vote. As votes for women were demanded on the same basis as those for men, the possible extension of the vote to a handful of qualified non-white women proved an obstacle that complicated and delayed the enfranchisement of women for many years.⁹¹

In South Africa's racially divided society women's primary identification lay with their own community, class and colour. Even among white women, ethnic loyalty to their own language group took first place, proving a major obstacle to the establishment of an organization representative of English and Afrikaner suffragists.⁹² It was only in 1923 that the Vroue Nasionale Party, that opposed women's suffrage, were brought around by Mrs E. G. Malan's (step-mother of Dr D.F. Malan) argument that enfranchising women would enable them to vote 'the right man' into parliament – "te sorg dat die beste manne aan die hoof van sake kom." [To ensure that the best men would be elected]⁹³

Although urban Jewish women identified with the English speaking group, their primary loyalty was to the Jewish community. Moreover the vast majority of first and second generation eastern European immigrant women were still firmly rooted in the cultural traditions they had brought along with them, and the equality of women was certainly not part of those beliefs. Besides the Christian flavour lent to the movement by the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the first organization formally to espouse women's suffrage, alienated the average Jewish woman.⁹⁴ On the other hand,

⁹¹ Cheryl Walker, "The Women's Suffrage Movement: the Politics of Gender, Race and Class", in Cheryl Walker, ed, *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, David Philip, Cape Town, 1990, pp. 314-315.

⁹² Walker, 1990, p. 316.

⁹³ Ibid, 1979, p. 42.

⁹⁴ It was founded in 1889 to campaign against the trade in alcohol, Ethel Mackenzie, 'Women's Christian Temperance Union', in *Women of South Africa*, 1913, p. 305.

for several uncompromising eastern European Jewish women, who had become politicised and whose loyalty lay with the entire community of South African women regardless of colour, the movement was too narrow.⁹⁵

The WEAU was exclusively white, predominantly English speaking and urban, and thoroughly middle class. Krut has pointed out that middle class Jewish women, like their men, felt the vulnerability of protecting their status as both middle class and Jewish, and the imperative to 'look to their own'. According to Krut, right up to the outbreak of the First World War, Jewish women upheld standards which were more moral, and perhaps more old-fashioned, than other white middle class women in Johannesburg.⁹⁶ In 1909 they could still insist that: The Jewish woman believes in her home, her husband, her children and her religion. She is not a suffragist.⁹⁷

Jewish women who participated in the WEAU were thus a small minority within their community. They tended to conform to the profile of the typical white women members. They were women of standing, educated, civic-minded, the majority of whom had been born and raised in England.⁹⁸ Of approximately 34 Jewish women listed in the 1913, *Women of South Africa*, the five who evinced an interest in the Women's movement conformed largely to this description.

Four out of the five were Anglo-German Jews, who had been born in the United Kingdom: Helena Auerbach, wife of Julius Auerbach of Port Elizabeth and East London, was born in London; Selina Behrmann, married to Jacob Behrmann, 'Landed Proprietor' of Johannesburg, was born in Liverpool; Mrs Bertha Goudvis was born in Lancashire; Miss Gertrude Rogaly was born in Birmingham. The exception was Bertha Schwartz (Solomon), of eastern European origin, who had been born in Minsk in Russia.⁹⁹

All five were educated, although they had obtained their education in different ways. Helena Auerbach had been educated by private tuition in London. Selina Behrman,

⁹⁵ See Chapter Eight, Varieties of Integration, Case Studies, Political.

⁹⁶ Krut (1985: 198-203) bases this judgment on her analysis of a very public divorce that occurred in the Jewish community in Johannesburg.

⁹⁷ "The Jewish Woman Suffragist", SAJC, 6 August 1909, p. 1091.

⁹⁸ Walker, 1990, p. 330.

⁹⁹ *Women of South Africa*, 1913, pp. 20, 31, 115, 229, 237.

who had come to South Africa as a child, was educated at Victoria Grove Girls School in Riversdale in the Western Cape, and at Good Hope Seminary and Normal College in Cape Town. In 1900 she became the first Jewish woman to graduate B.A. from the South African College in Cape Town.¹⁰⁰ She also obtained her Second Class Teaching Certificate, as well as certificates for Pianoforte, Singing, Ambulance, Nursing, Taalbond, and Science. Miss Gertrude Rogaly was educated at King Edward's School in Birmingham. Mrs Bertha Goudvis was remarkable in that she was largely self educated, and was a journalist and story writer for the *Natal Mercury* and for the Johannesburg press. Bertha Schwartz was educated at the Hope Mill School and at Good Hope Seminary, and had obtained an M. A. in Classics at the Diocesan College.¹⁰¹

All the women had held portfolios either in the Suffrage movement or in other organizations. Helena Auerbach was the Honourary Treasurer of the National Union of Women's Suffrage societies in England. Selina Behrman was a member of the S. A. Women's National Union, and an honourary member of the Jewish Boys' and Girls' Guild, in Cape Town. Mrs Bertha Goudvis was a member of the Women's Reform Club as well as of the Women's Enfranchisement League. Miss Gertrude Rogaly was a member of the Women's Reform Club, and also belonged to the Union of Jewish Women, the Victoria League of S.A. (Johannesburg branch), G.L.W., Standing Committee of Women's organization, S.A.N.U. Bertha Schwartz (Solomon), the only east European, was a member of the Zionist movement.¹⁰² Bertha Solomon became an indefatigable fighter for women's rights and one of the earliest women to be elected to parliament, where she made the removal of women's legal disabilities her chief goal.¹⁰³

Olive Schreiner's Jewish friends.

Besides the influence of birth, class and education, on Jewish women's affiliation to the WEAU, a coterie of Jewish women living in Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State, as well as in De Aar, a small town in the Northern Cape, were influenced by

¹⁰⁰Ibid, 1913, p. 31. In Saron & Hotz, eds, *The Jews of South Africa*, 1955, p. 131, George Aschman writes that Selina Hirsch (Gordon) was the first South African Jewish female graduate, see Chapter Four, Education and Careers for Jewish Women.

¹⁰¹ *Women of South Africa*, 1913, pp. 20, 31, 229, 115, 237.

¹⁰² Ibid, pp. 20, 31, 115, 229, 237.

¹⁰³ See Chapter Eight, Varieties of Integration: Case Studies, Political.

writer and campaigner for the rights of women and of all oppressed peoples (including the Jews),¹⁰⁴ Olive Schreiner (1855-1920). As early as 1883 her novel *The Story of an African Farm* raised a storm because of its outspoken criticism of women's subordinate status in society. It was praised by feminists who approved of the strong heroine who controls her own destiny. It was revolutionary for the time and became a best seller in Europe and in the United States.¹⁰⁵ Although Schreiner later distanced herself from the Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union, because of its narrow race policies, she was an important source of inspiration for the South African suffrage movement, both through her writings and as a founding member of the Women's Enfranchisement League in the Cape in 1907.¹⁰⁶

Among the Jewish women who came under her influence, Ruth Schechter Alexander, who emigrated to South Africa from the United States, became her special protégé.¹⁰⁷ Schreiner was a family friend of the Baumanns, among the founding families of Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State. Sophie Levisieur, daughter of Isaac and Caroline Baumann, and her cousin, Rose Ehrlich, were founder members of the Bloemfontein committee of the Women's Enfranchisement League of the Orange River Colony that was started in Rose's mother, Helen Ehrlich's home in Bloemfontein on the 11th of June 1909. Rose was the first secretary, and Miss Steedman, the principal of Eunice school was the President. Sophie Levisieur and Mrs Ehrlich were on the first committee. Rose Ehrlich writes:

Olive Schreiner, or aunt Olive as we all called her, came into my life when I was very young. I dared to cross swords with her. How bold and ignorant one is when young! It occurred over votes for women. This was a burning question in my early youth. My father and mother both being strong suffragists, we held many public meetings, and celebrated women came from all over the world to talk to us. Olive Schreiner was one of the foremost women in the movement.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ See O. E. A. Schreiner, "A letter on the Jew", *Jewish Affairs*, 31(8), 1976.: 6-11.

¹⁰⁵ SA History online: Towards a People's History: Olive Emily Albertina Schreiner, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/olive-emilie-albertina-schreiner>

¹⁰⁶ Walker, 1979, pp. 19-21.

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter Eight, Varieties of Integration: Case Studies, Political.

¹⁰⁸ Rose Ehrlich, in Zelda Friedlander, ed., *Until the Heart Changes: a Garland for Olive Schreiner*, Tafelberg-Uitgewers, Cape Town, 1967, p. 58.

Until 30 November 1909, all the meetings were held at Helen Ehrlich's home. When Miss Steedman resigned, Sophie became President, and from February 1910 all the meetings were held at the Levisieur home in Markgraaff Street. From 1910 to 1930, when women were granted the vote, Sophie served as President of the committee, except for a two year leave of absence. In 1929 Sophie attended the Peace Conference in Amsterdam as a delegate for the South African Women's Enfranchisement League. Sophie was appointed one of the Vice Presidents of the S. A. W. E. A. U. when it was started and her daughter, Clara acted as Treasurer for over eight years.¹⁰⁹

Others like the Friedlander sisters, Zelda and Ethel (Mrs Louis Herrman), and their cousin, Feodora Friedlander (Clouts), made her acquaintance in their home town of De Aar, where Olive lived between 1907 and 1914. Ethel Herrman became the Vice-President of the Women's Enfranchisement League in Cape Town.¹¹⁰ Feodora Clouts (b. 1895) became a leader on the local Jewish community scene, both in the Zionist movement and in the Union of Jewish Women. In Zelda Friedlander's collection of tributes, *Until the Heart Changes: a Garland for Olive Schreiner*, published in 1967, Ethel Herrman, who used to accompany Olive Schreiner on long drives into the veld, writes about her:

Of all qualities she admired fortitude and moral courage. Physical courage did not seem to command her highest respect, but it was for the man who had the pluck to hold to what he considered to be right in face of all the abuse and obloquy that fall to the lot of him who dares oppose the mob mind that she reserved her highest admiration. She always championed oppressed or discredited peoples. She admired the old-fashioned Boers in the days when it was not the fashion to see their virtues. She championed the Jews when the old

¹⁰⁹ Levisieur 1982, pp. 113-115

¹¹⁰ In August 1923, Mrs Herrman, Vice-President of the league in Cape Town moved that a resolution be sent to the National Council of Women asking them to call a round table conference to consider means of adequate protection for women and children. She also moved that the National Council of Women should invite organizations of Coloured and native women to co-operate. SAJC, 10 August 1923, p. 634.

monarchical Russia was organizing massacres. The natives were her continual object of sympathy.¹¹¹

Attitude of the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* to the enfranchisement of women

The Jewish women who participated in the WEAU were a small minority and until the vote was finally awarded to white women in 1930, the *Chronicle* was ambivalent in its attitudes towards the women's franchise. Following the convention of the Combined Suffrage Bodies of the Union in February 1920, the *Chronicle* urged women to vote only for candidates of all parties who supported women's suffrage.¹¹² However only a month later concern was expressed that the interest in the enfranchisement movement was estranging women from their families and their community, where their first loyalties should lie. They claimed that women "had ceased to function as the religious centre in the home... The reverential attitude which was accorded her by the family is no longer given her. The woman of the past was frequently, judged by present day standards, uneducated – possibly even illiterate – yet she radiated such an atmosphere of simple piety and thorough devotion to her family... that she inspired the same feelings in those about her. Her Jewishness was her pride." The writer claimed that no organization could arouse the pride and spiritual joy in our faith, that could be achieved through studying the history of our people and the origin of the customs and rituals that women no longer practice.¹¹³

When in February 1923, the Women's Enfranchisement Bill was defeated by one vote,¹¹⁴ a report in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* compared the ensuing debate in the House of Assembly to a *Purim Spiel* [humorous play performed on the Jewish festival of Purim].¹¹⁵ Brigadier-General J. J. Byron, M. P. for East London, a well known philo-semite,¹¹⁶ had attributed women's disabilities to the Ten Commandments although he could not believe that the Creator intended that women should be rated with men's cattle. He had compared the struggle for women's emancipation with that

¹¹¹ Zelda Friedlander, ed., *Until the Heart Changes*, 1967, p. 51.

¹¹² SAJC 20 February 1920, pp. 49,56.

¹¹³ Ibid, 26 March 1920, p. 95.

¹¹⁴ South African Parliament. House of Assembly, *Debates of the House of Assembly of the Union of South Africa as Reported in the Cape Times*, Vol. 8, 27th Jan. 1923 to 25th June 1923, State Library, Pretoria, 1969, pp. 37-39.

¹¹⁵ SAJC, 9 February 1923, p. 117.

¹¹⁶ When J. J. Byron died in 1935 the *Chronicle* noted that "a very great friend of the Jewish people" had passed away. SAJC, 22 November 1935, p. 137.

of the biblical Queen Esther's advocacy on behalf of the Jewish people to save them from the wicked Minister Haman's decree to have them destroyed. On the other hand, he had pointed out that women's situation had improved considerably in the recent past and in all a total of 54 states had now granted the franchise to women.¹¹⁷

In May 1930 when universal suffrage was finally extended to women, it was to white women over the age of 18 exclusively. While the majority of women celebrated their victory, for others, like Ruth Alexander, protégé of Olive Schreiner, this was totally unacceptable, so much so that the break-up of her marriage to parliamentarian and communal leader, Morris Alexander, is attributed to their falling out on the question of the women's vote.¹¹⁸

In a letter to the *Cape Times*, on 5 March 1930, together with Caroline Murray, Anna Purcell, F. H. Schreiner, Lyndall Gregg and Rose Movsovitz, all former members of the committee of the WEAU, Ruth Alexander registered her protest against the form of the proposed Women's Enfranchisement Bill. Giving the vote to White women only, they said with foresight would alter the whole basis of the franchise at the Cape.¹¹⁹ In their words: "we think this Bill is the thin end of the wedge. If white womanhood suffrage is won it will be only a step to white manhood suffrage."¹²⁰ And indeed in 1936 the African vote at the Cape was removed.

The editorial on 23 May 1930 in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* on the occasion of women's enfranchisement presents a telling contrast between attitudes to women in the Afrikaans and the Jewish communities. Whereas, as earlier cited, the Afrikaner women viewed themselves merely as potential voters to ensure that the best man be voted to Parliament,¹²¹ the *Chronicle* immediately conceived of women, as elected representatives. On the other hand, whereas the Afrikaner women recognised that

¹¹⁷ Among the countries that had granted women full rights both to vote as well as to be elected were: Finland 1906; Norway 1913; Denmark 1915; Netherlands, Poland 1918; Sweden, Germany, New Zealand, Canada (except for Quebec) 1919; New Zealand 1919; Australia: United States 1920, Women's suffrage, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women's_suffrage

¹¹⁸ Enid Alexander, *Morris Alexander: a Biography*, Juta, Cape Town, 1953, pp. 171-173. See Chapter Eight, Varieties of Integration: Case Studies, Political.

¹¹⁹ Baruch Hirson, "Friend to Olive Schreiner: the Story of Ruth Schechter", *The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, University of London, London, 1993, vol. 19, p. 50.

¹²⁰ *Cape Times*, 5 March 1930.

¹²¹ Cheryl Walker, 1979, p. 42.

their votes could influence the course of government, the small Jewish community did not regard the presence of Jewish women in parliament as affecting Jewish interests in any significant way.

On questions of specifically Jewish interest they will in the average case have little more weight in tipping the balance in our favour than any Jewish man in Parliament.¹²²

Nonetheless the editors believed that women's enfranchisement would make a big difference to the Jewish community, but in an entirely different way. Expressed in exceedingly chauvinistic and paternalistic terms, the editors proceeded to paint a picture of Jewish women as having internalized man's image of her as his inferior, lacking sufficient intelligence to participate in public affairs, barred from participation in all Jewish institutions and restricted to home and family. In their opinion having the right to vote would enhance her self esteem, self confidence and her status within her marriage and within the Jewish community.¹²³

“So long as she stayed within the domain of the home she was honoured and respected – *kevudoh bas-melech penimoh*; as soon as she emerged she was cursed and condemned. Not unnaturally, she suffered from this tyranny. She began to believe that these man-made traditions were god-made. She began to believe in her own mental inequality, began to develop a chronic inferiority complex.¹²⁴

Furthermore having the right to vote would motivate women to take a more active interest in world affairs, which in turn would enhance her appreciation of the importance of the establishment of a Jewish National home in Palestine and the need for her assistance in its upbuilding. The Zionist leader, Zeev Jabotinsky, who was on a visit to South Africa at that time, had emphasized the fact that women were playing as large, if not a larger part than men in the Jewish National movement. However according to the writer of this article, South African women “still hesitate to come forward and take their part in matters of general and communal interest; they still in

¹²² SAJC, 23 May 1930, p. 329.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

most cases are ignorant of the very fundamentals of such matters; they shudder at the thought of publicly giving voice to their opinions, as is only too much in evidence at the average Jewish meeting.”¹²⁵

Considering the enormous role being played by women who shouldered the lion’s share of fund raising in the South African Zionist movement, and who were clamouring for the establishment of a separate Women’s Zionist Council, the author of this article, it appears, was completely blind to reality. To argue that only when women had got rid of their inferiority complex, would they be able to realize the “significance of the Jewish National Home and the need for their invaluable assistance in its upbuilding”¹²⁶ completely ignored the very active role women were already playing.¹²⁷

Synagogal Vote

In the Jewish community the struggle for the synagogal vote coincided with that of the parliamentary vote.¹²⁸ In January 1928 when the United Synagogue of the British Empire turned down a proposal to grant the suffrage to women, an editorial in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* proposed granting the synagogal vote to women who were, “members of the congregation in their personal or individual capacities and not merely seat-holders by reason of their being wives or daughters of members.” The editor conceded that “where women contribute to the exchequer of the synagogue they are entitled to a voice in the management of its affairs.” Although there were not many individual female members of the various congregations, nor were they clamouring to vote, it was anticipated that with the emancipation of women “almost complete” it would not be long before this would be the case. In South Africa the reluctance to give women the vote in the synagogue, was bound up with the fear of the infiltration of Reform Judaism, that was first introduced in South Africa in 1933 and which never had a large following. In the Reform Temple women were allowed to officiate in the synagogue.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ See Chapter Six, The Feminization of Zionism.

¹²⁸ See debate between Bertha Solomon and Jack Alexander, versus Irene Geffen and Sydney Jacoblson, SAJC, 20 May 1927, p. 531.

¹²⁹ SAJC, 27 January, 1928, p. 56.

The irony of the situation, however, did not go unnoticed. When in March 1928 the Parliamentary Bill for the women's vote was recommitted to the committee stage by the Legislative Assembly of the Union, Avril, the editor of the women's column, "Social and Fashionable", in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*, observed that,

We Jewish women, generally speaking, are inclined to claim the vote, but it seems illogical for us to argue our rights when our own *rabbonim* [rabbis] are divided upon the question of the enfranchisement of women and we have not yet got the synagogal suffrage. Of course there will be those who say there is no connection between religion and politics, and we are entitled to vote for Members of Parliament even though we might not be permitted to express our opinion upon the engagement of synagogue officials.¹³⁰

The move to admit women to synagogue committees was initiated by the newly established branch of the Union of Jewish Women in Cape Town, whose aim was to obtain equality of status between women and men.¹³¹ Cape Town took the lead as the motion had not received sufficient support in Johannesburg. In September 1932, in what was described as a move of a 'revolutionary nature', the principle to admit women on to the committee, was approved by the Cape Town Hebrew congregation, although women were still barred from membership of the Executive. While the vote was carried quite easily, its opponents were fearful that it was only a first step that could lead to women joining the choir, sitting in the synagogue office-holders box, mixed seating, playing the organ during services and moving the service from Saturdays to Sundays, i.e. what they really feared was the infiltration of Reform Judaism.

However their fears were assuaged when it soon became clear that few women had sufficient interest in communal affairs to avail themselves of their new privileges. In any case practically every other committee in Cape Town was open to them. On the other hand while the synagogue officials were keen to see women participate under

¹³⁰ SAJC, 16 [sic] March 1928., p. 152 , bound in 9 March 1928.

¹³¹ Ibid, 12 August 1932, p. 543.

the new dispensation, they pointed out that rights on their own were not sufficient, “what is more important is to properly utilize those rights”.¹³²

At the Green and Sea Point Hebrew Congregation, founded in 1932, women were immediately admitted to full membership on the basis that they had the same political votes as men. Therefore, “it was only right that they should be allowed not only to vote but to share the responsibility of management with their menfolk in every institution.”¹³³ If the Jewish public still had reservations about the move, any doubts were finally put to rest by a letter, dated 14 December 1932, from Rabbi Dr Hertz, Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, that was published in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*.

“You ask my opinion in regard to the Resolution passed by your Congregation giving full privileges to its women seat-holders. Although the phrase “full privileges” is indefinite, I take it to mean that the women of your congregation are now given the right to vote and membership on Committees.

To this there is no objection whatever in Jewish law. In the minds of many people, however, this innovation is bound up with other measures which go far beyond the mere right of voting and Committee membership, and some of these measures are either religiously questionable or they would tend to change the traditional character and spirit of the Service. Therefore, each and every proposed extension beyond the right of voting or membership on Committees should, if and when such arises, be submitted to a Rabbinical authority whose competence cannot be questioned, and the permissibility or otherwise of the extension proposed ascertained.

With this safeguard there is no danger in the Resolution adopted by your Congregation.”¹³⁴

Apparently the ladies of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation took their newly won privileges very seriously and at the first A. G. M. in September after the franchise was extended to them, at least fifty per cent of those present were ladies. One of the ladies was praised for addressing the very important question of Hebrew education.

¹³² SAJC, 30 September, 1932, p. 645.

¹³³ Ibid, 7 October 1932, p. 673.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 13 January 1933, p. 26.

However the editor of the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* expressed the hope that in the future they would also focus their attention on the question of synagogue attendance, decorum during the service, and to a general awakening to a sense of their duties as far as the community was concerned.¹³⁵ A year later the editor again commented on “the unqualified success of the presence of the ladies on the committee”, expressing the hope “that there would always be three ladies on the committee.”¹³⁶ The influence of the ladies also led to a proposal to renew the Consecration service for sixteen-year old girls that had once existed, an essential feature of which was a course of preparatory classes in basic Judaism,¹³⁷ to overcome the gross neglect of Jewish girls’ education current at that time.¹³⁸ The question of votes for women was only broached at the New Hebrew Congregation, Roeland Street in 1937, at the instigation of the newly formed Union of Jewish Women.¹³⁹

Conclusion

The Women’s Enfranchisement movement was peripheral to the majority of first and second generation immigrant women in the young Jewish community, who were appreciative of the greater freedom they enjoyed in South Africa. For the radicalized few it highlighted the intractability of South Africa’s racial problems. For the more acculturated it was a victory, but one that for other than a very small number of women who will be discussed in the following chapter, had limited significance in the short term. According to the editor of the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*, Jewish men were more concerned as to its influence on the Jewish community and on the greater confidence that it would give Jewish women. On the community scene it was secondary to the Zionist movement and it was hoped that it would result in women’s taking an increased interest in Zionist affairs.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 15 September, 1933, p. 629.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 7 September 1934, p. 645.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 20 July 1934, p. 509, 31 August 1934, p. 626.

¹³⁸ “Innovations in the Synagogue”, SAJC, 20 July 1934, p. 509.

¹³⁹ Union of Jewish Women of South Africa, Cape Town Branch, Sixth Annual Report and Financial Statement, October, 1937 – October, 1938.

SECTION THREE

VARIETIES OF INTEGRATION: CASE STUDIES OF EXTRAORDINARY WOMAN

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER EIGHT

VARIETIES OF INTEGRATION: CASE STUDIES, POLITICAL

**Sarah Gertrude Millin, Bertha Solomon, Ruth Schechter Alexander,
Ray Alexander Simons, and Ellen Hellmann**

In Chapter Four, 'Education and Careers for Jewish Women', it was demonstrated that during the period c1880 to 1939, the areas where Jewish women excelled were in the field of literature, law and politics. Whilst most women relinquished their careers on their marriage, several managed to combine marriage with successful careers. In this chapter, the lives and careers of five exceptional women whose lives crossed by virtue of their commitment to politics, whether as writers, politicians, or as political activists, will be examined. Three of the five women grew up in South Africa, while two emigrated to South Africa as young adults. In all five cases, however, the influence of their migration or that of their parents from eastern Europe or from Germany, is apparent in the intersection of their Jewish and their South African politics.

An area where South African Jewish women in particular have come to the fore is in politics. Helen Suzman, who served as a member of parliament for a total of 36 years, for thirteen of which (1961-1974) she was the sole representative of the opposition Progressive Party, was preceded by the lesser known, but no less accomplished Bertha Solomon, who in 1938, became one of the first women to be elected to parliament, where she served for twenty years until her retirement in 1958. Although she never aspired to be elected to parliament, the author Sarah Gertrude Millin, South Africa's foremost novelist, before the Second World War, wrote politically inspired novels and biographies and also penetrated the inner circles of government, becoming a great friend of General Jan Christiaan Smuts and Jan H. Hofmeyr, in this way exerting indirect influence on government. On the other side of the political spectrum, Ruth Schechter Alexander, a brilliant intellectual and literary critic, wife of leader of the Cape Town Jewish community and Member of Parliament, Morris Alexander, operated a salon for left wing intellectuals and scandalized the community when she left her husband, and changed political allegiances. In the Communist Party of South Africa, the most prominent woman was trade union leader, Ray Alexander Simons, who joined the Party only five days after her arrival in South Africa from her native

Latvia in 1929 at the age of fifteen. As South Africa's first female anthropologist, executive member of the South African Institute of Race Relations and founder member of the Progressive Party, Ellen Hellmann, was committed to the peaceful struggle for a broad-based society of justice and equal opportunity.

Born between 1888 and 1913, with the exception of Ellen Hellmann, whose parents were German immigrants, what all these women have in common is their eastern European heritage. Of the four eastern European women, the two women who adopted typical South African positions, came to South Africa as infants, whereas the two left wing women arrived in South Africa as young adults. Ellen Hellmann is the only one of the women who was not of eastern European origin and who was born in South Africa. Of the five women, two were active in practical politics and two were writers and intellectuals, while one was both an academic and an activist. For the women of eastern European origin, their interest in South African politics paralleled their interest in Jewish politics, whether as Zionists or Jewish Socialists. Daughter of German Jewish immigrants, Ellen Hellman's interest in Jewish politics, both local or Zionist, was awoken by Hitler's ascent to power.

The writer, Sarah Gertrude Millin, and the politician, Bertha Solomon, who identified with the South African United Party, came to South Africa at the age of five months and four years, respectively, and were thoroughly South African in their attitudes. Millin left Zhager, the small village in Lithuania where she was born, in 1888, when her parents, Isaiah and Olga Liebson, followed Olga's father to the diamond fields in Beaconsfield in the Northern Cape. Millin entertained few romantic notions about the country of her birth, and many years later, observing the poverty of the Russian people while on a visit to Soviet Russia, remarked that she would rather be an African living in Africa than a Russian living in Russia.¹ The politician, Bertha Solomon, born in Oosda, a suburb of Minsk in White Russia, in 1892. came to South Africa in 1896, at the age of four, together with her mother and sister, to join her father who had fled to South Africa to evade conscription into the Russian army.²

¹ Sarah Gertrude Millin, *Night is Long*, Faber & Faber, London, 1941, p. 176; Sarah Gertrude Millin, *Measure of my days*, Central News Agency, South Africa, 1955, p. 155.

² Bertha Solomon, *Time Remembered: the Story of a Fight*, Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1968, pp. 13-17.

Both Bertha and Sarah had considerable intellects, and it is likely that their home environment influenced their very different life trajectories. Millin's father settled in Waldeck's Plant an isolated river diggings on the banks of the Vaal River not far from Kimberley in the Northern Cape, where they were the only white family among a mixed population of poor Whites and Coloureds. Solomon only narrowly escaped a similar isolated country upbringing to that of Millin, as on arrival her mother flatly refused to live in the small house with a shop at Klapmuts, a small trading station outside Cape Town on the road to Namaqualand,³ that Solomon's father had bought for the family. Instead Solomon grew up in District Six in Cape Town in a house on Butler Square, a quiet cul-de-sac off Harrington Street, then a good middle class Jewish neighbourhood,⁴ Thus while Solomon enjoyed all the advantages of a city upbringing, the immoral behavior of Millin's neighbours at the river diggings,⁵ tainted her world view, while she was traumatized by having to leave her family to go to school in Kimberley at a very young age.

Coming from homes where money was not plentiful, both Millin and Solomon, outstanding scholars, advanced their education on scholarships. Solomon, who attended the Hebrew Public School, won a scholarship to attend high school at Good Hope Seminary.⁶ Her scholarships to the Diocesan College, where she completed a B. A. and M. A. in Classics, were discussed in Chapter Four, Education and Careers for Jewish Women.⁷

Solomon continued studying after marriage. Encouraged by Sarah Gertrude Millin's husband, Philip Millin, she read law privately and within three years in June 1926, she was admitted to the Bar.⁸ She was only the second woman to be admitted to the Johannesburg Bar, both were Jewish. The first was Irene Geffen, the author of the well known text book, *The Laws of South Africa Affecting Women and Children*. However whereas Geffen had lasted precisely six months,⁹ Solomon was able to make a substantial contribution to the family finances even during her first year. She was

³ Solomon, 1968, pp. 18-20.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 18-23.

⁵ Millin, 1941, pp. 22, 77-78.

⁶ Solomon, 1968, pp. 24-26.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 34-35, 43-44.

⁸ Ibid, pp. 50-56.

⁹ Ibid, p. 56.

also the first woman to plead a case before the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court in Bloemfontein.¹⁰

Millin was the only girl at her school in Kimberley to matriculate with a first-class pass and the highest marks of all the girls in the Cape Colony. She was awarded the Victoria Memorial Exhibition, the University bursary, and the Barnato Scholarship, in addition to a special citation for distinction in mathematics. The stage was set for her to continue her education at the South African College in Cape Town, but traumatized by having lived away from home with relatives in Kimberley from the age of eight, she elected to study for a music teacher's certificate in Kimberley instead.¹¹ Eighteen months later, having completed her training, she was conscious that she had made the wrong choice, but was too proud to put it right. She never practiced as a piano teacher and the only person she ever taught to play was her brother.¹²

Although leftist intellectual, Ruth Schechter Alexander, and trade unionist, Ray Alexander Simons both came to South Africa as young adults, unlike Sarah Gertrude Millin and Bertha Solomon, their origins are worlds apart, shaped by very different circumstances and very different times.

Born in 1888, to Solomon Schechter, a Rumanian immigrant, and later one of the greatest Jewish scholars of the twentieth century, and Mathilda Roth from Breslau in Germany, Ruth Schechter Alexander, grew up in London and Cambridge until the age of fourteen, when she emigrated together with her family to New York. Thus the formative influences in her life were British and American. Her first encounter with South Africa was in 1907, when at the age of nineteen, she came to Cape Town as the wife of Morris Alexander, the leader of the Cape Town Jewish community and from 1909, a Member of the Cape Legislative Assembly. Educated at school in Cambridge and New York, Schechter did not go to university but received a more intensive education from her mother who had been a teacher at a young ladies seminary in Germany and was an accomplished linguist who had translated Israel Zangwill's

¹⁰ Elaine N. Katz, "Bertha Solomon: a Feminist for her Time", *Jewish Affairs*, 48(2), Winter 1993: 101.

¹¹ Millin, 1941, pp. 81, 89; Martin Rubin, *Sarah Gertrude Millen: a South African Life*, Ad Donker, Johannesburg, 1977, pp. 22-28.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 88.

books into German.¹³ As the daughter of Solomon Schechter, reader in rabbinics and scholar of the Cairo Genizah at Cambridge University and President of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, she acquired a wealth of Jewish knowledge and languages that included English, French, German, Hebrew and Yiddish. She met Morris Alexander at Cambridge where he was studying law, and intellectually precocious and mature beyond her years, at the age of twelve years old, had allegedly made him promise to marry her.¹⁴ He took her at her word and in 1907 went over to New York for that purpose.

Simons' family background was by far the least privileged of the five women. Simons was born in 1913 in the town of Varaklan in the Rezekne (Rezhitse) Province, part of the Latgalia region, the largest and the poorest of the three provinces, that constituted Latvia. According to the *Yivo Encyclopedia of the Jews of Eastern Europe*, (2008), in 1898, 18.5 percent of the Jewish population of Latgalia of approximately 62 000 (12.8 percent of the total population), required welfare.¹⁵ She was the second youngest sibling in a family of eight children, a son and seven daughters. Her father died in 1923 when she was ten years old¹⁶ and she was obliged to help her mother to support the family.

She attended the local school, where the medium of instruction was in Yiddish, although they also learnt Hebrew and Russian. For a period she and her sister attended a special school for poor children where they were supplied with food and clothing. Although an excellent scholar, she had little chance of furthering her studies at university because of the discrimination against Jews in Latvia, and went instead to study dress making at the Ort vocational school in Riga. In 1928 Simons was hurried

¹³ Baruch Hirson, "Ruth Schechter: friend to Olive Schreiner", *Searchlight South Africa*, Vol. 3, no. 1, August 1992, p. 49.

¹⁴ Enid Alexander, *Morris Alexander*, Juta, Cape Town, 1953. p. 8.

¹⁵ Gershon Hundert, editor-in-chief, *Yivo Encyclopedia of the Jews of Eastern Europe*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2008, Vol. 1, p. 997.

¹⁶ There is a discrepancy between the date of her father's death in Simons' Yiddish diary (1927) and in her published autobiography. While in the autobiography it is cited as 1925, when she was thirteen years old, in the diary the time and date of her father's death is very precisely recorded as 12.45 p.m. on Tuesday, Kislev, 5684 – 11 December 1923, when Ray was only just eleven years old. A photograph of her father's tombstone taken in the cemetery in Latvia, however, confirmed the date to be that of the diary – Kislev, 5684 - December 1923, Ray Alexander Simons, Yiddish diary, 1927, pp. 7-8, Biographical information, Jack and Ray Simons collection, 2.12, BC 1081 Photographs, Tanya Barben.

out of Latvia to join her brother in Cape Town in order to escape the police in the wake of her underground activities.¹⁷

Of the five women, Ellen Hellmann, born in 1908 in Johannesburg, was the only one who was locally born. Her father, Bernard Kaumheimer, an orphan, immigrated to South Africa from Bavaria in Germany in 1894 at the age of sixteen years and settled in Johannesburg where cousins had offered him a job. After initial struggles during the South African War his firm prospered and by 1906, he had accumulated enough money to return to Germany, as was the custom, to find himself a bride. In 1906 he married Clothilda Theilheimer, whose family initially opposed the marriage on account of her going to live in a primitive far away country. Although she remembers being taunted as a child during the First World War on account of being German, in an interview in 1982, Hellmann admits to having had a privileged childhood. Living in Berea, then an upmarket suburb of Johannesburg, her parents were comfortably off, later moving to a mansion in Houghton. They were part of the close knit German Jewish community that associated little with the eastern European Jews, and Ellen travelled regularly to Germany to visit her grandparents.¹⁸

Hellmann was educated at Barnato Park and in the Classical Section of the Commercial High School. She then attended the University of the Witwatersrand where as a student of Social Anthropology she came into contact with Winifred Hoernle who encouraged her to do research among the urban Africans. For her Masters Degree Hellmann conducted research among a community of African slum dwellers living near the centre of Johannesburg. The results of that research which had involved daily visits to the slum over a period of a year, were published in *Rooiyard: a Sociological Survey of an Urban Native Slum* (1948, reprinted 1968). In 1940 Hellmann became the first woman to obtain a D. Phil. Degree at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her dissertation, "Early School Leaving Among Urban African School Children and the Occupational Opportunities open to African Juveniles" was published as *Problems of Urban Bantu Youth* in 1940. She served in various

¹⁷ Ray Simons, 2004, pp. 44-46.

¹⁸ Ellen Hellmann, interviewed by Riva Krut, Kaplan Centre Interviews, Johannesburg, June 1982, pp. 1-2, 4.

capacities in the African community, for some years lecturing in sociology at the Jan Hofmeyr School of Social Work which trained Africans as social workers.¹⁹

Marriage

Unlike the women who will be described in the next chapter, all the women in this chapter married and all but one had children. Solomon from Cape Town and Millin from Waldeck's Plant, moved to Johannesburg on their marriage, while Schechter and Simons lived in Cape Town. Four of the five women led stable family lives. Ruth Schechter Alexander who divorced her husband after twenty eight years of marriage, was the exception.

In her autobiography Millin admits to being very anxious about getting married by the time she reached the age of twenty.²⁰ She rejected the idea of becoming a teacher as teachers were reputed to become old maids.²¹ Sarah met Philip Millin in typical fashion²² on the sands of Muizenberg beach.²³ According to Millin's biographer, Martin Rubin, Philip Millin was privately engaged to Bertha Solomon at the time that he first met Sarah, but broke it off on her account.²⁴ Millin never had children, but she never refers to this in either of her autobiographies. Rubin observes that Millin's younger siblings stayed with the couple in Johannesburg for long periods of time at the beginning of their marriage, which could have compensated her for her lack of children.²⁵ Nonetheless she and Philip were a particularly devoted couple. In her autobiography, *The Measure of My Days*, written just after his death, her devastation and her difficulty in coming to terms with his loss are poignant, as is her subsequent deterioration throughout the remainder of her life without him. In the words of the South African writer, Bernard Sachs: "With the death of her brother, she lost her God: with the death of her husband, she lost her life."²⁶

¹⁹ "Hellmann, Ellen Phyllis", *New Dictionary of South African Biography*, edited by E.J. Verwey, foreword by Nelson Mandela. HSRC, Pretoria, 1995-1999, pp. 96-97; Milton Shain and Miriam Pimstone, "Ellen Phyllis Hellmann", *Jewish Women: a Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, 2005, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/Hellmann-ellen-phyllis>

²⁰ Millin, 1941, p. 97.

²¹ Ibid, p. 81.

²² See Chapter Three, Marriage Strategies

²³ Millin, 1955, p. 47.

²⁴ Rubin, 1977, p. 37.

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 47-48.

²⁶ Bernard Sachs, "Sarah Gertrude Millin", in *South African Personalities and Places*. Kayor, Johannesburg, 1959, p. 80.

Although as was earlier noted she was widely expected to marry Philip Millin, Solomon married South African born but British educated Sephardic Jew, Charles Solomon, fifteen years her senior. They had two children, Frank and Joan.

Ruth Schechter, who married Morris Alexander, leader of the Cape Town Jewish community, had three children: two daughters and a son. It is possible that the trouble in their marriage started with their children, as both daughters suffered from mental illness. At 24 years old, their oldest daughter, Esther, was confined to an institution, and their younger daughter, Muriel, was living with Schechter's brother in New York, until he could no longer tolerate her irresponsible behavior and sent her home.²⁷

The breakup of their marriage was precipitated by Schechter's affair with Ben Farrington, from 1920 Classics Professor at the University of Cape Town, where she was one of the first women to have registered.²⁸ From Belfast in Ireland, a Sinn Feiner although not a Catholic, Farrington towered over his contemporaries as a thinker and author, and as a personality. He became a regular visitor at the Alexander home in Muizenberg.²⁹ However until her children were settled, Schechter kept up appearances, and in June 1932, participated in the public celebration of her and Morris Alexander's 25th wedding anniversary, where she delivered a public tribute to her husband.³⁰

She waited until the end of 1933 to leave her husband to join her family in New York,³¹ and she waited another two years before joining Farrington in England. Her timing seems to have coincided with the departure for London of her youngest and favourite child, where he was to study medicine. She informed Morris that he could have his freedom whenever he wanted it. Devastated, Morris embarked on an extended trip to Australia, where he met Enid Baumberg, who became his second

²⁷ Baruch Hirson, *The Cape Town Intellectuals: Ruth Schechter and her Circle*, Merlin Press, Cape Town, 2001, pp. 150-151.

²⁸ In 1918 her name is mentioned in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* as one of the women who had registered at the newly established university, SAJC, 27 March 1918, p. 311.

²⁹ Hirson, 2001, pp. 122-149.

³⁰ SAJC, 17 June 1932, p. 411.

³¹ Hirson, 2001, p. 223

wife. In 1935 when Morris and Ruth's divorce became final,³² they remarried within days of each other. While her affair had been tolerated, her divorce and remarriage to a gentile clinched her complete alienation from the South African Jewish community. It is only relatively recently, in 2001, that her memory was reconstructed in the book, *The Cape Town Intellectuals, Ruth Schechter and Her Circle, 1907-1934*, by Baruch Hirson.

After a brief marriage to fellow Communist, Eli Weinberg, that ended in divorce, in 1941 Ray Alexander married Jack Simons, Professor of African Government and Law at the University of Cape Town and leader of the Communist Party of South Africa, whose father but not his mother was Jewish.³³ They had three children, two daughters and a son.³⁴

German Jewish Ellen Hellmann married Joseph Michael Hellmann, an attorney, and an east European Jew, in 1936. This led to much discussion in her family regarding the merits of 'intermarriage'. They had one daughter, Ruth Runciman. Joseph Hellmann died in 1941 and in 1948 Ellen married Dr Bodo Koch, a German Jewish doctor whose family had perished during the Holocaust.³⁵

In at least three of the five cases (Millin, Alexander and Simons) their husbands acted as very significant mentors in the progress of their careers. Millin's husband, future judge, Philip Millin, was her sounding board in all matters political and revised all her books;³⁶ Schechter's husband Morris Alexander was a brilliant Cambridge graduate and parliamentarian, who would have educated and advised her in all matters South African; Ray Alexander's husband, Professor of African Government and Law, Jack Simons, provided Ray with the broad political education that she was lacking.³⁷ Although acknowledged to be a tremendous support to her in her career, Charles Solomon died in 1944 only six years after Bertha was first elected to parliament.³⁸

³² Enid Alexander, 1953, pp. 171-181.

³³ Conversation, Tanya Barben, Ray Simons' daughter, 2009.

³⁴ Simons, 2004, pp. 18-19.

³⁵ "Hellmann, Ellen Phyllis", *New Dictionary of South African Biography*, 1995-1999, pp.96-97; Milton Shain and Miriam Pimstone, "Ellen Phyllis Hellmann", 2005; Ruth Runciman, interviewed by Andrew Bank, 2011.

³⁶ Rubin, 1977, p. 47.

³⁷ Conversation, Tanya Barben, 2011.

³⁸ Solomon, 1968, p. 212.

Jewish ideologies

Four of the eastern European women came from staunchly orthodox Jewish families. With the exception of Ray Simons, all the women were ardent Zionists. Even though in the 1920s, Schechter extended her support to the Jewish Colonisation Fund that advocated the establishment of Jewish colonies in Russia, as long as she lived in South Africa this was not to the exclusion of Zionism. German Jewish, Ellen Hellmann, on the other hand, confesses to growing up without any religion, and her Zionism was only awakened by Hitler's ascent to power in Germany.

Solomon's father, Idel Schwartz, came from a prestigious east European Jewish line. His father was one of the founders of the famous Mir Yeshiva, and his father's brother was the renowned Yiddish and Hebrew writer, Mendel Abramovitz, who wrote under the pseudonym, Mendele Mocher Seforim – Mendel the bookseller.³⁹ Idel Schwartz co-founded the first Dorshe Zion Association in Cape Town in 1899. Within six months he was elected as its chairman. In his later years he donated a chair of Post-Biblical Hebrew Literature to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and attended its opening in 1925. Marcia Gitlin writes of him:

A Lithuanian Jew who had already achieved a certain status in the Cape Town community, Schwartz combined within himself vast Jewish learning with a sound and practical approach to life. A Zionist who was prepared to give limitlessly of his time, his energies and his means to the movement, a forceful personality and a fighter, he made an invaluable contribution to the advancement of the Zionist cause in Cape Town. To-day he is remembered as one of the most prominent figures which South African Zionism has produced.⁴⁰

Solomon lent her support to all the local Zionist causes. In February 1932 she wrote a letter to the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* defending the Women's Zionist Campaign,

³⁹ Solomon, 1968, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁰ Gitlin, 1968, p. 46.

insisting that “Zionism is not a charity”, but an investment in the future of the Jewish people.⁴¹

Although with the death of her brother in the First World War, Millin claims to have lost her faith, and neither she nor her husband belonged to a synagogue,⁴² she never lost her pride in her Jewish identity. She deliberately cut off a potential friendship with the poet, T. S. Eliot, because of the blatant antisemitism expressed in his poem “The Wasteland”.⁴³

Besides supporting all the local Zionist causes, Sarah Gertrude Millin visited Israel twice at the invitation of the future President of Israel, Dr Chaim Weizmann, and his wife, Vera, who stayed over with them while on a fundraising trip to South Africa in 1932.⁴⁴ In return they invited the Millins to visit Israel twice: in 1933 and in 1949.⁴⁵ Her husband, Philip, never joined her on these trips and she writes that he was never a Zionist. In 1933, impressed by the Jewish settlements in British Palestine, she described the Galilee in biblical terms:

It does look holy. When, at dusk, I saw it for the first time, I could well conceive mystic feelings, moods of eternity, rising in the heart of the Galilee; and, if ever water was walked upon, it was surely, I thought, the still blue water under the hills of Galilee.⁴⁶

In her later years her Zionist politics veered increasingly to the right, away from David Ben Gurion to the Revisionist leader, Menachem Begin.⁴⁷

Daughter of the greatest Jewish scholar of the twentieth century, Solomon Schechter, Ruth Schechter Alexander was born into a Chassidic Rumanian Jewish family.⁴⁸ She

⁴¹ Bertha Solomon, “Zionism is not charity”, SAJC, 12 February 1932, see Chapter Six, *The Feminization of Zionism*.

⁴² She writes that Phillip would have liked to belong to a synagogue, but didn’t because religion meant nothing to her. She didn’t participate in the prayer service after he died because she was an unbeliever, Millin, 1955, pp. 390, 393.

⁴³ Rubin, 1977, pp. 242-243.

⁴⁴ Millin, 1941, p. 300; Rubin, 1977, pp. 148-149.

⁴⁵ Rubin, 1977, pp. 148-149.

⁴⁶ Millin, 1941, pp. 307-308.

⁴⁷ Rubin, 1977, p. 259.

came to South Africa as a staunch supporter of Zionism. Her husband, Morris Alexander, had joined the Zionist movement in 1904 and in 1905 became the secretary of the Dorshe Zion Society in Cape Town.⁴⁹ On the way back to South Africa after their marriage in New York, they stopped over at the Zionist Congress in the Hague, where Morris was accredited as a delegate from South Africa.⁵⁰ In South Africa Schechter's huge fund of knowledge of Jewish lore and Jewish languages, acquired from her father, made her a popular lecturer on Jewish topics. She participated in the Bnoth Zion Association, the women's Zionist association. In 1909 she gave Bible classes to the young girls studying Hebrew at the Zionist Hall, and between 1910 and 1912, she served as President of the Bnoth Zion Association.⁵¹ She only resigned as President of the Bnoth Zion in 1919.⁵² In May 1921 she addressed a meeting of the Bnoth Zion together with the folklorist and translator, Dr Immanuel Olswanger, who was visiting South Africa, expressing admiration for the pioneering work of the colonists in Palestine and emphasizing the need for more cultural work.⁵³ In 1923 she wrote an article on the Yiddish language for the *Cape Times*, in which she reviewed the season of Yiddish plays at the Opera House.⁵⁴

Hirson writes that he could find no direct reference among her papers of Schechter's distancing herself from the synagogue, and therefore he was obliged to extrapolate about this from the main character of Miriam, Schechter's alter-ego, in her unpublished novel, *The Exiles*.⁵⁵ Hirson was totally oblivious to Ruth's participation in the Jewish Colonization movement, that had a wide following in South Africa in the 1920s, and that was reported in the local Jewish press.

In the wake of the Russian revolution a movement to create agricultural colonies for Jews in the Soviet Union was established in an attempt to salvage Jewish economic life that had been destroyed during the Civil War.⁵⁶ In 1926 Dr Leon Bramson, a

⁴⁸ Hirson, 2001, pp. 8-11.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 29.

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 33-34.

⁵¹ David Zuckerman, Notes on the Bnoth Zion Hebrew Classes Association, Jewish Museum papers.

⁵² *Zionist Record*, 22 April 1919, p. 31.

⁵³ Ibid, 31 May 1921, p. 31.

⁵⁴ *Cape Times*, 11 August 1923.

⁵⁵ Hirson, 2001, pp. 218-221.

⁵⁶ Srebernik, *Dreams of Nationhood: American Jewish Communists and the Soviet Birobidzhan Project, 1924-1951*, Academic Studies Press, Boston, 2010, pp. 10-12.

former member of the Russian Duma⁵⁷, who represented Ort-Oze Emig-Direkt, an organization that aimed to establish vocational and agricultural schools to equip Jews to work in the new settlements, toured the length and breadth of South Africa. He was celebrated by all including the rabbinate as well as by Morris Alexander and the South African government.⁵⁸ According to Gideon Shimoni, the issue of whether Jewish colonization in the Soviet Union was compatible with Zionism, presented South African Zionism with its greatest challenge.⁵⁹ A local Jewish Colonisation Fund was established and in January 1928 the first of what was envisaged to be an annual conference of the Fund was held at the Jewish Guild in Johannesburg that attracted hundreds of South African Jews.⁶⁰ Many including Ruth Schechter felt that supporting the Jewish colonies in eastern Europe, did not preclude support for the Zionist enterprise in Palestine. The British allowed only a limited quota into the settlement in Palestine and in the meantime millions of Jews in the Soviet Union were suffering, unable to make a living.⁶¹

When Reuben Brainin, one time President of the Keren Hayesod, and a prolific Yiddish and Hebrew writer who had become a supporter of the Jewish colonisation in the Soviet Union, believing that it complemented the Zionist enterprise⁶², came to South Africa on its behalf,⁶³ Ruth accompanied him on several of his speaking engagements.⁶⁴ A year later in July 1930, Ruth together with Julius Lewin, professor of African Government and Law at the University of the Witwatersrand, led a discussion conducted in the Old Synagogue in Cape Town, as to whether Russian

⁵⁷ See David Engel, "World War I" in *Yivo Encyclopedia of the Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2008, vol. 2, p. 2034.

⁵⁸ "The Reconstruction Campaign for East European Jewry: Sunday's Mass Meeting, *Zionist Record*, 1 July 1927, p. 10; "Address by Dr Leon Bramson", *Zionist Record*, 26 September 1927, pp.92-93; "Dr Bramson" *Zionist Record*, 7 October 1927, 28-29; "Dr Bramson", *Zionist Record*, 14 October 1927, p. 26; "Reconstruction Campaign", *Zionist Record*, 28 October 1927, p. 23; "Farewell to Dr Bramson", *Zionist Record*, 9 December 1927, p. 31;

⁵⁹ Shimoni, 1980, pp. 56-57.

⁶⁰ "Dr Leon Bramson", 13 January 1928, p. 23; "Farewell to Dr Bramson", *Zionist Record*, 27 January 1928, pp. 24-25; "Russian Jewish Colonisation Movement: last Sunday's meeting in Johannesburg", *Zionist Record*, 19 October 1928, pp. 27-28.

⁶¹ Shimoni, 1980, pp. 56-57; SAJC, 13 January 1928, p. 25.

⁶² See Stanley Nash, "Reuven Brainin" in *Yivo Encyclopedia of the Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2008, vol. 1, pp. 224-225.

⁶³ Rozilda, "Out of the Ordinary: South African Jewish Personalities: an Interview with Reuben Brainin", SAJC, 12 April, 1929, p. 223; In Cape Town he was boycotted, his arrival unmarked, "Reuben Brainin's Mission", SAJC, 3 May, 1929, p. 276. He was refused permission to address the conference in Bloemfontein, SAJC, 28 June 1929, p. 409, 413; 5 July 1929, p. 419, 429; Gideon Shimoni, 1980, pp. 57-58.

⁶⁴ Helene Rachel Isaacson, 1983, Kaplan Centre interviews.

colonisation was incompatible with Zionism. In a very convincing address to a largely hostile audience, she stated that:

Unless the 3,000,000 Jews in Russia were settled on the land as was intended by those supporting the Russian colonisation Fund, they were bound to starve. It had been said that the Soviet would disallow the practice of religion in those settlements, but the Jews were only sharing in the dislike the Soviets had for *all* religious bodies. Our disapproval of the Communist attitude towards religion was not going to keep our brethren alive. It was also an insult to those 3.000,000 Jews to say they would not remain Zionists, for eastern Europe was the stronghold of our spiritual and intellectual strength.⁶⁵

Her husband was clearly behind her in this as he supported the campaign of Melech Ravicz in July 1931, to raise money for Yiddish schools in Poland. This campaign was also boycotted by the Zionists who decried Alexander's support for it, describing him as "misled."⁶⁶

Simons, the only anti-Zionist in the group, was sympathetic to Zionism in her earliest youth, but then rejected it. She writes that, "Not all Jews could go into Palestine and what would happen to the poor Palestinians?"⁶⁷ When she was called on to give an address to her school on the occasion of the establishment of a university in Jerusalem in 1926, she informed her audience that she would celebrate the opening of a university anywhere, in Jerusalem or Timbuktu.⁶⁸

Simons went to the Committee school where the Bund, the Jewish socialist movement, held sway. She also had a traditional Jewish education, learning the Hebrew language and the Pentateuch and claims to have been inspired by the Jewish biblical heroines, Rachel, Ruth and Esther, who were depicted in tapestries hanging in her parents' bedroom.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ SAJC, 11 July 1930, p. 451.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 10 July 1931, p. 454.

⁶⁷ Simons, 2004, p. 40.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 38.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 31.

However, at the age of thirteen, Simons chose the cause of Jewish cultural autonomy when she joined the Varaklan Workers' Society, *Kultur-lige*, a Jewish socialist organization dedicated to the promotion of Yiddish language and culture. This organization was heir to the *Arbeiter Heim* that existed between 1920 and 1923, to which her sisters had belonged. *Kultur-lige* branches operated in all Latvian towns that had sufficient Jewish numbers, sponsoring clubs, libraries, and drama and music circles.⁷⁰ Simons thoroughly enjoyed participating in the social evenings organized by the club, reciting workers' poems,⁷¹ and taking part in Yiddish plays. She also joined two study circles: one on political economy and the other on religion and faith. At the same time Simons was invited to join an underground movement, where they were given pages of the Communist Manifesto and other Marxist texts for discussion.⁷²

Yet despite her involvement with the Varaklan Workers' Society and the Underground Communist Party Simons relates in her Yiddish diary that she and her sister Mary fasted on the Day of Atonement. However she qualifies this, saying that she did so *unwillingly*, believing that it was *all in vain*. However during the day the sisters went for a walk and sang workers' songs, and after the fast read the *Yugnd Hamer* (Youth Hammer), a Communist-leaning Yiddish newspaper.⁷³

In South Africa Simons participated in the activities of the Geserd, the Gezelshaft far Erd Arbet (established in the Soviet Union in 1926), a branch of which was established at the Fund's third conference in 1932 to support the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Birobidzhan, the territory along the far eastern Manchurian border of the Soviet Union.⁷⁴ With the visit of Gina Medem, the widow of the Labor leader, Vladimir Medem, and a charismatic speaker, in October 1932, the Geserd

⁷⁰ "Kultur-lige" in *Yivo Encyclopedia of the Jews in Eastern Europe*, Gershon Hundert, editor-in-chief, Yale University Press, 2008, pp. 955-956.

⁷¹ In a handwritten poetry diary, dated 1928, when Simons was fifteen years old, she copied out poems by famous Yiddish poets, including the group known collectively as the Sweatshop poets, who wrote social lyrics protesting the exploitive labour practices in the United States, such as Dovid Edelstadt's *Mayn Tsevo'e* (My Last Will and Testament), that became the anthem of the Jewish Labour Movement in America. Ray's heart went out to those who are mouldering in prison, as in L. Halper's poem, *In Gefangenis* (In Prison), Simons Yiddish Poetry diary, Biographical information, Jack and Ray Simons collection.

⁷² Simons Yiddish diary, 1927, Simons collection, p. 12; Simons, 2004, pp. 35-36.

⁷³ Simons, 1927, p. 13.

⁷⁴ Henry Felix Srebernik, 2010, pp. 10-12; *Zionist Record*, 7 October 1932, p. 7; Gideon Shimoni, 1980, pp. 57-58.

attracted a record number of members.⁷⁵ The Geserd held picnics and on occasion staged Yiddish plays.⁷⁶

In an interview in 1982, Ellen Hellmann said that she grew up without any religion. Due to an unpleasant incident during the First World War her parents resigned from the Wolmarans Street synagogue and they never attended synagogue other than for barmitzvahs and weddings. Her mother was very broad minded and even allowed her father to indulge his love of pork. Her Zionism was only awakened by Hitler's accession to power, after which she was active in the Zionist Socialist movement for a period in the 1930s. However she acknowledges that her sister, Enid Gordon, five years her junior, who served as the President of the Women's Zionist Organisation and eventually emigrated to Israel, was the true Zionist in the family.

She relates that until she began to serve on the South African Jewish Board of Deputies of which she was an executive member from 1940 to 1950, she was hardly aware of the Jewish community. She had never even met anybody who had attended the Jewish Government School in Johannesburg.⁷⁷ Much later her daughter (born 1936) recalls a sense in the household that those who survived the Holocaust owed a debt to contribute to society, something that she retained in a life of dedicated social commitment.⁷⁸

Feminism

Despite the fact that she was an exceptionally strong willed woman, Millin was the only one of the four who never took up women's cause. She was happy to defer to her husband and he was the first to revise her books. Millin's sights were set on the broader political scene rather than on the 'narrower' one of women's cause. She was also the only one of the four women not to share in the unqualified adulation of Olive

⁷⁵ "The Arrival of Gina Medem": Emissary of Geserd Outlines Biro-Bidjan Plan", *Zionist Record*, 7 October 1932, p. 7.

⁷⁶ Invitation to a performance of Sholem Aleichem play, performed by the Geserd, Biographical information, Jack and Ray Simons collection. Simons, 2004, p. 59.

⁷⁷ Ellen Hellmann, 1982, pp. 2, 4-5.

⁷⁸ Ruth Runciman, interviewed by Andrew Bank, 2011; Ruth Runciman was awarded an O.B.E. for her work on drug policy and then a D.B.E. in 1998 for services to mental health, social welfare campaigns in which she remains actively involved. Ruth Runciman DBE – by FEAD, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/ruth-runciman>

Schreiner who inspired a generation of feminists in South Africa and overseas. Writes Millin:

But I think those women merely wrong-headed who, without special reason, believe that men are, by instinct and training, the inevitable enemies of women.

For myself, I am impressed by the amiability and loyalty of men towards women: by the amount they are willing to do for the little they receive.

The reason may be that I have always lived among admirable men. But Olive Schreiner did too. And I cannot conceive why she should have spent forty years of her life on a novel – never finished, and I don't wonder- that had as its theme the wickedness of men towards women.

I sympathize as little with masculine conceptions of women as creatures holy, sinister, age-old, childlike, inferior, superior, veiled and unaccountable.⁷⁹

Bertha Solomon, by contrast, chose the legal status of women, as the focus of her work. She joined the National Council of Women (NWC)⁸⁰, an organization that aimed to further women's rights with the removal of married women's legal disabilities as part of its platform. She made the removal of women's legal disabilities her primary cause, particularly relating to marriage in community of property, the form of marriage contracted by 70 percent of white South African women. Whatever her age, the wife on marriage became a legal minor who could not, without her husband's consent, enter into the simplest contract, including the opening of a bank account. It gave the husband sole control over the joint estate, including his wife's earnings, immovable property, whether accumulated during the marriage or inherited, and sole guardianship of the children.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Millin, 1941, pp. 97-98.

⁸⁰ The National Council of Women that was founded in South Africa in 1909. The Council was affiliated to the International Council of Women, founded in Washington in 1888, that sought to improve the status of women. One of the most important achievements of the National Council of Women in South Africa concerned the legal disabilities of women. After 22 years of pressure on successive governments by the Council together with 17 nationally organized women's societies, the Citizen's Act was passed which enabled women to retain their nationality on marriage, and the Matrimonial Affairs Act gave them the right to their own property and earnings. Mary Asher, *South African Encyclopedia*, p. 76.

⁸¹ Katz, 1993, p. 102.

In 1926 she also joined the Johannesburg branch of the Suffrage Movement and her first public position was as chairman of the Women's Suffrage Propaganda Committee.⁸² Within a short time she was acknowledged as 'one of the leaders of the women's movement in South Africa.' However when the Suffrage Bill passed in 1930 deviated from the original terms negotiated, and granted the franchise only to white women,, deliberately excluding the Coloured or Native women, Solomon, like Morris Alexander, reluctantly accepted this. Their attitude was a matter of expediency, believing that 'half the loaf is better than no loaf'.⁸³

In 1934 when first elected to the Provincial council of the Transvaal, Solomon was forced to stand down as Branch President of the National Council of Women, as it was a strictly non-political body. However, by virtue of being on holiday in England in the course of the year she was invited to represent the NCW at the International Council of Women in Paris. In the same year she was also instrumental in the founding of the University Women's Association in Johannesburg, that succeeded in ensuring women lecturers equal pay to that of men.⁸⁴

The key to Ruth Schechter's support of the emancipation of women, was her great friendship and admiration for Olive Schreiner, (1855-1920). Author of *The Story of an African Farm*, and *Woman and Labour*, a milestone in the writing about working class women, Olive Schreiner's writings inspired a generation of feminists in the United States.⁸⁵ On Ruth's departure for South Africa, her father expressed the wish that she might one day meet Olive Schreiner.⁸⁶ After the passage of the women's Suffrage Bill in 1930, excluding women of colour at the Cape, Ruth Schechter Alexander, withdrew from the suffrage movement, realizing that this was just the first step to excluding Coloured men as well from the Cape Voters' Roll. She could not forgive her husband, Morris, for accepting it.⁸⁷

⁸² Solomon, 1968, p. 70..

⁸³ *Rand Daily Mail*, 29 November, 1930; *S. A. Life and Women's Forum* 3 August 1933; *Cape Argus* 24 July, 1969, article by Dr Thelma Gutsche, cited in Katz, 1993, p. 102.

⁸⁴ Solomon, 1968, pp. 82-87.

⁸⁵ Ruth First and Ann Scott, *Olive Schreiner: a Biography*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1990.

⁸⁶ Hirson, 2001, p. 31.

⁸⁷ Enid Alexander, 1953, pp. 171-181.

Simons' budding feminism was first aroused by a production of Peretz Hirshbein's landmark Yiddish play, *Miriam* (1902), about a poor young girl who is forced into a life of prostitution when her rich seducer abandons her and their child,⁸⁸ that was performed in her home town of Varaklan.⁸⁹ In South Africa her introduction to feminism was through Ruth Schechter whom she met at a meeting of the Geserd, only days after she arrived in Cape Town in November 1928. Simons was shocked to hear that women in South Africa did not have the vote unlike in Latvia which had inherited the Soviet constitution. It was Schechter who advised her to read Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labour* in order to understand women's working conditions in South Africa, that she obtained at the Public Library in the Gardens.⁹⁰ She subsequently attended a meeting of the Women's Enfranchisement League at a Church Hall on Greenmarket Square that was chaired by Schechter.⁹¹ She became close friends with Petronella van Heerden, the first Afrikaans female gynaecologist and one of the few Afrikaans women to have played a part in the struggle for women's enfranchisement.⁹²

Simons' belief in the equality of all people meant involvement in the movement for women's rights. A successful liberation struggle in South Africa, she felt, had to include the liberation of women. However when the franchise was awarded to white women only, Simons could not accept it. In April 1954 she was instrumental in the establishment of the Federation of South African Women, a broad based inter-racial women's organization.⁹³

The National Council of Women is not listed among the many organisations to which Ellen Hellmann belonged, although she was a member of the Johannesburg Soroptimist Club and Women for Peace.⁹⁴ However by virtue of the pioneering nature of her study of the African urban slum of Rooiyard, that few white people, men or

⁸⁸ See *Landmark Yiddish Plays: a Critical Anthology*, edited, translated and with an introduction by Joel Berkowitz and Jeremy Dauber, State University of New York Press, Albany, c2006.

⁸⁹ Simons Yiddish diary, 1927, p. 59.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 50-54.

⁹¹ Simons, 2004, p. 52.

⁹² *Ibid*, 2004, p. 66.

⁹³ Ray Simons formed a steering committee together with Helen Joseph, Lilian Ngoyi, and Amina Cachalia. The founding conference was attended by 164 delegates representing 23,000 South African women, The Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW), South African History Online: Towards a People's History, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/chronology/thisday/1954-04-17.htm>

⁹⁴ *New Dictionary of South African Biography*, 1995-1999, pp. 96-97.

women, would enter, she made a significant step on behalf of women. Moreover her actual study focused on the female brewers of illicit alcohol, and hers was not only the first anthropological study on the urban African, but also the first anthropological study in the region to focus on women.⁹⁵

Sarah Gertrude Millin's Politics

In a career that spanned thirty years, beginning with the publication of her first novel, *The Dark River*, in 1919, Millin produced seventeen novels, two major biographies, two autobiographies, six war diaries, a volume of short stories, a collection of essays and a sociological account of South Africa.⁹⁶ When in 1952, in recognition of her work, the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature was conferred upon her by the University of the Witwatersrand, it was stated that, "Mrs Millin has become par excellence the interpreter of South Africa to the English-speaking world. This is not only because of such an essay in objectivity as *The South Africans* – it is also because of her novels of South African life."⁹⁷ She was the biographer and a close friend of General Smuts, Prime Minister of the Union (1919-1924 and 1939-1948), as well as with liberal politician, J. H. Hofmeyr. Her biographer, Martin Rubin, characterizes her as "both a commentator upon and a participant in much of the process of South Africa's coming of age".⁹⁸

Millin inherited her interest in politics from her father, who was interned for two weeks in a hotel in Barkley West during the South African War for sheltering and feeding fugitive Boers.⁹⁹ According to Millin he "would expand on world affairs the whole day", and lived for the arrival of the local daily newspapers as well as for the weekly liberal British newspapers.¹⁰⁰ Her love of literature she inherited from her mother.¹⁰¹ Her interest in politics and literature was intertwined with an intimate knowledge of the Bible, her favourite reading matter, which resonates throughout her

⁹⁵ Andrew Bank, interview, 2012.; See E. Hellmann, "The Importance of Beer-Brewing in an Urban Native Yard", *Bantu Studies*, 8, 1934: 30-60.

⁹⁶ Fanelle Levy, *The Works of Sarah Gertrude Millin, 1919-1968: a Bibliography*, Department of Bibliography, Librarianship and Typography, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1969.

⁹⁷ Edgar Bernstein, "Jewish Contributions to the Union's Literature", *Jewish Affairs*, 15(5), 1960: 27-32.

⁹⁸ Martin Rubin, *Sarah Gertrude Millin: a Life*, 1977, p. 11.

⁹⁹ Millin, 1955, p. 12.

¹⁰⁰ Millin, 1941, 1939, p. 35.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 35; Millin, 1955., p. 31.

work. Jewish journalist Edgar Bernstein writes, “It influenced her thinking, her tragic sense of life and her literary style. There was a biblical austerity about her prose, a biblical simplicity in her choice of words and her best similes were taken from the Bible.”¹⁰² The titles for both her autobiographies are from the Bible: the title, *The Night is Long* is a quotation from the Book of Job and *The Measure of my Days* is a quotation from the Book of Isaiah.¹⁰³

Three of Millin’s novels – *Dark River*, *God’s Step-children*, and *The Sons of Mrs Aab*, describe the society that she knew best, that of the River Diggings where her family was the only white family among a community of poor whites who were co-habiting with the indigenous Coloured peoples.¹⁰⁴ Miscegenation or interracial marriage, that was taboo in South Africa of that time, was the central theme in *God’s Step-Children*, the novel that established her reputation as a writer, first published in 1924. This story of intermarriage between a white man and a Hottentot woman, was based on documented evidence of early English missionaries, who in their attempt to convert their subjects married them to order to penetrate their community. The name of the tragic hero ‘Reverend Andrew Flood’, the missionary who marries a Hottentot woman, was deliberately chosen because of its connotations with God’s vengeance in the story of Noah, and because it rhymed with blood through which this heritage was passed down through the generations causing untold suffering.¹⁰⁵ Millin writes that the story was inspired by the true experience of a girl in her class at school in Kimberley, who was of mixed race, a fact she tried her best to conceal.¹⁰⁶

If *God’s Step-children* brought her fame in the United States, Millin’s book *The South Africans*, published in 1926, was the first of her books to be widely acclaimed in South Africa. The book was not easily categorised. Millin writes that she felt as if she was writing a novel in which South Africa was the hero.¹⁰⁷ It is part history, part sociology, part reportage. It was commissioned as the first book of a series on various

¹⁰² Edgar Bernstein, “Sarah Gertrude Millin: the Writer and the Jewess”, *Jewish Affairs* 23(7), 1968: 18; for a biblical analysis of *God’s Stepchildren*, see Lavinia Braun, “Not Gobineau but Heine – not racial theory but biblical theme: the case of Sarah Gertrude Millin”, *English Studies*, 34(1) 1991: 27-38.

¹⁰³ “Lord make me to know mine end and the measure of my days, what it is, that I may know how frail I am”, Millin, 1941, p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ Millin, 1941, p.18.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 148; Martin Rubin, 1977, pp.18-20, 80-81.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, pp. 76-77, 144-145.

¹⁰⁷ Millin, 1941, p. 70.

countries but was the only one in the series to appear. The book contains a vivid portrait of South Africa's national character, examining its racial groups, politics, life in the cities, the country, unique local customs, railways, and the cost of living.¹⁰⁸ It most closely resembles a travel book, but with far greater depth of insights. It contains the statement, that the Coloured people, "are a race made up of weak materials and without capacity for great spiritual or intellectual growth".¹⁰⁹ As the book was revised by her husband, a liberal who upheld the colour-blind Cape Franchise,¹¹⁰ also by the renowned liberal politician, the Administrator of the Transvaal, J. H. Hofmeyr, and by the Chief of the Chamber of Mines and a Member of Parliament, one can only conclude that that was the prevailing view of the Coloured peoples at that time.¹¹¹ Millin revised it twice in 1934 and 1951, chiefly adding in the new legislation relating to the non-White population as well as to the Jews. The 1934 edition, revised by General Smuts, became a standard reference book.¹¹²

Today in the new democratic South African order, Millin's work has been subjected to increasing criticism for expressing a world view that was current in her day. While praising her as "the most substantial novelist writing in English in South Africa between Olive Schreiner and Nadine Gordimer", South Africa's Nobel Prize winning novelist and literary critic, J. M. Coetzee, simultaneously brands her as a Nazi, and a Social Darwinist, claiming that she subscribed to de Gobineau's racial theory. This claim rests chiefly on her novel, *God's Stepchildren*, that while acclaimed in the United States, was pirated in Hitler's Germany for its overt racial theme, and also on her books of reportage, that she revised twice: as *The South Africans* in 1934 and renamed *The People of South Africa* in 1951.¹¹³

In defence of Millin's writing, much has been made of her Jewishness and the fear of antisemitism that was prevalent in the 1920s with the influx of eastern European

¹⁰⁸ Rubin, 1977, pp. 97-104.

¹⁰⁹ Sarah Gertrude Millin, *The South Africans*, Constable, London, 1926, p. 206; *The People of South Africa*, Central News Agency, Johannesburg, 1951, p. 253.

¹¹⁰ Rubin, 1977, p. 45-46, 55-56; Millin, 1955, p. 56.

¹¹¹ Millin, 1941, p. 171; *The South Africans*, pp. 205-206, in Rubin, p. 100.

¹¹² Millin, 1955, p. 171.

¹¹³ J. M. Coetzee, "Blood, Taint, Flaw, Degeneration: the Novels of Sarah Gertrude Millin", in *White Writing: on the culture of Letters in South Africa*, Pentz Publishers, Braamfontein, South Africa, in association with Yale University, New Haven & London, 2007, p. 138, 143, 150-158, 161; Rubin 1977, p. 174

Jewish immigrants. Some, like Lavinia Braun, claim that as a Jew she was able to identify with the plight of the Coloured peoples, and she detects in *God's Step-Children*, 'a deep-felt compassion for the victims of conflict caused by racial differences'.¹¹⁴ However Millin makes it perfectly clear that she does not equate the problems of that of mixed race peoples of South Africa with that of the Jews. Whereas the former was a biological problem caused by miscegenation, the Jewish problem was a political problem, a result of the Jews being a minority in their host countries, which also accounts for her keen support of the Zionist movement.¹¹⁵

Claudia Braude maintains that Millin was motivated to protect her own insider status - as well as the minority status of the Jewish community in South Africa. She believes that her use of the theme of racism was a smoke screen to deflect attention from her own dubious racial status.¹¹⁶ In Braude's words: "By adopting and mimicking prevailing white views on miscegenation..., she sought to demonstrate loyalty to and therefore unambiguous belonging within white South African society."¹¹⁷ This would also serve to explain her later defence of Apartheid and white supremacy.¹¹⁸ Other literary historians, such as Marcia Leveson, back this up by referring to her depiction of Jews as insecure, distrusted and vaguely disliked by their gentile neighbours, in the only one of her novels that touches on the problem of the Jewish minority in South Africa, *The Coming of the Lord* (1928).¹¹⁹

Braude characterises Millin as modeling herself on the biblical figure of Esther, who, while resident in the house of Persian King Ahaseurus, successfully intervened in the politics of the day to protect the Jews, a view that she expressed in her radio play, *The Jewish Esther*.¹²⁰ Millin was aware of the danger of the early penetration of German

¹¹⁴ Marie Pienaar, 'An evaluation of the novels of Sarah Gertrude Millin', M.A. – University of South Africa, 1979, p. 147, cited by Braun, 1991.

¹¹⁵ Millin, 1941, pp.174-176.

¹¹⁶ Millin mentions being described in an Oslo newspaper as having frizzy hair and flashing black eyes, and the golden brown skin of a typical African, S.G. Millin, 1941, p. 191.

¹¹⁷ Claudia Bathsheva Braude, 'Introduction', *Contemporary Jewish Writing in South Africa: an Anthology*, edited by C. B. Braude, David Philip, Cape Town, 2001, pp. xxvi-xxvii.

¹¹⁸ In 1966 she defended Apartheid with comments, "Ah, what a heaven South Africa is to every one – even those separately developed"; and, "Vorster is turning out to be one of our best P.M.s. In 5 years, he promoted four Jews to the bench. It took Smuts 20 years to be persuaded by Hofmeyr to do this", Millin to Herbstein, 11 July 1966 and 2 January 1967, cited in Martin Rubin, 1977, pp. 271, 273.

¹¹⁹ Rubin, 1977, pp. 108-109; Marcia Leveson, *People of the Book: Images of the Jew in South African Fiction, 1880-1992*, Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1996, pp. 78-84.

¹²⁰ Braude, 2001, p. xxii.

influence into South Africa with Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s¹²¹ and did her best to try to alert South African politicians, Smuts and Hofmeyr, as well as politicians such as Winston Churchill in Britain to the danger.¹²² She was shocked by the stories that she heard from Jewish refugees from Germany that she encountered on the ship on her way to Palestine in 1933.¹²³ She was devastated by the enactment, by her great friend, General Smuts, of the Aliens Act in 1937 that prevented the further entry of German Jewish refugees to South Africa.¹²⁴

The book, *The South Africans*, launched Millin on a career of political writing and commentating, in which she reveled, to the neglect of her fictional works. It was followed by her biography of Rhodes (1933), considered one of her finest works,¹²⁵ The book was revised by J. H. Hofmeyr (who had been a neighbour of Philip Millin's family in Cape Town).¹²⁶ Hofmeyr introduced Sarah to General Smuts, leading to her two volume biography of Smuts published in 1936, and to an intimate association with Smuts that lasted until his death in 1950.¹²⁷

Smuts was both a national and international statesman, who had been instrumental in the founding of the League of Nations after the First World War, in addition to being one of the signatories to the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and a keen Zionist.¹²⁸ It took Millin twenty months to write his biography, often sleeping over at his farm to examine his massive collection of papers. Millin felt that the twenty months that she visited Smuts on his farm in the Transvaal, examining his papers and asking him questions, made up for the education that she had sacrificed on leaving school.¹²⁹ Through her association with Smuts, Millin was introduced to some of the most famous British and American statesman, including Winston Churchill and Franklin

¹²¹ This is evident in her 1934 revision of *The South Africans*, Rubin, 1977, pp. 156-157.

¹²² Rubin, pp. 190-193.

¹²³ Millin, 1955, pp. 117-118.

¹²⁴ Ibid, pp. 157-161.

¹²⁵ Rubin, 1977, p. 144.

¹²⁶ Millin, 1955, pp. 106, 109.

¹²⁷ Ibid, pp. 109-123.

¹²⁸ See Gideon Shimoni, "Jan Christiaan Smuts and Zionism", *Jewish Social Studies*, 39(4), 1977.: 269-298.

¹²⁹ "What was I before I Smuts educated me?", Millin, 1955, p. 206.

Delano Roosevelt.¹³⁰ Millin's adulation for Smuts knew no bounds and even survived the unfair treatment that her husband, Philip, suffered at his hands.

Philip Millin, however, did not share in his wife's unqualified admiration of Smuts. Up for selection as a judge from 1929, he feared that Smuts' friendship with his wife might prevent his appointment as he could be accused of favouritism. When he was repeatedly passed over, it was believed to be owing to his 'Negrophilism' as well as because he was a Jew. Overlooked by General Smuts for promotion to the Transvaal Supreme Court in 1938, on the pretext of not wishing to further aggravate the prevailing atmosphere of antisemitism, his own colleagues rebelled, and six months later, he was duly appointed.¹³¹

In the last two decades of her life with Smuts's fall from power and the rise of the Nationalist Party government in 1948, followed in the next four years by the death of J. H. Hofmeyr and Smuts, her most influential political allies, the insider political status that she so valued, was severely compromised. The death of her beloved husband, Philip, in 1951, left her a lonely and disillusioned widow.¹³²

Neither could she find solace in the South African community of writers that she so craved in her early years, that emerged in the last decades of her life, as her racial views were so out of tune with theirs, that she was completely excluded from their circles. Nadine Gordimer writes:

... She found that she had nothing in common, as a human being, with people like Paton and myself, for example... she found our attitude anathema [*sic*]. One of the times I was summoned to an audience, it was as a result of her having read my novel 'A World of Strangers', one that was subsequently banned. She deduced from the subject matter of the novel what sort of world I was living in, and she wanted to warn me that these black people that I thought of as friends simply came to my house... to spy out the lie of the land so that

¹³⁰ Millin, 1941, pp. 241-255.

¹³¹ Millin, 1955, p. 105, 120-123, 131-132, 162-168; Martin Rubin, 1977, pp. 187-190.

¹³² For a description of her immediate reaction to Philip's death, see Millin, 1955, pp. 389-394.

they could tell gangsters how to break in and rob me. She was perfectly serious and sincere about this.

... Her egotism cast a kind of spell of isolation around her, in that house, in the end, I suppose. And yet she had such a big mind – one of the few real intellects in this country...¹³³

During her fourteen years of widowhood, she became increasingly secluded and eccentric. Disillusioned with the lack of attention paid to her by the South African Nationalist government despite her staunch support, in her final books, Millin turned her attention to Sir Roy Welensky's government in Rhodesia (present day Zimbabwe) in *White Africans are also People* (1966).¹³⁴

She died of a heart attack on 2 July 1968. She was buried alongside her husband in Westpark cemetery in Johannesburg. The funeral was relatively small (under 100 people) for somebody who had sought fame throughout her life. No representative from the South African or the Rhodesian government was present.¹³⁵

Bertha Solomon's Politics

By the time Bertha Solomon launched on her political career Sarah Gertrude Millin already had a well established reputation. Her political allegiance was the same as Millin, aligned with the South African United Party (SAP), the fusion party led by Barry Hertzog and Jan Smuts. In 1933, Solomon declined the opportunity to become the first woman Member of Parliament by contesting the safe seat of Parktown, a constituency of mining magnates, because she was loathe to be away from her teenage daughter for six months at a time.¹³⁶ Instead she contested and lost the Parliamentary nomination for the constituency of Bezuidenhout, but then won the Transvaal Provincial Council nomination for the same constituency, and was returned unopposed. In this election four women¹³⁷ were returned to the Provincial Council for the very first time.¹³⁸

¹³³ Gordimer to Rubin, 25 May 1970, in Rubin, 1977, p. 255.

¹³⁴ Rubin 1977, pp. 277-278.

¹³⁵ Ibid, pp. 280-281.

¹³⁶ Solomon, 1968, pp. 78-79.

¹³⁷ Carol Badenhorst for Vrededorp, Miss Christine Meeser for Johannesburg North and Mrs Malherbe for Wonderboom, Bertha Solomon, 1968, p. 81.

¹³⁸ Solomon, 1968, pp. 71-81.

In 1938, with her daughter married and her son at Oxford, Bertha was free to stand for Parliament. As the candidate for the United Party in the working class constituency of Jeppe, she was elected in a hard fought battle with the long standing Labour candidate. She represented this constituency from 1938 until her retirement in 1958. The “Poor white problem” was a major socio-economic issue at the time and Bertha instituted a soup kitchen during the winter school holidays when school meals were not available. The scheme operated for twenty years, providing a much-needed service in the impoverished area. Her attempts to provide for the needs of her constituency also resulted in the opening of a municipal recreation center in Jeppe, the first of its kind in Johannesburg. Named after her, it was officially opened by the mayor in 1949, in recognition of the work she had done for her constituents.¹³⁹

Once in Parliament she focused all her energies on the two matters of the utmost concern to her: the introduction of compulsory Third Party Insurance, an issue that she had been instrumental in raising in the Transvaal,¹⁴⁰ and the removal of married women’s legal disabilities. The Motor Vehicle Insurance Act was passed in 1942, introducing compulsory third party automobile insurance.¹⁴¹ However it took another 23 years, until August 1953, before the latter motion was passed.¹⁴² Dubbed “Bertha’s Bill”, it was known as the Matrimonial Affairs Act No 37 of 1953.¹⁴³

In 1967 Bertha Solomon was awarded an honorary doctorate in law by the University of the Witwatersrand in recognition “of the contribution she had made to the common weal during her twenty years of service as a Member of Parliament.” She died on November 22, 1969 at the age of seventy-seven.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ Ibid, pp. 112-121.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 89-91.

¹⁴¹ Solomon, 1968, pp. 140-146.

¹⁴² Solomon devotes eight chapters (19, 21-22, 26, and 29-32) of her autobiography to this subject.

¹⁴³ Solomon, 1968, pp. 267-271.

¹⁴⁴ Milton Shain and Miriam Pimstone, Bertha Solomon, in *Jewish Women’s Archive: a Comprehensive Encyclopedia*, 2005, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/solomon-bertha>

Ruth Schechter's Politics:

Schechter's transition from Zionism to Jewish socialism and finally to Communism was tied up with the break up of her marriage to pillar of the Jewish community, Morris Alexander, and her marriage to gentile professor of Classics, Ben Farrington.

Like her husband, a member of the Cape Legislative Assembly from 1908, and an early liberal, who championed ethnic minorities and entertained visiting Indians at his home, Schechter also worked to improve the conditions of the Coloured people, running a play group in District Six for fifty Coloured children once a week.¹⁴⁵ In 1929 Schechter was recruited as principal book reviewer on *The Cape Times* by Laurens Van der Post who recorded that she had literary connections all over the world.¹⁴⁶

The key to Schechter's move away from the particularism of Judaism to the universal problems of the struggle against colour and race prejudice, the emancipation of women, the overcoming of poverty and the pursuit of peace, was her great friendship and admiration for Olive Schreiner, (1855-1920). Olive Schreiner's writings became a symbol of resistance to all forms of oppression.¹⁴⁷ She wrote a famous letter protesting against the pogroms in Russia in 1905 and again in 1906.¹⁴⁸

It was her friendship with Olive Schreiner that initially led her outside the Jewish community to join a group of intellectuals who lauded humanism above particularism. From 1909 when she first met her, Olive Schreiner became the main influence in Ruth's life.¹⁴⁹ The admiration was mutual and when Olive sailed for Europe in 1913, she was to declare that Schechter was the brightest person she knew in South Africa.¹⁵⁰ Ben Farrington writes:

¹⁴⁵ Hirson, 2001, p. 104.

¹⁴⁶ Gerald Shaw, *The Cape Times: an Informal History*, David Philip, Cape Town, 1999, p. 40.

¹⁴⁷ See Ruth First and Ann Scott, *Olive Schreiner: a Biography*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1990.

¹⁴⁸ Schreiner, "A letter on the Jew", *Jewish Affairs* 31(8),1976: 6-11.

¹⁴⁹ Hirson, 2001, p. 56.

¹⁵⁰ Olive Schreiner letters, 26 January 1910, BC1062, A2, 1903-1913, file RR/12/1909; Hirson, 2001, p. 56.

In the twenty two years I knew Ruth she lived in continual awareness of Olive Schreiner's personality. This awareness lay at the deepest level of her thought and feeling, and above all, was present when hard decisions had to be made. Nor was it dependent on Olive's books but on their friendship.¹⁵¹

Schreiner was one of the 'three great souls' who were Schechter's inspiration, that included her father, Mohandas Gandhi, the leader of passive resistance in India,¹⁵² with whom she became acquainted through Hermann Kallenbach, one of Gandhi's closest friends and a frequent visitor at the Alexander home.¹⁵³ Gandhi slept over at the Alexander home on the night before he left South Africa.¹⁵⁴

Schechter hero worshipped her husband whom she had met at a very young and impressionable stage of her life, but her expectations of him were completely unrealistic. She believed that he epitomised all of Olive Schreiner's values. She envisaged him as a latter day Abraham Lincoln, who would be the 'liberator of the slaves' in South Africa.¹⁵⁵ When he was returned unopposed in the 1921 elections, she wrote him a letter that more than anything else, demonstrated the unrealistic expectations she nurtured for him, envisaging him as the leader of a new political party that was destined to save South Africa. She warned him that he would have requests from both Smuts and Nationalist candidates for assistance in the election. He "had to decide before the boat docked where he stood."¹⁵⁶

However, as she grew in maturity, she veered more to the Left, and lost all interest in Alexander's political activities.¹⁵⁷ The 1930 Franchise Bill was the last straw.¹⁵⁸ Another influence that distanced Schechter from the mainstream community, was her growing affinity towards the Soviet Union, attributed to her mentor, Olive Schreiner.¹⁵⁹ It is significant that Classics Professor at the University of Cape Town,

¹⁵¹ Hirson, 2001, p. 51.

¹⁵² Ibid, p. 3.

¹⁵³ Hirson, 2001, pp. 37-38.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 2.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 27.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 119.

¹⁵⁷ Baruch Hirson, "Friend to Olive Schreiner: the Story of Ruth Schechter", *The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, University of London, 1993, vol. 19, pp. 43-44.

¹⁵⁸ Enid Alexander, 1953, pp. 171-181.

¹⁵⁹ Hirson, 2001, pp. 64-65.

Ben Farrington, entered Schechter's life in 1920, the very year that her great inspiration and mentor, Olive Schreiner, passed away.

Schechter was clearly a person who was in love with ideas and her writings demonstrate her own exceptional facility with language. She had been brought up in a rarified intellectual atmosphere of humanism and commitment to scholarship. Her father mixed with the leading Jewish intellectuals of his day.¹⁶⁰ From their friends, leading scholars, artists and intellectuals she "acquired the delight in impersonal conversation about the things of the mind, in the absence of which she found all society insipid and dull."¹⁶¹ In her unpublished novel, *The Exiles*, Ruth riles at the moneyed middle class Jews and at the pettiness of the life she had entered. It was actively anti-intellectual – a life of chatter and gossip – that she despised.¹⁶²

Together Schechter and Farrington created a salon for writers, artists and poets, patronized by the likes of university professor and populariser of science, Lancelot Hogben, zoologist, Frederick Bodmer, linguist and German professor, historian, Jean van der Poel, who translated the Communist Manifesto into Afrikaans, and the artist, Moses Kottler.¹⁶³

In 1935 when her divorce became final,¹⁶⁴ Schechter joined Farrington in Bristol, where he had a lectureship, after which they moved to Swansea University College, where Farrington held the Chair of Classics.¹⁶⁵ By the time Schechter arrived in Britain, she said in a letter to her cousin, she was already half a communist. Her move to the Left was the logical outcome of the growth of Fascism in Europe, and her growing despair of anything ever happening through the parliamentary processes in South Africa. Although contact was tenuous between them, her sister Amy had joined the Communist Party in the United States, wrote in its journal, *New Masses*, and was a prominent party activist. But according to Farrington, Schechter was finally persuaded when she read the "Stalin constitution" of 1936. This document which persuaded (or fooled) so many people outside the USSR, proclaimed the full equality of women and

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, pp. 7- 19.

¹⁶¹ Memorial service, thought to be written by Ben Farrington, Hirson, 2001, p. 19.

¹⁶² Hirson, 2001, p. 35.

¹⁶³ Ibid pp. 161-162.

¹⁶⁴ Enid Alexander, 1953, pp. 171-181.

¹⁶⁵ Hirson, 2000, p. 224.

men, or races and nationalities, “in all spheres of economic, state, cultural social and political life”. Ben also believed in the truth of the document, and also joined the Communist Party.¹⁶⁶

In Swansea Schechter worked in the Workers Educational Association, the National Council of Labour Colleges, in the Left Book Club, in the National Council of Civil Liberties, in the Women’s Co-operative Guilds, in the British Soviet committee. Above all she believed that the struggle in Spain led by the Communists, as party propagandists claimed, would start the transformation all over Europe. That people like Schechter adopted such an uncritical adulation of Stalinism is explicable only in terms of the crisis of the 1930s, superimposed on the social problems they were unable to address their own societies. It seemed to offer a glimmer of hope, a gleam of sanity. Schechter died in 1942. Farrington left the Communist Party after the Hungarian uprising was suppressed 1956.¹⁶⁷

Ray Alexander Simons’ Politics:

Born in 1913, in Latvia, Simons’ politics were shaped by the support enjoyed by the Bolsheviks, and later during the interwar years by the Social Democratic Party.¹⁶⁸ Although a strictly orthodox Jew, Simons’ father was inclined to socialism having studied at a Russian medium school, unusual in those days, while her mother had been exposed to anarchist ideas during the two years she spent in Leeds in England before returning to marry her father. Simons’ two older half sisters, Anna and Tanya, by her father’s first marriage to Gita, who died in childbirth,¹⁶⁹ both joined the revolutionary movement.¹⁷⁰ Moreover after her father’s death in 1923, the sisters were influenced by the principal of their school, Leib Yoffe, a Communist and a close family friend, who was also the mayor of Varaklan.¹⁷¹

There can also be no doubt that the poverty, deprivation and suffering of her early years, sensitized Simons to the cause of the oppressed. In a Yiddish diary written in 1927 when she was fourteen years old, she describes her mother as old beyond her

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, pp. 225-227.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 229.

¹⁶⁸ E. Mendelsohn, 1983, pp. 241-242.

¹⁶⁹ Simons, 2004, p. 40.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 30.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, pp. 30-31, 33, 40.

years, the result of constant worry about their economic situation. She recalls a time when she and her sister, Dveyre (Dora) went to school hungry, and another occasion when as a result of having no shoes to wear, she became ill and when she and her sister were transferred to a school for poor children where they were provided with food and clothing. In her words:

And I remember virtually nothing of not having what to wear on my feet, catching a cold, becoming sick. My mother took me to Iser Levin, a doctor, Avram's brother, and I recovered. There was a type of school for poor children. The school that I was attending before, was for the more privileged and mainly the *balebatishe* (householders) children, and I with my sister Mary - Dveyre was in Birzh – went there... They seldom had teachers there, but provided us with nourishing food and clothes.¹⁷²

Her political consciousness was first aroused at school where she learnt about the Spanish Inquisition, also about antisemitism in Latvia as well as the Russian pogroms. The persecution of the Jews does not seem to have left as strong an impression upon her as that of the enslavement of Blacks in America. In her English autobiography she recounts:

One Saturday afternoon [her teacher] Sonia Shapiro, read to them *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and we all cried about the terrible things done to separate children from parents and enslave them on sugar plantations. Greditor [a teacher] suggested to Sonia Shapiro that she get the children to prepare a map of the colonies in Africa, which she asked Dora and me to do... We made a map marking the British, Belgian, German and French colonies in different colours. It was a great success and was hung on the school wall for many years until the Nazis came and burned the school down.¹⁷³

¹⁷² Simons, 1927, pp. 4-5.

¹⁷³ Simons, 2004, p. 34.

Simons' rejection of Zionism and her participation in the Varaklan Workers' Society, *Kultur-lige*, and an underground Communist cell has already been discussed.¹⁷⁴ In Riga, where she went to study dressmaking, she was again recruited into the underground Communist movement.¹⁷⁵ In 1926 after the death of her sister, Mary, from a botched appendectomy, her mother began making plans to emigrate. She wrote to her sisters in America and in Upington in South Africa. As the immigration laws prevented their entry into the United States, it was decided that after her brother's release from military service in June 1927, he would emigrate to South Africa. In January 1929 Ray's sister, Dora followed him.¹⁷⁶

After a narrow escape from arrest after attending an illegal meeting in Riga, her mother arranged for Simons too, to emigrate to South Africa. Before her immigration to 'a capitalist country', where it was certain that the Communist Party would one day be banned, her underground unit saw to it that she should receive training in conducting activities underground. She was taught to write leaflets, that could not be traced to a typewriter, and to use stencils and a duplicating machine. She was given leaflets to distribute to the soldiers at the army barracks and took food to political prisoners. Thus by the time she left Latvia, she was already a fully fledged agitator.¹⁷⁷

Simons left Varaklan on 17 October 1929 arriving in Cape Town on the 6th of November, just a day before the anniversary of the Russian Revolution.¹⁷⁸ Initially devastated that there was to be no form of celebration to mark the anniversary of the Russian Revolution, she realized that she had a mission to fulfill in Cape Town. This was to organize the workers because South Africa "was virgin soil."¹⁷⁹ Within five days, on 11 November 1929, she had joined the Communist Party of South Africa. In January 1931, she was elected chairman of the Cape Town District Committee of the Communist Party together with Josiah Ngedlane and Johnny Gomas,¹⁸⁰ branding her automatically as an outsider in South African Jewry's Zionist *milieu*.

¹⁷⁴ Simons, 1927, p. 16; Simons, 2004, p. 40.

¹⁷⁵ Simons, 2004, pp. 41-44.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, pp. 41, 43.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, pp. 42-46

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 50.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 55.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 62.

This did not concern Simons as from the outset she preferred to associate with likeminded radicals, both white and black, with whom she soon became acquainted. In line with her universalist political beliefs, her friends were diverse - of all religions and races¹⁸¹ an attribute that immediately marked her as an outsider not only in the Jewish community but in the wider white society. However, as most of the white members of the Communist Party were Jewish, Simons could not avoid a preponderance of Jewish friends, including well known Jewish academic and Communist supporter, Julius Lewin, who was to become a professor at the University of the Witwatersrand, and David Schrire, both law students at the time at the University of Cape Town at that time.¹⁸²

While her loyalty to the Party was unwavering,¹⁸³ Simons' main focus was the Trade Union movement. Simons was dismissed from her first job at a dress shop on the corner of Adderley and Longmarket Streets, for taking part in a demonstration by Black workers against the Pass Laws.¹⁸⁴

In 1931 she became secretary of the Commercial Workers' Union.¹⁸⁵ In 1935 she became full-time organizer of the Non-European Railway and Harbour Workers' Union.¹⁸⁶ But her main legacy lies with the Food and Canning Workers' Union (FCWU) in the Western Cape, that she helped to establish in 1941.¹⁸⁷ In 1953 Simons' political career was cut short by a series of banning orders.¹⁸⁸ In 1965 she and her husband, fellow communist and lecturer in African Studies at the University of Cape Town, Jack Simons, were forced into exile when he was banned from teaching. They went from Zambia to the University of Manchester and back to Zambia, all the while continuing their work for the trade unions and the banned ANC. In exile Jack lectured and together they co-authored a number of booklets and pamphlets in addition to the pioneering book *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950*, an analysis of the effect of class and race on South Africa's socio-political

¹⁸¹ Gessie Brookes, interviewed by Eva Horwitz, 198-, Kaplan Centre Oral History project, BC949.

¹⁸² Simons, 2004, pp. 55-56.

¹⁸³ Ibid, p. 65.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, pp. 50-54.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 208

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, pp. 91, 98, 113.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, pp.19, 21.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, pp. 256-260..

landscape.¹⁸⁹ Finally in 1990 after an absence of twenty-five years, with the freeing of Mandela and the unbanning of the ANC, they returned to South Africa.¹⁹⁰

Ellen Hellmann's politics:

Hellmann always believed that the Jew should not ignore South Africa's racial problems, and should not isolate himself from his environment.

“The Jew must become merged, both in regard to the major areas of behavior and identity of civic and social interests, with the people among whom he lives. Any other approach appears to me to be isolationist, hampering the integration of the Jew which remains, despite obstacles to its fulfillment, the overall aim of a free society.”¹⁹¹

Her Masters degree, that involved research into the lives of urban African slum dwellers, conducted in the 1930s, exposed her to their living conditions and motivated her to help to improve their situation. She became involved with their resistance to the attempts by the Johannesburg municipality to remove them from inner settlements. One of the slums known to be very active in resisting slum clearance was Rooiyard in Doornfontein, that she used as a case study in describing the living conditions of Africans in the inner city.¹⁹² Hellmann became a leading executive member of the South African Institute of Race Relations. Her opposition to the Apartheid regime led her into active politics and she was a founding member of the liberal Progressive Party, serving on its executive from 1959 to 1971.¹⁹³

In 1968 the University of the Witwatersrand awarded Hellmann an Honorary Doctorate in Law and in 1970 she received the gold medal of the Royal African Society (Great Britain) for “dedicated service to Africa.” In the citation she was

¹⁸⁹ H. J. and R. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950*, Penguin books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1969.

¹⁹⁰ Simons, 2004, pp. 302-304;

¹⁹¹ Bernard Sachs “Ellen Hellmann”, in, *South African Personalities and Places*. Kayor, Johannesburg, 1959, pp. 188-189; Ellen Hellmann, “The Jews’ Problems Cannot Be Isolated”, *Jewish Affairs*, 15(5), 1961: 8-10.

¹⁹² SA History Online: Ellen Phyllis Hellmann, social anthropologist and executive member of the SAIEE dies in Johannesburg, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/ellen-phyllis-hellman>

¹⁹³ “Hellmann, Ellen Phyllis” in *New Dictionary of South African Biography*, 1995-1999, pp.96-97; Milton Shain and Miriam Pimstone, “Ellen Phyllis Hellmann” <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/Hellmann-ellen-phyllis>.

described as an “authority on race relations and in the forefront of the battle for African advancement.” Hellmann died in Johannesburg on November 1982 at the age of seventy four.¹⁹⁴

Conclusion

The chief attribute that unites these successful political women is their intellect and their drive. All five women excelled intellectually within their given circumstances. Yet only two followed what is today considered to be the conventional route to professional success. Simons, who was deprived of conventional education through poverty and racial discrimination, made up for this through reading, through participation in cultural and political groups, and by way of political activism. Ultimately her union with Professor Jack Simons, gave her entrée into the world of academia as well. Millin initially eschewed an academic education but broadened her horizons through reading and research, and was also enhanced by her husband, journalist, advocate and judge, Philip Millin. Schechter was largely educated by her brilliant intellectual parents, by her own wide reading, and by both of her husbands. Solomon and Hellmann were the only ones to follow the conventional route of university education.

It is also significant that with the exception of Hellmann of German Jewish origin, whose Zionism was awoken by Hitler’s rise to power, all of the women’s choices were influenced in one way or another by their experience of Russian Jewish politics. As keen Zionists, Millin and Solomon could easily identify with a South African nationalism, even though it ignored people of colour. Diaspora nationalism caused Schechter to change her allegiances from Zionism, via Jewish Socialism to the wider cause of humanity, that she believed was being served by the policies of the Soviet Union. For Simons it was the poverty of her childhood, as well as the Workers’ Party, *Kultur Lige*, and the underground Communist Party in Latvia, that sensitized her to the cause of the oppressed black people in South Africa.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

What distinguishes these political women from the women who will be discussed in the next chapter, who either remained single, adopted alternative lifestyles or married late in life, is that these women had husbands who helped to launch them on careers. Their marital status also served to protect their respectability. Despite her affair, Schechter retained her place in society until she actually left her husband to marry the gentile Professor Ben Farrington, after which her memory was blotted out. Similarly once her husband had passed away, Millin's political opinions veered to the right of prevailing opinions in the Jewish community causing her to become increasingly reclusive and eccentric. As the only Communist and non-Zionist in the group, Simons was marginalized in the Jewish community as well as in the wider community until her exile in 1965. However with the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990 as well as the unbanning of the ANC, she was able to return as a hero, reclaimed by the Jewish community.

CHAPTER NINE

VARIETIES OF INTEGRATION: CASE STUDIES, CULTURAL

Roza Van Gelderen, Hilda Purwitsky, Irma Stern, Sarah Goldblatt, Muriel Alexander, Leontine Sagan and Sarah Sylvia

In contrast to the average Jewish woman, cited in the earlier chapters, whose aim in life was to marry, stay at home to look after her husband and to raise his children (even if she had tertiary education and a career), and even to the exceptional women examined in the previous chapter who managed to combine marriage with a literary or a political career, a handful of women by virtue of intellect or artistic talent, were driven to forgo these conventions and to devote their lives to a career or a calling rather than to a marriage.

These strong minded independent women had the courage to break the traditional mould, despite social prejudice, sacrifices and struggles. What they had in common, was total confidence in their own abilities, arrogance that made them oblivious to disapproval and the courage to flout societal norms. More importantly they were feminists who did not believe that their sex should deter them from achieving their goals. They were representatives of the New Woman discussed in the previous chapters. Of the seven women, three never married out of choice, three were briefly married and divorced, and only one married but did not have children.

Born between 1884 and 1901, the women came from diverse backgrounds, both western Europe (Holland, Germany, Austria, and Britain) and eastern Europe (Lithuania). Active in Cape Town were: Roza Van Gelderen and Hilda Purwitsky, teachers, journalists and promoters of the arts; Irma Stern, South Africa's leading artist; and Sarah Goldblatt, literary executrix of the Afrikaans poet C. J. Langenhoven. Active in Johannesburg were actor-directors, Muriel Alexander, Leontine Sagan and Sarah Sylvia. What distinguishes the women of eastern rather than western European backgrounds, is that the eastern European women (Purwitsky, Goldblatt and Sarah Sylvia) had to struggle against the odds to achieve their goals, while the western European women, from more advantaged, although by no means affluent backgrounds, were able to pursue their goals with relatively greater ease. The western European women also had the advantage of being able to return to their countries of

origin to pursue artistic training and to follow a career that was not possible in South Africa in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Roza Van Gelderen and Hilda Purwitsky.

Central to this group of women were Roza Van Gelderen and Hilda Purwitsky, an avant garde lesbian couple whose ideas were well beyond their time. The mere fact of the existence of a flamboyant Jewish lesbian couple in conservative 1920s Jewish Cape Town is accentuated by the fact that in the preface to her seminal *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class, Woman, Family and Identity in Imperial Germany*, the historian, Marion Kaplan, confesses that she could find no material about “independent single women or widows and nothing about lesbians or divorced women”, in the far more educated, emancipated and permissive Jewish society in Germany during the same period.¹

Whether Van Gelderen and Purwitsky were lesbians in the modern sense of the word cannot be established. However there can be no doubt that their relationship conforms to the broader definition that: “Women who love women, who choose women to nurture and support and to create a living environment in which to live creatively and independently are lesbians.”²

Although their partnership was recognized by the local Jewish community, Van Gelderen and Purwitsky were not outsiders, and in this sense this unconventional couple help to shed light on the nature and the values of the South African Jewish community. Van Gelderen and Purwitsky played a central role in the community as teachers, journalists and patrons of the arts. They were associated with a wider group of talented and educated women - several of whom remained single for all or most of their lives. They included Sarah Goldblatt, the literary executrix of the Afrikaans poet, C. J. Langenhoven, author of the South African national anthem, *Die Stem* (The Voice), as well as the celebrated South African artist, Irma Stern, both of whom will be discussed further on in this chapter. Although the three theatrical women, who were living in Johannesburg, were not part of their immediate circle, as patrons of the

¹ Marion Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women Family and Identity in Modern Imperial Germany*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. xi.

² Rebecca Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Great Britain: Love and Sex Between Women Since 1500*, Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007, p. xv.

arts they would have attended all their productions and as a keen Yiddishist, Purwitsky would no doubt have been an enthusiastic admirer of Sarah Sylvia.

Van Gelderen and Purwitsky are excellent examples of the ‘New woman’. Their partnership also reflected a trend among the ‘surplus women’ that emerged after the First World War, when three quarters of a million men lost their lives.³ In a South African context the couple could be compared to another Jewish couple, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), famous American author and critic, and her partner, Alice B. Toklas, early patrons of Picasso, Braque and Matisse, whose Paris apartment became a centre for writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway.⁴

Roza Van Gelderen

The life and personality of Van Gelderen, the dominant member of the pair, is the more enigmatic. To those who knew her, she was “Miss Roza”, regarded as an “enfant terrible”, and spoken of with “admiration and affectionate disapproval”.⁵ While her striking gypsy looks have been immortalized in a portrait by Irma Stern, her life is less documented, and much of the information about her has reached us via the personal papers of her partner, Hilda Purwitsky. The more socially prominent, Van Gelderen was the special protégé of the Reverend A. P. Bender, the leader of Cape Jewish society in those days. Van Gelderen’s personality was characterized on the one hand, by great compassion, and on the other by extreme arrogance and a tendency to dismiss any opinions that did not accord with her own. This frequently caused her to clash with members of the community, and it was often only by virtue of the high status of her allies, that she was not completely disgraced.

Van Gelderen was born in Holland in 1890, into a prestigious Dutch Jewish family. On her father’s side, her great grandfather’s sister was the mother of the famous

³ See, Virginia Nicholson, *Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men After The First World War*, Viking, London, 2007. Statistics in the UK show that between the ages of 25 and 29 there were 1209 women for every 1000 men. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-481882/Condemned-virgins-The-million-women-robbed-war.html>.

⁴ Gertrude Stein, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Keter, Jerusalem, 1972, vol. 15, pp. 352-253.

⁵ “When Cape Jewish Secular Education was a “One Woman Show”: “Miss Roza Looks Back”, Roza Van Gelderen, *Autobiography*, Hilda Purwitsky & Roza Van Gelderen papers, 2.1.1, BC 1271, Manuscripts and Archives, U.C.T. Libraries.

German poet, Heinrich Heine. Van Gelderen's love of the arts and of the finer things in life, came from an indulged childhood when she was dressed in 'the latest Parisian fashions' and showered with toys. She learnt to play the violin and was a self-confessed exhibitionist. It was in her home town of Leiden that Van Gelderen nurtured her love of fine art and beautiful objects, that she encountered in its many fine museums, that she explored freely as a child.⁶ She also spent hours wandering through the Hortus Botanicus, the oldest botanical gardens in the Netherlands, established in 1587 as a centre for medical research and botanical instruction.⁷ All experiences she would utilise in her own school, and in her later career as a collector, journalist and patron of the arts.

The family first came to South Africa in 1897 when Van Gelderen was seven years old. They settled in Durban where she started school. However life in Durban was not congenial for the family. They suffered from the heat and humidity and her mother fell ill with dysentery. In 1899, a few months before the outbreak of the South African War, Van Gelderen returned to Holland together with her mother and her sister, and the family settled near their relatives in Leiden. When her father finally arrived,⁸ he joined his brother in the cheese business. Unfortunately the business went bankrupt and in 1903, when she was twelve years old, the family decided to return to South Africa to settle in Cape Town. Her father bought a number of agencies, among them the agency for Bendsdorp chocolate. He worked in the import-export business off and on for thirty years.⁹

On their return Van Gelderen first attended a very exclusive English private school called Vredenberg, one of Cape Town's oldest schools. It was situated at the top of Long Street opposite the German church, where Victoria Court, the city's first block of flats stands today. Behind the old Cape house, that was part of the school, there

⁶ These include the Rijksmuseum Van Oudheden (National Museum of Antiquities), an academic-anthropological museum that contains ethnic treasures brought back by the Dutch explorers, with Incan treasures, Chinese paintings and bronzes, Indonesian artifacts, and one of the finest Egyptian collections in the world with an unbeatable collection of mummies, <http://www.mummytombs.com/museums/nl.leiden.rijksmuseum.htm>; http://goeurope.about.com/od/leiden/Leiden_Travel_and_Tourism_Information_for_Leiden_The_Netherlands.htm

⁷ Hortus Botanicus, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hortus_Botanicus_Leiden

⁸ Van Gelderen, *Autobiography*, Chapter 2, We go to South Africa, Hilda Purwitsky & Roza Van Gelderen Papers

⁹ *Ibid*, Chapter 3, We return to Holland.

was a large garden with an entrance on Queen Victoria Street. Vredenberg Lane, that runs along one side of the building still exists today. The principal was a Mrs Percival and the well known Dr Barrow-Dowling, the organist and choir master of St George's Cathedral, was the singing teacher. At that time the family could afford this as Van Gelderen's father was making a good living with his agencies. However when he suddenly decided to move the family to Tulbagh, a small town in the heart of the Boland, to open a small country store that went bankrupt within nine months, the family fortune was largely depleted.¹⁰

Back in Cape Town their standard of living deteriorated considerably and the family was forced to take rooms in Wilkinson Street, behind the Mount Nelson Hotel. When her father found a job as a bookkeeper they were able to move to larger rooms in Annandale Street, in front of the Mount Nelson, and then to a house in Burnside Road in Tamboerskloof. Van Gelderen was not able to continue at Mrs Percival's exclusive school, but was sent to the Normal College, a school originally established by the Dutch Reform Church in 1878, where the fees were low or non-existent.

After completing Standard Six, she left school to do her T3 - Third Class Teaching Certificate, at the Teachers' Training College. Although offered the option of doing her pupil teaching at the Hope Mill School, (the former Hebrew Public school) under Mark Cohen, that was situated at the top of the Gardens, Van Gelderen preferred to be sent to a branch of the school in a poorer part of Cape Town, in Constitution Street, District Six where most of the newly arrived immigrants from eastern Europe lived. In 1910 she returned to the College to complete her Kindergarten Teaching Certificate, that she found was her *métier*, and she qualified first in the Cape Colony. She taught at the Constitution Street School under Mr E. H. Kloot, for fifteen years, progressing from Pupil teacher to Kindergarten teacher to Kindergarten mistress. From the outset she had very clear ideas about early childhood education, derived from her own early childhood experiences.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid, Chapter 4, Cape Town 1903.

¹¹ Van Gelderen, Autobiography, Chapter 5, Cape Town 1905.

Hilda Purwitsky

Eleven years her junior, Hilda Purwitsky, on the other hand, came to South Africa from Lithuania in 1901, as a small baby, the second of seven children of penniless east European immigrants. The family first lived on the top floor of a double storey house in Strand Street with Malay neighbours downstairs. Her father was the only Jewish blacksmith in Cape Town. Her mother ran a grocery shop in Camp Street.¹²

Where Van Gelderen's love of the arts stemmed from her exposure to art galleries and museums, Purwitsky's love of the arts stemmed from her love of literature that she developed at the Sacred Heart Convent in Somerset Road where she began her formal education.¹³ She says: "I admired the nuns very much, they were very good teachers, very devoted." Particularly influential was Sister Marie Clare whose passion was English grammar and poetry. Purwitsky, who displayed a similarly high opinion of her own abilities as Van Gelderen, claims that by the time she left school in Standard 5, she knew enough English grammar and literature to teach matriculation. She describes herself as "an omnivorous reader", devouring anything from *Boys Own* and *Billy Bunter*, to the stories about the building of the Trans-Siberian railway that her father used to read to her.¹⁴ Her older brother went to the Hebrew Public School in Upper Mill Street. When Purwitsky joined him there,¹⁵ she regularly stayed behind after school to read the dictionary and the Bible that the teacher left on his table.¹⁶

Desperate for further education that was way beyond her parents' means, at the age of 12 or 13 Purwitsky faked her age and enrolled at the Teachers' Training College where training was free and students were given a monthly allowance. After three years, she completed her Third Class Teachers Certificate, coming tenth in the Colony in her final examinations.¹⁷ Her first job was in Woodstock teaching Standard 3, and she also taught for a while at the Hope Mill School under Mark Cohen. Desperate for a permanent post she determined to go back to Training College to get her T2 (Second Class Teaching Certificate), but for that she needed a matric. Together with her colleague, Sarah Goldblatt, the daughter of the Yiddish journalist, David Goldblatt,

¹² Hilda Purwitsky, 1981, pp. 1-2.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 2-4

¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 3-4.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.5.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 2-4.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 5.

and future literary executrix of the Afrikaans poet, Langenhoven, in three months the two successfully passed their examinations. Purwitsky got a permanent post in the junior section of the Hope Mill School that had moved from Constitution to De Villiers Street. It was there that she first met Roza Van Gelderen, the kindergarten teacher at the school, who took her under her wing, and their great friendship blossomed.¹⁸

In June 1926, Purwitsky went to London for a year under the League of Empire Teachers' Exchange System. She was in London at the time of the implementation of what was known as the Hadow Plan, the scheme that aimed to separate all the children of eleven and under from the "Eleven Plus." While she was away it was decided to separate the girls and the boys at the Hope Mill school. The girls remained in the Normal College building in Buitenkant Street, and the school was renamed the Central Girls' School, while the boys moved to Hope Lodge in Roeland Street. On the strong recommendation of Reverend A. P. Bender and Prof Fred Clarke, Van Gelderen was appointed principal of the girls' school.¹⁹ "She was the first Jewess to become principal of a Government School in Cape Town."²⁰ On Purwitsky's return Van Gelderen requested to be transferred to her school. The two ran the school together. When Purwitsky decided to get a university degree, they re-organized the timetable and bought a car to make this possible.

Central Girls' School

The school attracted the flood of immigrants who were coming into South Africa to beat the Quota Act of 1930, who settled round the area of the school in Buitenkant, Harrington, Maynard, Canterbury, and the little streets on the fringes of Roeland Street in District Six. The school soon outgrew its premises and in 1935 Van Gelderen was invited to participate in the planning of a new and larger building for the school in Vredehoek.²¹ On the 8th of November 1935, the foundation stone of the school was laid by Reverend Bender, who had sponsored her appointment and remained a

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 6-8.

¹⁹ Hilda Purwitsky, "Educational Pioneer, Art Patron, Connoisseur: Roza Van Gelderen was a Unique Personality: She Fostered Talent Where Ever She Found it." *South African Jewish Times*, 2 January 1970, p. 3.

²⁰ Purwitsky, 1981, p. 8.

²¹ Purwitsky, "Miss Roza's School", Hilda Purwitsky papers, F1, BC 707, p. 2.

lifelong friend. The school was officially opened by the Secretary of Education for the Union, Prof M. C. Botha on the 2nd of September 1936.²²

Van Gelderen and Purwitsky modeled their curriculum on the lines of A. S. Neill's Summerhill School,²³ that they had encountered at first hand when they were on furlough in England in 1933.²⁴ Like Summerhill, their school had no rules, but the children were expected to honour those principles which govern mutual trust and consideration in any community.²⁵ In the morning the pupils studied the normal school subjects, except that the subjects were not taught by a single class teacher, as is the custom in Junior School, but by a subject teacher, as in High School. Even more revolutionary was the afternoon program, consisting of two periods, when the children in Standards IV-VI (age 10-14) were allowed to choose between a whole range of subjects, both academic, vocational and practical.²⁶ The only condition was that the children should be obliged to stick to their choices for at least a month. They had a debating club and a journalism club that produced a regular Friday newspaper. Sex education was introduced, quite revolutionary in those days. For these lessons they used their subject mistresses, but also roped in visiting professors, artists and other experts.²⁷ Particular emphasis was placed on the teaching of art, one of Van Gelderen's passions. Van Gelderen pioneered children's free-expression painting in South Africa. A ground breaking exhibition of children's art was mounted,²⁸ that was displayed in Cape Town, Johannesburg and London.

However the school was not only distinguished by its creative innovations in the arena of the curriculum, Van Gelderen and Purwitsky also introduced a system of parallel classes for those girls who could not cope scholastically and were older than the average, for reasons that varied from inferior intelligence, emotional or physical

²² Ibid, p. 2.

²³ Summerhill School, was a progressive, co-educational residential school founded in 1921, where the children were free to attend lessons or not, in a self governing democratic community.

<http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/pages/index.html>

²⁴ Purwitsky, 1981, p. 11.

²⁵ Purwitsky, "Miss Roza's school", p. 17.

²⁶ The subjects were as diverse as English, arithmetic, history, geography, biology, science, Latin, algebra, cookery, sewing, drawing, gardening, singing, musical appreciation, eurhythmics, percussion band, toy-making, mask-making, versification, public speaking, stamp collecting, typing, newspaper printing, lexicon, correspondence, drawing, painting, drama and French.

²⁷ Purwitsky, "Miss Roza's School", pp. 69-83.

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 150-155.

problems, or because they were foreign immigrant children. In these classes the focus was on teaching the girls practical skills that would equip them for a job and life in the outside world. On completion of Standard Six, Van Gelderen would do her best to find suitable work positions for the girls.²⁹

Van Gelderen and Purwitsky were also progressive in terms of their social conscience and their school, admittedly in pre-Apartheid days, included so-called Coloured girls such as the first Coloured artist to exhibit at a gallery, Valerie Desmore.³⁰

Van Gelderen also took a great interest in the physical as well as the mental wellbeing of the children, many of whom were from impoverished immigrant families. She succeeded in convincing doctors and dentists to give their services free.³¹ Her methods were unconventional. As was later recalled of Van Gelderen and her pupils: “how, despite the protestations of an angry mother, she insisted on having their tonsils yanked out; how she sent them to convalescent homes even at the risk of missing examinations; how she encouraged them to stay away from school and go on holidays, assuring them that the knowledge they gained from seeing other parts of the country would help them in geography and in life.”³²

Their concern extended to the parents of the immigrant children, many of whom barely knew how to read or write English. They organized evening classes in English enlisting the aid of members of staff and others to come to the school to teach. Together with Goldblatt, Purwitsky prepared a program of 74 lessons of two hours each. No payment was required, the only demand was regular attendance.³³

Van Gelderen’s progressive educational methods, however, did not find favour everywhere. A running battle developed between Van Gelderen and the Principal and the Committee of the Cape Jewish Orphanage, particularly with regard to homework, something that Van Gelderen did not believe in, and at the beginning of 1934 the

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 38-68.

³⁰ Lily Cammerman, who was a pupil at their school, mentioned this, Union of Jewish Women, 2010.

³¹ Hilda Purwitsky, *South African Jewish Times*, 2 January 1970, p. 3.

³² “When Cape Jewish Secular Education was a “One Woman Show”, Van Gelderen, Autobiographical writings.

³³ “In and Around the Peninsula: the End of the Evening Classes”, SAJC, 5 September 1930, p. 580.

Orphanage removed their children from her school and transferred them to the Tamboerskloof Primary School.³⁴

Despite glowing praise for the school in the press³⁵ as well as the annual Inspector's reports,³⁶ in 1940 the Cape School Board decided to amalgamate the Central Girls' School with the Boys' School, Hope Lodge in Roeland Street. According to a Departmental rule, that prevented a woman from becoming principal of a co-educational school,³⁷ Van Gelderen was automatically precluded from continuing as principal. Reasons advanced for the amalgamation was that of economy. Both schools had been losing pupils for some time,³⁸ the Hope Lodge because of the infiltration of Coloured people into the district, the Central Girls School because of the Quota Act, as most of its pupils were drawn from among the immigrants.³⁹ Another factor that had contributed to the reduction in numbers, was the removal of the children from the Cape Jewish Orphanage.

However Purwitsky and Van Gelderen believed that the move was a deliberate ploy to get rid of Van Gelderen and her progressive ideas. They blamed the Broederbond, a conservative Afrikaans Nationalist organization, that held sway at that time on the School Board. Given the option of staying on (at the same salary) as an assistant teacher, Van Gelderen initially agreed. Purwitsky, however, resigned and easily secured a post teaching English at a secondary school in Johannesburg. With Van Gelderen's removal as principal all her innovations also ceased. Despite the praise that was heaped on the school at the time, and the huge furore in the local press, none of their methods were adapted at any other schools. In Purwitsky's words, "our school

³⁴ Cape Jewish Orphanage (CJO), Minutes 27 October 1931, 25 October 1932, 31 October 1932, 25 July 1933, 29 August 1933, BC 918, Manuscripts and Archives, U.C.T. Libraries.

³⁵ An American educationist, Dr Lucy L. W. Wilson of Philadelphia, Director of a 3 000 pupil school, who was visiting South Africa in 1937, commented that: "To find so fine a school has been a climax to all the other wonders of South Africa." *South African Jewish Times*, 2 January 1970, cited by Hilda Purwitsky, "Miss Roza's school", p.3

³⁶ Hilda Purwitsky, "Miss Roza's school", pp. 169-170.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 173.

³⁸ Enrolment at the Central Girls' School for the Past 12 Years: 1929-407.3; 1930-401.6; 1931-412.4; 1932-407.5; 1933-389; 1933-389; 1934-359.8; 1935-367.1; 1936-360; 1937-333.4; 1938-293.3; 1939-281.4; Sept. 1940-270. Hilda Purwitsky, "Miss Roza's school", p. 172

³⁹ Christine van Heyningen, "Notable Death", *Trek: the Family Magazine for All South Africans*, 5 (13), 19 December, 1940.

was an isolated phenomenon, a small miracle that manifested itself once and never again.”⁴⁰

In 1941 Van Gelderen opened a children’s art studio in a small room in Breda Street in Cape Town, that became known as The Yellow Windows Studio.⁴¹ In the *S. A. Jewish Times* (9.1.1942), it was predicted that her studio would “become one of the greatest influences in moulding the future art of South Africa.”⁴² She opened a similar studio in Johannesburg where the pictures were snapped up by collectors.⁴³ Van Gelderen promoted immigrant artists, such as Wolf Kibel, who came to Cape Town from Poland via Israel, in 1929,⁴⁴ giving him a studio at her school, and supporting Irma Stern in the days that her work was encountering ridicule and contempt for her too modern expressionism. They also amassed a fine collection of original art,⁴⁵ African artifacts and beadwork,⁴⁶ Middle Eastern artifacts,⁴⁷ as well as a collection of valuable old glass perfume bottles.⁴⁸

Purwitsky and Van Gelderen were also prolific journalists, writing, under the pseudonym Rozilda, on topical and historical themes, both serious and lighthearted, in the local English and Afrikaans,⁴⁹ as well as the Jewish press. From 1924 to 1927 they contributed a regular column to the “Page for woman” of the *Cape Argus*. Their columns reflect their day to day lives relating to housekeeping, shopping,

⁴⁰ Purwitsky, “Miss Roza’s school”, p. 4, 180.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 180.

⁴² *S. A. Jewish Times*, 9 January 1942; Hilda Purwitsky, “Miss Roza’s school”, p. 185.

⁴³ To quote the Johannesburg daily *Star* of 12.1.1942: “In her art crèche...Miss Van Gelderen has collected children from all strata of society who are allowed to paint exactly what, when and how they please...unhampered by the shackles of classical tradition. There is a pristine purity, a spontaneity and an emotional honesty about these youthful manifestations of artistic expression that is quite awe-inspiring.

⁴⁴ See Joseph Sachs, “Wolf Kibel”, *Jewish Affairs*, 1(7), 1946: 12-17; F. Kibel. & N. Dubow, *Wolf Kibel: a brief sketch of his life and work* Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1969.

⁴⁵ Original posters, lithographs, etchings, engravings, woodcuts, South African art and impressionists, Hilda Purwitsky and Roza van Gelderen papers.

⁴⁶ They bought it from Dr Maria Stein-Lessing, Professor of Art at the University of the Witwatersrand, who assembled it in the 1930s and 1940s from African kraals and Native reserves, African collection catalogues, Hilda Purwitsky and Roza van Gelderen papers.

⁴⁷ Middle Eastern artifacts catalogue, Hilda Purwitsky and Roza van Gelderen papers.

⁴⁸ They are described in the column, “Collectors’ corner” that she wrote for the *Cape Times* in the 1960s. Roza van Gelderen, Antiques and “Collectors corner”, Hilda Purwitsky and Roza van Gelderen papers. See, “African Crafts ‘take over’ Camps Bay sitting-room”, *Cape Times*, 3 July 1968.

⁴⁹ Byvoegsel tot *Die Burger*, 20, 29 June 1963.

entertainment and holidays, but also describing the cultural landmarks of the city⁵⁰ and its diverse ethnic groups.⁵¹ Drawing on their own experiences they offered advice to the bachelor girl.⁵² Defying gender stereotypes they covered the heavyweight boxing match in 1925, between New Zealander Tom Heeney and South African Johnny Squires.⁵³ Although most of their articles are light hearted and amusing several deal with social issues such as the provision of playgrounds and bath houses for slum children,⁵⁴ and the inadequate medical inspection of children in the poorer schools.⁵⁵ From 1933, about the time that they introduced their innovative curriculum into their school, their columns relate to bringing up children and education, with titles such as “Are Parents Worthwhile: Fathers and Mothers with no Training”⁵⁶ or ‘The Value of Happiness in Modern education’⁵⁷.

They also contributed articles to *The Financial Times*,⁵⁸ *Die Burger*,⁵⁹ and to all the Jewish papers of the time: *The S. A. Jewish Chronicle*, *The Zionist Record*, *The Jewish Times* and *Di Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*.

Their relationship

Both women were highly individualistic, innovative and creative, feminists, rebels and eccentrics. As was evident in their coverage of the heavyweight boxing match in 1925, between New Zealander Tom Heeney and South African Johnny Squires,⁶⁰ they loved to defy gender stereotypes. In their various exploits during their travels together they enjoyed a freedom undreamed of by married women.

⁵⁰ “Know Your Own City: a Teacher’s Brilliant Idea: What South Africa Means to the Schoolgirl”, *Cape Argus*, 17 November 1925.

⁵¹ “Real Life Sketches from District Six”, *Cape Argus*, 27 June 1925; “East Meets West: In Cape Town’s City Hall: Rozilda Among the Muslims”, *Cape Argus*, 23 February 1926.

⁵² “Safety First”: A Burglar-Proof House: Hints to the Bachelor Girl”, *Cape Argus*, 19 March 1926.

⁵³ *Cape Argus*, 16 June 1925.

⁵⁴ “For Our Children: Suggestions for Incoming Councillors: the Unprotesting Poor,” *Cape Argus*, 2 September 1925.

⁵⁵ “The City’s Responsibility to our Children’s Needs. Some Practical Suggestions”, *Cape Argus*, 17 September, 1925.

⁵⁶ *Cape Argus*, 29 August 1933.

⁵⁷ *Daily Express*, 24 June 1934.

⁵⁸ In 1946 they did a series on “Builders of South Africa”, including Sammy Marks, the De Pass brothers, Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, Sir Abe Bailey, Barney Barnato, the House of Mosenthal, Sir David Harris, Alfred Beit, Morris Kentridge, Sir Harry Graumann, the Rand Club and The Mayoral Chain, for *The Financial Times*, 14.6.1946-27.9.1946.

⁵⁹ Articles by them on art and painting appeared in the *Byvoegsel tot Die Burger*, 20 & 29 June 1963.

⁶⁰ *Cape Argus*, 16 June 1925.

On a visit to Austria in 1933, for example, they had the gall to enter a shop selling all sorts of Nazi propaganda, such as scarves with swastikas and postcards with the typical Streicher Jewish caricature. Purwitsky picked up one of the postcards and inquired of the shopkeeper: “Is das Hitler?” He quickly responded: “Nein, nein, das zinen Juden” (No, no, those are Jews). Purwitsky then purchased two postcards of Hitler, confirmed that they were indeed her property, and then proceeded to tear them to bits and throw them on the floor in front of the amazed shopkeeper. The two women proceeded to leave the shop in a great hurry, ignoring the mutterings of two men in Nazi uniforms. They subsequently wrote up the incident in the *Cape Argus*.⁶¹

Van Gelderen is remembered on occasion as cropping her hair short and wearing men’s suits⁶² in the style of the well known British lesbian, Radclyffe Hall, author of *The Well of Loneliness*. Purwitsky was devoted to Van Gelderen. A book, a gift from Purwitsky to Van Gelderen is inscribed to: “my beloved poppie [doll] Roza”. They shared a small prefab bungalow on the beach at Bakoven. The children of the Central Girls’ School constituted their family. Purwitsky writes:

“We loved to see the faces of the children and to observe their burgeoning personalities. We loved to see them grow, to see our system grow. We felt elated. The school was our little world.”⁶³

That their feelings were reciprocated is indicated in a letter dated 27 September 1940, signed by twenty two of her pupils that is incorporated in Purwitsky’s unpublished history of the Central Girls’ School, entitled: “Each of us has two mothers.”

Dear Miss Roza,

We want to thank you for all you have done and are doing for us.

You have understood all our inmost thoughts, and have done all that one with a devoted character you could possibly do. You have cultivated all our interests as a farmer does his plants. From the tiny children in the kindergarten to the oldest class in Standard. VI, all the girls are your concern.

⁶¹ Rozilda, “A Cape Town Jewess Among the Nazis: Incident in a Vienna Shop”, *Cape Argus*, 14 October 1933.

⁶² Interview with Sheila Lawrence, April, 2004.

⁶³ Purwitsky, “Miss Roza’s school”.

We are grateful to you. Each one of us has two mothers, - one at home and one at school. We love both our mothers dearly. Please remember that always.⁶⁴

The nature of their liaison, as teachers, is typical of the homoerotic relationships between female teachers at girls' boarding schools of that era, described by Martha Vicinus in her study, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*.⁶⁵ However in a newspaper article on single sex boarding schools, entitled, "School Lovers or School Friends", Van Gelderen strongly advocates co-educational residential schools as being the most healthy way to avoid such 'perversion'.⁶⁶

It is possible that the truth may lie in an article by Van Gelderen that was published in the *Cape Times* on 23 April 1927, entitled: "The Superior Girl: Why Does She Remain Unmarried." In it Van Gelderen posits that the intellectual young woman's pursuit of knowledge, suppresses or sublimates her sexual urge; and only when it is too late, at the age of thirty to thirty five, does she wake up to the fact that she has sacrificed a home and children for a career. She concludes that, "Nature has produced the superior woman in order that she may give her full quota to the racial stock, but man, who has not yet learnt to think of women in terms of equality, will not give her the opportunity."

Moreover the First World War had influenced the balance of the sexes:

It must be remembered, too, that the really intelligent broad-minded girl of today is one of the biggest sufferers of the war, for many of the men who would have balanced, by experience and travel, her wide outlook and keen interest in life, who would have given her a sane and to-be-valued standard of marriage, were killed. What has she in their place? Striplings of her own age, mere "boys" (for an intellectual girl of twenty is easily twenty-three or four) who neither read decently, nor follow the world's affairs, who know everything about musical comedies and revues, but practically nothing of

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 84. The affection and the high regard in which Van Gelderen was held, was confirmed by at least four former pupils who attended my lecture on Van Gelderen and Purwitsky at the Union of Jewish Women on 27 October, 2010.

⁶⁵ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*, Virago, London, 1985.

⁶⁶ "School lovers or school friends", [*Cape Times* or *Cape Argus*], 4 March.1930.

Galsworthy and Bernard Shaw... raw callow youths who have the audacity to judge a girl's marriage merits by her ability to dance well or syncopate on a piano.⁶⁷

Purwitsky and Van Gelderen's attitude to men can also be gauged from a lighthearted piece that they wrote: "Men are Like Chairs" that was pirated and appeared in overseas newspapers as well.

"Men are like chairs. They vary in shape and size, but all can be sat on. Some men are like mahogany chairs; they lose their polish after a little while. Some are like Chippendale chairs; they need delicate handling. Some are like plush upholstered chairs; one cannot stand them on a hot day. Others are like seats in Congress; they have to be won. Some married men are like desk chairs; they are always being dragged about and turned this way and that. Some are like rocking chairs; they put you to sleep. And finally, some men are like benches; they are an invitation for more than one woman to sit on them – a wife and a mother-in-law."⁶⁸

Sholem Schwartzbard

Purwitsky was very briefly romantically linked with Sholem Schwartzbard, the Jewish assassin of the Ukrainian pogrom leader, Petlyura. In 1926 his Paris trial caused a worldwide sensation when he was acquitted, his victim, Petlyura, was condemned and Schwartzbard was feted as a hero throughout the Jewish world.⁶⁹ Schwartzbard arrived in Johannesburg in September 1937 on a mission to publicise the first three volumes of the *Universal Encyclopedia* in Yiddish, the *Algemeyne Entsiklopedye*, that had recently been published.⁷⁰ He met Purwitsky in Cape Town in February 1938 and they were instantly attracted to each other.⁷¹ A Yiddish poet,⁷²

⁶⁷ "The Superior Girl and Marriage: Is Intelligence a Bar?", *Cape Argus*, 30 April, 1927.

⁶⁸ Fiona Chisholm, "Out and About", *Cape Times*, 27 March 1975.

⁶⁹ See Howard M. Sachar, *Dreamland: Europeans and Jews in the Aftermath of the Great War*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2002.

⁷⁰ In 1937 when the very existence of the Jewish people was being threatened by the rise of Hitler's regime in Germany, the publication of an encyclopedia in Yiddish was an act of cultural defiance. The publicity leaflets characterise it as "The symbol of a nation's will to live." At a time when ten million Yiddish speakers existed, another 17 volumes were envisaged. Flyer, *Universal Encyclopedia* in Yiddish, Schwartzbard papers 7, BC1155.

⁷¹ Hilda describes him as "a great man with the heart and soul of a child", Correspondence and Hilda's memoirs, Schwartzbard papers.

⁷² Sholem Schwartzbard, *Troymen un Virklekhkeyt* (Dreams and Reality), Pariz, 1920.

Schwartzbard wrote love poems to Purwitsky that he posted to her.⁷³ However barely three weeks after his arrival in Cape Town, on the 3rd of March he suffered a massive heart attack and passed away at Purwitsky's and Van Gelderen's cottage. While Purwitsky always insisted that their relationship was platonic,⁷⁴ according to urban legend he died in her bed.⁷⁵ A poem marked by Purwitsky as not for publication, would seem to confirm that their relationship went beyond the platonic.⁷⁶

Schwartzbard was buried at Woltemade Jewish cemetery in Maitland in Cape Town on 4 March 1938. Keen to obtain documentation to write a book about Schwartzbard, Purwitsky traveled to Paris to help his widow to sort the hundreds of photographs and newspaper clippings that he had accumulated.⁷⁷ It was Purwitsky who conceived the idea of having his remains transferred to Jerusalem, and it was through her persistence that his remains were finally re-interred at Kfar Avichayil, near Natanya in Israel in 1967.⁷⁸

⁷³“*Liebste mayne! / Du ost mich geretet fun ungluk- / Fun zweifel ostu mikh bafreiet / Mit liebe mit fred und hoffnung/ Ostu mikh bakleyt und baneiet... / Du ost mir gihelt meine vunden / Di tifste leiden und schmerz...*” Romanization by Hilda Purwitsky. Translation by Veronica Belling: (My darling/You have saved me from sadness/ /You have freed me from doubt./ With love with joy and hope / You have clothed and renewed me /The deepest suffering and smart).

Schwartzbard's writings, 1938, Poetry, Correspondence and Hilda's memoirs, Schwartzbard papers.

⁷⁴ Hilda wrote that the very first time that she met Schwartzbard, he banteringly suggested to her that they should have a platonic love affair: “*Mir willen shpielen a Platonische liebe?*” Correspondence and Hilda's memoirs, Schwartzbard papers.

⁷⁵ According to an informant at the S. A. Jewish Board of Deputies, in Cape Town, the Board went to great lengths to cover up the incident. Purwitsky describes the circumstances of his death in a letter to Anna Schwartzbard, found among her papers, that she significantly indicates that she never sent to her. According to this letter Schwartzbard went to bed in their study at about 11.30 p.m. At about twenty past four in the morning, he woke them up, complaining of severe pain that he attributed to indigestion and refused their offer to call a doctor. They gave him soda and some aspirins and covered him with a blanket to keep him warm as he was perspiring profusely. At about twenty to five, he went back to his room with tea and a hot-water bottle, saying that he felt much better. However when Hilda went to check on him about an hour and a half later, she found that he had passed away. Letter to Anna Schwartzbard, 9 March.1938, Schwartzbard papers.

⁷⁶ *In jenem erlichen groisen moment/ Hot ba mir jeder ewer gezapelt gebrent/ Ven ich hob derfult dein brenendig leib/* (In that great moment of truth/ All my limbs trembled and burned/ When I felt your burning heart...) Schwartzbard's writings, Poetry, Schwartzbard papers. (Purwitsky's Romanization, translated by Veronica Belling)

⁷⁷ Purwitsky's collection of archival papers about Schwartzbard contains the chapter outline for a book, as well as her own translation of chapters from Schwartzbard's two Yiddish autobiographies, *Inem Loyf fun Yorn* (As the Years Go By) and *In Krig Mit Zikh Aleyn*. *Inem Loyf fun Yorn* (As the Years Go By), Ceshinsky, Chicago, 1933; and *In Krig Mit Zikh Aleyn* (At war with myself), Ceshinsky, Chicago, 1933. In 1967 she sent material to Dr Joseph Nedava, Professor of Political Science at Haifa University in Israel, who was keen on writing a book about Schwartzbard that never materialized. Letters to J. Nedava (22.11.1964, 27.1.1965); letters from J. Nedava (11.3.1965, 27.2.1966), Correspondence, 1938-1988, Schwartzbard papers.

⁷⁸ Letters to Richard Feldman (2.2.1939, 8.3.1939); to J. Nedava, H. Turok (24.2.1967); from J. Nedava (7.1.1968), Correspondence, 1938-1988, Schwartzbard papers.

Jewish identity and politics

The unquestioning acceptance and the insider status that this eccentric and flamboyant couple enjoyed in Cape Town's conservative Jewish community, must, in my opinion, be attributed to their unwavering and proud Jewish identity. Van Gelderen was after all the protégé of Reverend Bender of the Cape Town Hebrew congregation. Both women had been brought up in strictly Orthodox homes.

Purwitsky served on the committee of the Yiddish encyclopedia, and belonged to a group of Yiddish intellectuals. Van Gelderen and Purwitsky's school was specifically aimed at the eastern European Jewish immigrants, to facilitate their adaptation to their new lives in Cape Town. They organized evening classes in English for their parents. Their regular column, in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle*, in the 1920s, under the pseudonym Rozilda, documented prominent personalities and events in the Jewish world. On her retirement from school teaching, Van Gelderen worked for a while as a researcher for the South African Jewish Board of Deputies in Johannesburg. Both women enthusiastically supported the nascent State of Israel, visiting on a number of occasions. Van Gelderen served on the first Committee of the Union of Jewish Women when it was established in Cape Town in 1932.⁷⁹

On the other hand, their Christian education (both were educated at Christian schools) also left its mark on both their personalities. Hymns were sung in the morning at their school and in an inscription in a book⁸⁰ given by Purwitsky to Van Gelderen, Purwitsky writes: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow", a quotation from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6: 25-34 1). Van Gelderen used to take the Catholic girls at the Central Girls School to mass on Fridays.⁸¹

In later years their Jewish observance became considerably more lax, in the way of the South African non-observant Orthodox. This is illustrated in the preface that Purwitsky wrote to Sarah Shaban's cookbook, *Bread and Peacocks*, giving her stamp

⁷⁹ "Union of Jewish Women", *Zionist Record*, 27 May 1932, p. 23.

⁸⁰ Winifrid Walker, *All the Plants in the Bible*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1958.

⁸¹ Lilly Cammerman, Union of Jewish Women, 27 October 2010.

of approval to a book that included many typical Lithuanian Jewish dishes but also included recipes with pork!⁸²

While neither women were socialists, they were very liberal in their attitude to South Africa's racial problems. As was noted earlier they accepted girls of mixed race into their school. Their liberal attitudes were also evident in their columns in the *Cape Times* and *Cape Argus*, describing Cape Town's social problems and its diverse ethnic groups. They were part of the circle of friends of the trade unionist and Communist, Ray Alexander Simons, discussed in the previous chapter.⁸³

Van Gelderen's death

Van Gelderen passed away on the 7th of December 1969 at the age of 79 years.⁸⁴ Purwitsky wrote glowing obituaries in *The Cape Times*⁸⁵ and *The Jewish Times*: "There was no one like Roza. She was vivid, influential, full of drive, able to confer on others a richness by virtue of her goodwill. She was endowed with great persuasiveness and though she seldom wanted anything for herself, she would move mountains to get what others needed."⁸⁶ Purwitsky lived on another thirty years after Van Gelderen's death. In the 1980s, when she was in her eighties, she typed up a 180 page manuscript on the history of the Central Girls' School.⁸⁷ Sadly when Purwitsky died in 1999 at the advanced age of 98 years, her passing went virtually unnoticed.

Irma Stern

In the *Cape Times* in 1933 Irma Stern was described as possibly "the greatest creative artist in South Africa today."⁸⁸ Yet her first exhibitions in South Africa (1922-1925) whose subjects were largely native South African,⁸⁹ were received, with bewilderment, ridicule⁹⁰ and even suggestions of immorality.⁹¹ To the conservative

⁸² Purwitsky, "Preface", in Sara Shaban, *Bread and Peacocks: a Cookery Book: Exotic Recipes*, Grosvenor Publishing, London, 1969.

⁸³ Simons, 2004, p. 56.

⁸⁴ Purwitsky papers, BC707, Manuscripts and Archives, U.C.T. Libraries.

⁸⁵ *The Cape Times*, 18 December 1969.

⁸⁶ Hilda Purwitsky, "Educational Pioneer..." *South African Jewish Times*, 2 January 1970, p.3.

⁸⁷ It is part of the collection of manuscripts that she handed over to the Manuscripts and Archives Department at the University of Cape Town.

⁸⁸ David Kahn, *Cape Times*, 31.8.1933, cited in Karl Schoeman, *Irma Stern: the Early Years, 1894-1933*, South African Library, Cape Town, 1994, p.105.

⁸⁹ *Malay Couple, Coloured Girl with Sunflowers, Zulu Woman*.

⁹⁰ 18:1, *Cape Times*, n.d., cited in Schoeman, 1994, p. 72

South African public isolated from new trends in art in Europe, “Everything that is new- and almost everything is new to these narrow-minded people – is simply laughed at, scorned, and afterwards imitated.”⁹²

Irma Stern conformed to the classic Anglo-German Jewish profile. Like the Baumanns of Bloemfontein, her father, Samuel, hailed from the grand duchy of Hesse in Germany, from the village of Reichensachsen. After initial failure in the United States, he emigrated to Africa where in 1892 or 1893, he settled in Schweizer-Reneke, a small predominantly German settlement in the Transvaal. Here he opened a general dealer’s business together with his brother. Later in the same year he returned to Germany to marry Henny Fels (b.1875) “an extremely young and pretty girl with no fortune”, from Einbeck, a town to the south of Hanover.⁹³

Although Stern, born in 1894, spent her first six years in Schweizer-Reneke, the majority of her formative years were spent in Germany. When with the outbreak of the South African War, her father was imprisoned for siding with the Boers, the family left for Germany. After the war they only returned to South Africa for limited periods: between 1903-1904, and 1910 and 1911.

In her attitudes Stern was European, writing and speaking German and identifying with its culture. Attending school in Berlin, Stern was exposed to the richness of its cultural life, the Philharmonic, the theatre and the opera, while also reading the German and Russian classics.⁹⁴ When she began studying art in 1913, she was fortunate to find an academy in Weimar, the Grossherzoglich Sachsische Hochschule fur bildende Kunst, where they had instituted a special art class for women. Noteworthy among her teachers was Max Brandenburg, famous for his fairy tale style of painting.⁹⁵ However Stern came into her own with the emergence of the Expressionist school of art. All her paintings reflect its use of strong and violent colours, distortion, stylization and the inclusion of elements from folk and tribal art,

⁹¹ Boonzaaier, 12.2.1922, cited in Schoeman, 1994, p. 72.

⁹² In 1922 Stern to her friend, Trude Bosse:Bosse, 15.6.1922, cited in Schoeman, 1994, p. 74.

⁹³ Karel Schoeman, 1994, pp. 11-12. As the sources relating to Irma Stern’s early life in the Irma Stern collection in the National Library of South Africa are in German, the evidence of her early life cited in this section are heavily reliant on Schoeman’s translations.

⁹⁴ Schoeman, 1994, pp. 36-37.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 46.

as well as its insistence on the validity of the emotional response of the artist to her subject. It was a movement essentially confined to Germany between the years, 1905 to 1925. Among its precursors were Van Gogh and Gauguin. Many of its exponents were Jewish: Kokoschka, Paul Klee, Paula Modersohn Becker and Max Pechstein, who by 1909 was recognized as its leading exponent.⁹⁶ It was he who became Stern's main influence and mentor. Therefore although her art depicts the peoples of South Africa, her artistic vision and her world outlook was that of a European.

Expressionism was the ideal vehicle for Stern's memories of Africa that in Germany she developed into her own private myth.⁹⁷ Her first public exhibition held at the Fritz Gurlitt Gallery in Berlin in May-June 1919, included some African subjects painted in the Transvaal (South Africa), described as 'the artist's home, during the years 1913 to 1918.'⁹⁸ On her return she found her private vision of Africa among the tribal blacks in the 'unspoiled' areas of Natal, Swaziland and Pondoland, and particularly in Umgubaba, on the south coast of Natal, some 35 kilometres from Durban, where she found a rich tribal life in a sub-tropical setting with all the 'elements' of the 'primitive', 'savage' and 'exotic' so highly praised by the Expressionists.⁹⁹ Her reputation was established, when in 1927 the Leipzig firm Klinkhardt & Biermann published a six page monograph by Max Osborne, on her as no. 51 in a series, *Junge Kunst* (Young Art), that included Pechstein, Van Gogh, Cezanne and Matisse. The issue immediately before Irma Stern had dealt with Picasso.¹⁰⁰

When in 1920, twenty five year old Stern returned more or less permanently to South Africa, she had spent less than ten years there in all. The family settled in Cape Town where they rented a house situated at 34 Breda Street, on the corner of Prince Street in Oranjezicht.¹⁰¹ From the outset Stern was befriended and promoted by art lovers, Roza Van Gelderen and Hilda Purwitsky. According to Berman, who knew them

⁹⁶Pechstein was one of the founders of the *Neue Secession* and an early member of *Die Brücke*, the artists' colony founded in Dresden in 1905, that marked the birth of Expressionism. Schoeman, 1994, pp. 47-50.

⁹⁷ Schoeman 1994, p. 56-57, 54.

⁹⁸ Schoeman, 1994, p. 63

⁹⁹ Ibid, 1994, p. 79.

¹⁰⁰ Marion Arnold, "A Reputation in Print", in in *Irma Stern: Expressions of a Journey*, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, 2003, pp. 39-44.

¹⁰¹ Bosse, 12.7.1921, cited in Schoeman, 1994, p. 69.

personally, as friends of her parents, they were Stern's closest friends and supporters. Although they squabbled constantly and often would not talk to each other for weeks, particularly Stern and Van Gelderen, they were dependent on each other.¹⁰²

Stern gave lectures on modern art at their school and mentored some of the girls, most notably the Coloured artist, Valerie Desmore (b. 1925), who later became the first non-European woman to exhibit at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town in 1942.¹⁰³ In appreciation of their loyal support, Stern painted a mural in 1936 showing a maiden in flowing robes, seated beneath the Tree of Knowledge, surrounded by the branches and fruit of the tree. The mural stood above the entrance to the assembly hall of the new premises of the Central Girls' School in Vredehoek. After Stern's departure, however, the mural was painted over as unsuitable for children. All that remains of it today is a photograph found among Purwitsky's personal papers. Many years later the headmaster ruefully admitted that, "in those days we didn't know how famous she was to become."¹⁰⁴

Although unlike Purwitsky and Van Gelderen, there is no suggestion of lesbianism, Stern, who was married for a period of seven years, was fascinated by the female figure and the subjects of her paintings, whether black or white, were predominantly female.

"With deep feminine feeling she submerged herself in the individual life of her brown and black peoples, above all in the life of her coloured sisters, the girls and women of these mysterious races, whose noble origin was disclosed in the wonderfully slender, proportionately formed bodies, whose native innocence and simplicity of feeling that could be seen in their faces by one who could interpret their expressions."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Mona Berman, *Remembering Irma*, Johannesburg, 2003, pp. 114-116.

¹⁰³ Elza Miles, *Land and Lives: a Story of Early Black Artists*, Human and Rousseau, 1997, p. 89, cited in LaNitra Michelle Walker, *Pictures That Satisfy: Modernist Discourses and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Nation in the Art of Irma Stern (1894-1966)*, Thesis (Ph. D.) – Duke University, 2009, p. 117; Other black artists accused Stern of being unwilling to mentor them, Walker, footnote 116, p. 117.

¹⁰⁴ Curran, Margaret, "Search for the Tree of Knowledge", *Jagger Journal*, 3, December 1982: 33-34.

¹⁰⁵ Max Osborne, cited in Neville Dubow, *Irma Stern*, C. Struik Publishers, Cape Town, c1974, p. 16.

Like Purwitsky and Van Gelderen she was an intrepid traveler and a collector of African artifacts. Her forays to Dakar in Senegal, the Congo and Zanzibar, were undertaken on her own. These long journeys into central Africa in search of subjects to paint was no mean feat for a woman on her own in the 1930s, at a time when there was no air transport. They illustrated extraordinary independence and courage, as well as a belief, determination and conviction in her art.¹⁰⁶ Only much later on in life with the deterioration of her health did she travel together with a male companion.¹⁰⁷

In an interview in the *S. A. Jewish Chronicle* in 1929, columnist, Rozilda (a conflation of the names of Roza and Hilda), presented Irma Stern as vivacious, bright and sunny, with a silvery gurgling laugh. “Slightly temperamental, she is subject to momentary depressions, which are, however, easily dispelled. She is a little shy of strangers... With her friends she is merry and a sympathetic companion.”¹⁰⁸ However the truth is probably somewhat more complex. The product of a dual life, lived between South Africa and Berlin, Stern herself once confessed, that it had given her a feeling of belonging nowhere.¹⁰⁹ Her friend of girlhood days, Trude Bosse observed:

She really led a most restless life. She was disappointed and depressed most of the time and felt that life gave her more suffering than she could bear... I doubt if she was ever happy... perhaps only for a little while. She was restless and pleasure seeking, loved eating and drinking, and even smoked the occasional cigar.¹¹⁰

Jewish identity

Irma Stern came from a typically assimilated German family, celebrating Christmas but not the traditional Friday night meals with the lighting of candles and the blessing over the wine.¹¹¹ Stern recounts being informed of her Jewishness by an aunt when

¹⁰⁶ Crump, 2003, p. 25.

¹⁰⁷ Berman, 2003, pp. 129-153.

¹⁰⁸ SAJC, 23 November 1928, p. 764.

¹⁰⁹ In an interview in the *Rand Daily Mail* in 1931, Stern was quoted as saying that, “She does not think this divided upbringing is a good one... for it leaves one with the feeling of belonging to nowhere”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 28.5.1931, cited in Schoeman, 1994, p. 33.

¹¹⁰ *Paradise*, p. 80, Schoeman, 1994, pp. 82-83.

¹¹¹ On Christmas day, 25 December 1909, in Wolmaransstad, she writes: “Mother and I played duets. She was probably in a festive mood, for she insisted on playing and singing Christmas carols. It seemed so ridiculous as we did not celebrate Christmas at all this year. We had no tree, and only gave small

she was about six years old. Although initially very upset at the news, on her return to Germany in 1901, at the age of seven, she became very attached to her Jewish tutor, Fraulein Redel, and for a while describes herself as becoming quite observant.

She was very devout and had a great influence on me. Formerly I had never wanted to be a Jewess; once I stayed behind sobbing all by myself in the middle of a wood because Aunt Grete had called me a little Jewish girl. Now I became terribly pious. At least I believed that I had, for I would only eat meat from kosher butchers, and once Aunt Grete, with whom I was staying for a few days, discovered that I always tore off the toilet paper on Friday in order not to desecrate the Sabbath.¹¹²

However by the age of sixteen she had clearly abandoned any attempts at Jewish practice. It would seem that her father was more observant than her mother, as in September 1911 she writes about the Day of Atonement in these terms:

“Today is the Jewish New Year. Father is in Gottingen. I was glad, it meant I don’t have to go through all the ceremonies. I’m certainly not going to fast on the Day of Atonement. I think it is ridiculous. It reminds me of the wild animals in the zoo who aren’t fed on Wednesday and walk up and down their cages hungry. On Thursday they fling themselves on the meat as though they were crazy. In exactly the same way the starving people who have been fasting fall on their meal. They withhold themselves from nourishment in order to withdraw into themselves and think of other things. When I’m hungry I only think about food and don’t withdraw into myself.”¹¹³

On the other hand Stern also made no secret of her Jewishness. In Germany as in South Africa she moved primarily in Jewish circles. In March 1923, she was responsible for designing the Fairyland Fete on behalf of the Cape Jewish Orphanage and the Cape Jewish Board of Guardians. In the European summer of 1929, two of her water colours together with ‘other works in portfolio’ were shown in the

presents. I gave presents mainly to the Kaffirs, it was so touching to see how happy they were on Boxing Day.” Irma Stern, cited in Karel Schoeman, 1994, p. 23.

¹¹² Irma Stern, cited in Schoeman, 1994, p. 18.

¹¹³ Ibid, pp. 39-40.

Exhibition of Jewish Artists' at the Galerie Aktuaryus in Zurich, where the artists represented included Chagall, Pissaro, Modigliani and the German Impressionist, Max Liebermann.¹¹⁴

In South Africa her Jewish friends, Purwitsky¹¹⁵ and Richard Feldman, were among the first to demonstrate support of her work in the press.¹¹⁶ Interviews with her and articles about her appeared regularly in the South African Jewish newspapers. In 1925 an article in the *Zionist Record* about Stern and the painter and sculptor, Moses Kottler, questioned whether South Africa would yet produce a "Jewish" Jewish artist.¹¹⁷ In 1931 a survey of Jewish artists by Rozilda in *Hasholom Rosh Hashanah* annual, reviewed her work together with Kottler, Herbert and Eva Meyerowitz, Wolf Kibel and Israel Lipshitz. In 1942 Stern commissioned the writer, Joseph Sachs to write a book about her entitled *Irma Stern and the Spirit of Africa*.¹¹⁸

Much later in life, Stern toyed with the idea of Roman Catholicism, but according to art historian, Neville Dubow, who knew her personally, this was more of an expression of an interest in its iconography than in its spirituality. Dubow also relates that she tended to rediscover her Judaism every year at the time of the High Holy days, when she would complain about her lack of invitations from members of the Jewish community!¹¹⁹

Jewishness, however, was not a requirement for her parents' choice of a husband for her. Cultural snobs, her parents exerted a controlling influence on her personal life. and prevented her from forming a liaison with anybody who did not meet up with

¹¹⁴ Schoeman, 1994, p. 108.

¹¹⁵ "Gone is the usually sedate atmosphere of the room. Colours, wild, shrieking, crude, fling themselves at the onlooker. Grotesque, malformed bodies slowly detach themselves from the closely packed conglomeration with clamorous suggestions of customs entirely un-European... There is something crazy in that abundance of colour – harsh and blinding and immoderate. It is strong and virile, but so unrestrained and chaotic as to be almost indecent. There is no apparent law and order there – only a reckless smothering turmoil... But then, tropical nature is like that... and tropical men." Hilda Purwitsky, *Zionist Record*, 17.7.1925.

¹¹⁶ Feldman's 1926 review in the *Zionist Record*, is one of the first to describe Stern's fusion of modernist techniques with blacks as subjects as qualities of "an essentially South African artist", writing that Stern was "the first artist to reveal, to use the soul of Africa's black children." Feldman, "Irma Stern's New Paintings", *Zionist Record*, 1926.

¹¹⁷ *Zionist Record*, 7.7.1925.

¹¹⁸ Joseph Sachs, *Irma Stern and the Spirit of Africa*, Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1942.

¹¹⁹ Neville Dubow, "Irma Stern: a Personal View", in *Irma Stern: Expressions of a Journey*, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, 2003, pp. 53-54.

their standards. Dubow has suggested that her depiction of bare African bodies, symbolized her own desire for liberation from her own ungainly body and for the freedom that was lacking in her own personal life.¹²⁰ Eventually when she was still single at the age of 31, in April 1926, her parents prevailed upon her to marry her former tutor, Dr Johannes Prinz, who had come to join the Sterns in Cape Town in 1921, where he had obtained a position as an assistant lecturer in German at the University of Cape Town.¹²¹

According to Mona Berman, whose parents, Richard and Frieda Feldman, hosted her at their home during her frequent visits to Johannesburg, it was hardly a marriage. The two went their separate ways. Her husband's interests centred largely on academic life and on research and he did not even exhibit a great interest in her art.¹²² Stern kept up the unsettled, wandering way of life established in early childhood, and she was often away from home for long periods.¹²³ She did, however, buy a home base: The Firs, Chapel Road, Rosebank, a double-storeyed Victorian adaptation of an earlier and simpler house, situated conveniently near the site where the new university complex was then being planned. After her death in 1966, it became the Irma Stern Museum.¹²⁴

If Jewishness was not a requirement for her marriage, it was very likely the cause of the break up of her essentially estranged and loveless marriage seven years later. Stern visited Germany four times with her husband. However, with the Nazi Party's rise to power on 30 January 1933, she cut her ties with Germany. Her husband, on the other hand, who was visiting Germany only a few months after the burning of the books and the boycott of Jewish businesses, was quoted in the *Cape Times*, as saying that "the accounts we hear of Germany are vastly exaggerated." In 1933 she informed him that she was leaving him and wanted a divorce. Prinz remained on at the University of Cape Town until 1937 when he was dismissed and returned to Germany, where he died in 1942 at the age of 56.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ Ibid p. 55.

¹²¹ Schoeman, pp. 84-85.

¹²² Berman, 2003, pp. 108-110.

¹²³ "She goes on lengthy expeditions," "to the Transvaal, Natal, Portuguese East Africa, the Transkei, Swaziland and the native reserves", Purwitsky, *Reform Advocate*, 1929, cited in Schoeman, 1994, p. 90.

¹²⁴ Dubow, "Irma Stern's House", in *Irma Stern: Expressions of a Journey*, 2003, p. 45.

¹²⁵ Prinz, *Cape Times*, 15.7.1933, cited in Schoeman, 1994, p. 111.

With her divorce at the age of 39 years, Stern lost her connection to the German speaking world in Cape Town and was becoming increasingly involved in the English speaking art world. Five years after her mother's death in 1944, she professed to be barely able to write German any more.¹²⁶ From 1933 the notes and captions in her clippings book are no longer in German but in English. The two books that she published in the 1940s – on the Congo and Zanzibar – were in English. Germany was dead to her, as she wrote to Trude Bosse:

I have buried the past, that is why I have kept silent. One shudders when one thinks of a country, its culture, its well-disposed people, all in a mass grave, hence my silence, Now you know. There is scarcely anything personal involved. Everything that comes from Germany is like a vanished age to me, like an echo from a sunken world.¹²⁷

Because of her support by the leftist Jewish intelligentsia in Cape Town, it has been suggested that Stern was herself a socialist. However Stern was not a liberal. “Her art was political only in the sense that it portrayed a culture deemed inferior by the white minority, but she was never one to take up cudgels in her art for a political cause.”¹²⁸ Her attitude towards the Black people she drew and painted was simplistic, paternalistic and patronizing. In the *Paradise* journal, and in an interview published in 1926, she stated: “I found the natives lovely and happy children, laughing and singing and dancing through life with a peculiar animal-like beauty which adds a touch of the tragic to the expression on their faces – the heaviness of an awaking race not yet freed from the soil, so well portrayed by Rodin in his ‘Iron Age.’”¹²⁹ She regarded them as decorative objects rather than as individual human beings.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ When her contact with her long time friend, Trude Bosse was re-established she wrote, “Do you know that I can barely write German any more?- there's no-one with whom I can speak German”, Bosse, 1949, cited in Schoeman, 1994, p. 111.

¹²⁷ Bosse, 1949, cited in Schoeman, 1994, p. 111.

¹²⁸ Crump, “Irma Stern, the Determined Search for the Exotic”, in *Expressions of a Journey*, 2003, p. 26.

¹²⁹ Purwitsky, *Cape Argus*, 3.4.1926, cited in Schoeman, 1994, pp. 92-93.

¹³⁰ Schoeman, 1994, p. 92.

This claim has been recently challenged by Braude¹³¹ citing Irene Below, German curator of Stern's 1996 exhibition in Bielefeld, who perceived in Stern, a "politically awakened" artist whose "closeness to the reality of life in Africa" had led to "works that questioned current stereotypes."¹³² Braude bolsters her argument with Berman's observation that it was her father, the Yiddish writer and stalwart of the South African Labour Party, Richard Feldman, who alerted her to the plight of the urban African.¹³³ However there is no evidence of the oppressed urban African in Stern's paintings.

Braude's suggestion that the developments in Germany in the 1930s influenced Stern's resolve that she should look for civilization among the Africans in their natural habitat, before they were tainted by western civilization,¹³⁴ is more plausible, but evidence of her embracing of the expressionist's love of the naïve and the primitive, rather than of a social conscience. On the other hand Braude's suggestion that Stern's continuation in the style of the Expressionists after it had been superseded in Germany by the *Neue Sachlichkeit* – New Objectivity, was a deliberate gesture of defiance against Hitler's rejection of the genre as 'degenerate' and the confiscation of over 300 of her great mentor and friend, Pechstein's paintings in Germany,¹³⁵ (some of Stern's own paintings were also confiscated)¹³⁶ seems far fetched. It is far more likely that she had found her métier and isolated from new developments in Germany, she stuck to it.

Braude's argument about Stern's social conscience, contested by Dubow and others who knew Stern in her lifetime, is also discredited by new evidence that was brought to light in 2009 in a Ph.D. dissertation at Duke University in the United States by LaNitra Walker. Citing a statement of Stern's to the *Cape Times* in 1938, Walker shows her up as holding views similar to that of the average white South African of

¹³¹ Braude, "Beyond Black and White: Rethinking Irma Stern", *Focus*, 61, June 2011: 48.

¹³² Below, "Between Europe and Africa", in *Expressions of a Journey*, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, 2003, p. 33, cited in Braude, "Beyond Black and White" *Focus*, 61, June 2011, p. 48.

¹³³ Berman, 2003, footnote 8, p. 181, cited in Braude, 2011, p. 51; While Braude emphasizes the influence of Feldman on Stern, it is much more likely that Stern's paintings of Zulus in their natural habitat, inspired Feldman's depiction of a Swazi wedding (Braude, 2011, p. 53-54) in his story *Di Khasene* (The Wedding), included in his 1935 anthology, *Shvarts un Vays*, published in Warsaw. Stern contributed four illustrations to this collection.

¹³⁴ Braude, 2011, pp. 45-59.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 2011, p. 56.

¹³⁶ Walker, 2009, pp. 108-109.

that time, when she was repelled by racially integrated Dakar in Senegal.¹³⁷ She advised liberal white South Africans who objected to the colour bar in Cape Town, to go to Dakar for a month, “That would make them sit up.”¹³⁸

Walker further argues that Stern’s African paintings that focused on the African in his natural habitat rather than in the cities, accentuated the large cultural and racial divides, that were crucial to the creation of a cultural ideology for Apartheid.¹³⁹ In the final two decades of her life, 1948-1966, government officials routinely selected Stern’s paintings of South African ethnic groups for exhibitions to emphasize racial differences and justify Apartheid.¹⁴⁰

Sarah Goldblatt: Afrikaans nationalist

Another member of the circle of Van Gelderen and Purwitsky, who devoted her life to a cause rather than to a marriage, was Sarah Goldblatt. Her career path was not dissimilar to theirs. Like them she was both a teacher and a journalist. However whereas they promoted the visual arts, she dedicated herself to the promotion of Afrikaans culture. Like them she was also a forceful independent woman. She taught at Van Gelderen and Purwitsky’s school for a number of years, where she is remembered as “an interesting character with the temper of the devil”.¹⁴¹ When Purwitsky organized evening classes to teach English to the eastern European immigrant parents of her pupils, it was Goldblatt who assisted Purwitsky in designing the syllabus.¹⁴² The character of “Tante Saartjie”, her nickname, in Purwitsky and Van Gelderen’s regular column in the *Cape Times* is presumably based on her. They describe her in the following terms:

¹³⁷ Having witnessed an incident of a black man using the same public restroom as a white man in racially integrated Dakar in Senegal in 1938, Stern was so repelled, that she described the city as “the most beautiful place in the world and the most evil.” “Stern Words on Dakar”, *Johannesburg Sunday Times* 1938, cited in Walker, 2009, p. 124.

¹³⁸ “No Colour Bar at Dakar,” *Cape Times*, 3 March 1938, cited in Walker, 2009, p. 124.

¹³⁹ Walker, 2009, pp. 128, 114-115.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 2009, p. 168.

¹⁴¹ Dorothy Whitesman, 1981, p. 64; Esther Wilkin entered the Afrikaans Eistedford on her encouragement and was awarded a gold medal that was presented to her by Langenhoven. As a further reward Goldblatt also took her with her to have lunch with Langenhoven at the Parliament Buildings, Esther Wilkin, 1983, p. 32.

¹⁴² “In and Around the Peninsula: the End of the Evening Classes”, SAJC, 5 September 1930, p. 580.

“She was one of those women who pride themselves on being plain and outspoken. She invariably asserted that she would say what she had to say, even if the King stood in front of her. Although at heart one of the kindest and best-intentioned women in the world, she always succeeded in making everyone around her uncomfortable and irritable.”¹⁴³

As literary executrix to the ‘father of Afrikaans literature’, Cornelis Jakob Langenhoven (1873-1932),¹⁴⁴ Goldblatt’s name has become synonymous with the fight for the recognition of the Afrikaans language.¹⁴⁵ She was the first woman to be employed on the editorial board of the Afrikaans daily newspaper, *Die Burger*.¹⁴⁶ Appointed his literary executrix in his will¹⁴⁷, after his wife’s death in 1950,¹⁴⁸ she enjoyed sole control of his literary legacy. She promoted the perpetuation of his memory on every possible occasion. After the death of his wife she had his house in Oudtshoorn, Arbeidsgenot, preserved as a National monument.¹⁴⁹ She protected the rights of the family when his poem, *Die Stem*, was adopted as the national anthem of the Union of South Africa in 1957.¹⁵⁰ She was the inspiration behind the Jubilee celebration of his birth that was held in Oudtshoorn in 1973.¹⁵¹ After his death, in 1933 she had a bust of Langenhoven, sculpted by the Jewish sculptor, Herbert Vladimir Meyerowitz¹⁵², that she kept in her lounge surrounded by his photographs and his books.¹⁵³ After Meyerowitz’s death in 1945 she had I. Mitford-Barberton

¹⁴³ Rozilda, “After the Examinations”, *Cape Times*, 7 March, 1925, Rozilda, Newspaper articles, Hilda Purwitsky and Roza Van Gelderen papers, BC 1271.

¹⁴⁴ According to B. Booysens, Prof of Afrikaans Literature, the wide range of his output that included “nursery rhymes, children’s tales, cradle songs, limericks, poems, essays, plays, satires, novels, thrillers, ghost stories, translations, epic poems, religious speculations, lectures on morals, political treatises and a variety of journalistic contributions... provided handsomely for the intellectual needs of the Afrikaans-speaking community for whose reading capacity very little had thus far been offered.” cited in George Aschman in “Langenhoven Centenary this year: South Africa’s Debt to Sarah Goldblatt”, *Jewish Affairs*, 28(1), 1973:11

¹⁴⁵ G 22 L. 1. NB 10 Afskrifte van aantekeninge in ou dag`boeke.

¹⁴⁶ Leonie Van Zyl, Sarah Goldblatt: Letterkundige Administrasie van C. J. Langenhoven. (Thesis) M. A. - University of Stellenbosch, 2003, pp. 56-60.

¹⁴⁷ J.C. Kannemeyer, *Langenhoven: ’n Lewe*, Tafelberg, Kaapstad, 1995, pp. 18-20.

¹⁴⁸ Van Zyl, 2003, p. 91.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 81-86;

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 87;

¹⁵¹ Kannemeyer, 1995, pp. 48-65; Van Zyl, 2003, pp. 93-98.

¹⁵² Van Zyl, 2003, p. 91.

¹⁵³ Mary Phillips, cited in Kannemeyer, 1995, p. 74; Dorothy Whitesman (1981, p. 65) also mentions her bust of Langenhoven.

make some more busts. In 1959 the first of these busts was unveiled at the headquarters of the Cape Provincial Council.¹⁵⁴

What distinguishes Goldblatt from all the other women in this section, is that overseas travel did not play a determining role in her career. Staunchly identified with South Africa and its indigenous Afrikaans culture, one suspects that a satirical article, “Tante Saartjie on the Warpath” by Rozilda, that appeared in the *Cape Argus* on 12 July 1927, is modelled on her. In this article the protagonist insists that there is no need for overseas travel as South Africa is sufficiently cosmopolitan, with a vast native population, Dutch, English, Huguenots, Indians and Chinese. Besides it has fine collections of art and an orchestra and the sights of Europe could be viewed at the bioscope! They would be better off going to visit her on her farm.¹⁵⁵

It is interesting to speculate the factors in Goldblatt’s background that predisposed her to take up cudgels for the Afrikaans language. Goldblatt was born in London in 1889, the oldest of the four children of David Nathan Goldblatt and Fanny Esther Smith. Her father, David Goldblatt, was born in Radom in Poland in 1866. He was educated in a *yeshiva*, but also received some secular education in Warsaw and Berlin. Despite his *yeshiva* education he was not religious and a contemporary described him “as a brilliant outspoken socialist Yiddishist, with little pretence of orthodoxy.”¹⁵⁶ At the age of twenty three he married and emigrated to London where Goldblatt was born. He opened a bookshop that his wife kept an eye on while he studied at the British Museum, where he became acquainted with socialist and anarchist philosophy, very popular at that time.¹⁵⁷

In 1897 the family emigrated to Cape Town. David Goldblatt opened a bookshop in Long Street and also started a small printing works, publishing a series of Yiddish newspapers. Initially unsuccessful, in 1904 he began publishing the weekly *Der*

¹⁵⁴ Van Zyl, 2003, p. 91.

¹⁵⁵ “A Page for Women: Off to See the World: the Little Friend Departs: Tante Saartjie on the War Path”, *Cape Argus*, 12 July 1927.

¹⁵⁶ Schrire & Schrire [In press] Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research.

¹⁵⁷ Gustav Saron, “Western Province Jewry, 1870-1902” in Saron & Hotz, eds, *The Jews in South Africa*, 1955, p. 43; Gustav Saron, “David Goldblatt: Champion of Yiddish, *Zionist Record and S. A. Jewish Chronicle*, *New Year Annual*, September 1978; M. De Saxe, *The South African Jewish Year Book 1929*, p. 253.

Idisher Advokat (The Jewish Advocate) that lasted until 1914.¹⁵⁸ David Goldblatt was a staunch Jewish nationalist, a Yiddishist, who believed that Jews should unite under the banner of the Yiddish language, much as Langenhoven believed that the Afrikaners should support Afrikaans. He was associated with the fight for the recognition of Yiddish as a language that would permit Jews to immigrate to South Africa, and was one of the earliest members of the Cape Jewish Board of Deputies.¹⁵⁹ In 1915 he abandoned his family and left first for London and then for the United States¹⁶⁰ where he published the first two volumes of a Yiddish encyclopedia.¹⁶¹

Goldblatt attended St Martini Schule that was opposite her home in Hope Street.¹⁶² Contrary to Van Zyl's claim that her father valued education equally for men as for women,¹⁶³ she was forced to leave school after Standard Four to help in her father's printing shop. On the other hand, her younger brother, Israel, continued his education to matric at Normal College and went on to obtain a B.A. degree at the University of the Cape of Good Hope, and an L.L.B. through the University of South Africa. In 1919 he was admitted to the Bar. His older siblings all contributed to his education.¹⁶⁴ However Goldblatt continued to study Nederlands privately,¹⁶⁵ and in 1911 she passed the Zuid-Afrikaanse Taalbond examination in the Second Class.¹⁶⁶ In the same year she also completed her T3 at the Teachers' Training college.¹⁶⁷ Only many years later, in 1924, together with Purwitsky,¹⁶⁸ she completed her matric examination. Like Van Gelderen and Purwitsky, Goldblatt was not immediately able to find a teaching

¹⁵⁸ Joseph Abraham Poliva, *A Short History of the Jewish Press and Literature of South Africa From its Earliest Days Until the Present Time*, Johannesburg [1961], pp. 16-17.

¹⁵⁹ Milton Shain, *Jewry and Cape Society: the Origins and Activities of the Jewish Board of Deputies for the Cape Colony*. Historical Publication Society, Cape Town, c1983, pp. 83, 91.

¹⁶⁰ Naomi Jacobson, Karen Blum-Marshall, "Who was Israel Goldblatt: an introduction", in Israel Goldblatt, *Building bridges: Namibian Nationalists, Clemens Capuuo, Hosea Kutako, Brendan Simbwaye, Samuel Witbooi*, edited by Dag Henrichson, Naomi Jacobson and Karen Marshall, Basler Afrika Biographien, Basel, 2010, pp. vii-viii.

¹⁶¹ *Di Algemeyne Ilustrirte Entsiklopedye*. Nyuyork: Advansd Entsiklopedye, 1920-1923 (3 vols).

¹⁶² Kannemeyer, 1995, p.21, and C.J. Beyers, (red) *Suid Afrikaanse Biografiese Woordeboek*, V, p. 312, cited in Van Zyl, 2003, p. 7; Naomi Jacobson and Karen Blum-Marshall, describe it as the Deutsche School in Queen Victoria Street, 2010, pp. viii-ix.

¹⁶³ Van Zyl, 2003, p. 41.

¹⁶⁴ Naomi Jacobson, Karen Blum-Marshall, 2010, pp. viii-ix.

¹⁶⁵ Van Zyl, 2003, p. 9.

¹⁶⁶ G 202. Pe D. 1 (2), Sertifikaat aan Sarah Goldblatt van die Zuid-Afrikaanse Taalbond, 1911, cited in Van Zyl, 2003, p. 10.

¹⁶⁷ G 202. Pe D. 3 (5), Aansoekform as skoolhoof by departement van opvoeding, g.d., cited in Van Zyl, 2003, p. 11.

¹⁶⁸ Purwitsky, 1981, pp. 6-8..

post in Cape Town. In 1912 she moved to Oudtshoorn, a town with a flourishing Jewish community, where she was employed at the Commercial Evening School.¹⁶⁹

In September 1912 she was employed as an assistant on the newspaper, *Het Zuid Westen*, a twice weekly newspaper, to which the famous Afrikaans author, Cornelis Jakob Langenhoven, had just been appointed editor. Although she knew no Afrikaans at the time, with her background in Yiddish, German and High Dutch, she mastered the language very quickly and soon made the struggle for the Afrikaans language her own. She and Langenhoven developed a very close relationship, both at work and at home. When with the collapse of the ostrich feather industry in 1915, the newspaper folded, Goldblatt returned to teaching, first at the Commercial Evening School in Oudtshoorn, then moving to a school in George, where she helped to introduce teaching in the Afrikaans medium.¹⁷⁰

In 1917 she returned to Cape Town where between 1918 and 1919, she was employed on the editorial board of *Die Burger*, while continuing to act as Langenhoven's assistant proof reading the manuscripts that he sent her. She would also on occasion have to make decisions on his behalf and this was the beginning of her work in her capacity as Langenhoven's executrix.¹⁷¹

In 1919, after leaving *Die Burger*, she taught Afrikaans at the Tokai Public School, the Cape Town Training College in Retreat as well as at the Central Girls' School under Roza Van Gelderen. During this period she obtained a Higher Primary Teaching Diploma and passed the Hoer Taalbond examination. She also studied further in Dutch and German and did courses in Psychology. Until her retirement in 1944 she was connected to the Brooklyn Primary School, and also taught at Herschel Girls' School, Christian Brothers' College in Sea Point as well as at the Kindergarten Teachers' Training College in Claremont.¹⁷² In addition she gave private lessons at her home to students as well as to members of the public¹⁷³ and between 1961 and 1962 she gave lessons on the Afrikaans Programme of the radio that were very highly

¹⁶⁹ Kannemeyer, 1995, p. 21.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, pp. 21-22; Van Zyl, 2003, pp. 37-45

¹⁷¹ Van Zyl, 2003. pp. 44-46.

¹⁷² Kannemeyer, 1995, p. 22.

¹⁷³ Van Zyl, 2003, pp. 75-76.

rated.¹⁷⁴ She also published three collections of Afrikaans poetry¹⁷⁵ that were not that well received. According to Langenhoven's biographer, J. C. Kannemeyer, despite her embracing of Afrikaans under Langenhoven's tutelage, she was never completely at home in the language and her usage was at times faulty. Similarly her reviews of the latest Afrikaans works were often superficial displaying limited insight. Kannemeyer describes her as highly intelligent but not really creative.¹⁷⁶

Her relationship with Langenhoven

Goldblatt was 23 years old when she began working as assistant to Langenhoven, who was sixteen years her senior and married with a daughter to a woman ten years older than himself.¹⁷⁷ When Langenhoven came down to Cape Town he used to stay at Goldblatt's home¹⁷⁸ and there is much speculation as to the nature of their relationship that continued until his death in 1932. Her passionate dedication to his cause has been attributed by some to the fact that theirs was a romantic relationship, and by others to her sublimation for being romantically unfulfilled and not having a family of her own.¹⁷⁹

Although there are no love letters to be found among their correspondence, in a letter dated January 1926, Goldblatt writes that she had destroyed any letters that did not deal with matters pertaining to his manuscripts, to the press or to politics.¹⁸⁰ Members of both her own¹⁸¹ and Langenhoven's family¹⁸² assert that their relationship was not purely platonic, and it is very likely true that as Mary Phillips wrote after her death, "theirs was one of the world's greatest love stories." Phillips felt that there could be no doubt that Langenhoven returned her great love and admiration for him in every way, while at the same time never ceasing to love his wife and daughter. She writes

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, pp. 72-73.

¹⁷⁵ *Liefde's Kransie*, H. J. de Bussy, Pretoria; Amsterdam, 1920; *Wolf en Jakhals versies*, Nasionale Pers, Kaapstad, 1920-1921.

¹⁷⁶ Kannemeyer, 1995, pp. 22-24.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 21.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 645.

¹⁷⁹ This was the opinion of her close friend the Afrikaans writer, Elsa Joubert, Kannemeyer, 1995, p. 649.

¹⁸⁰ Van Zyl, 2003, p. 49.

¹⁸¹ Conversation with Goldblatt's niece, Karen Marshal, 2010.

¹⁸² His granddaughter, Joyce Pocock said that there was no doubt about their affair; and Guillaume Brummer, Langenhoven's grandson, relates that as an eleven year old while sleeping in his mother's room one night, he overheard his grandmother telling his mother that she had tolerated her husband's relationship with Goldblatt because she loved him, and also that she had once caught them in bed together at their home, Kannemeyer, 1995, pp. 651-653.

that “The straightlaced Victorian attitudes of his day demanded a strict code of social behavior”, and attributes the fact that Goldblatt agreed to remain in the background to Langenhoven’s determination to gain acceptance for Afrikaans as an official language.¹⁸³

Jewish identity

Goldblatt’s identification with Afrikaans nationalism had some bearing on her Jewish identity. Given her father’s socialist views and lack of religious orthodoxy it is unlikely that she ever held very strong Jewish religious convictions. Langenhoven tried to influence her to believe in the Christian concept of God, but he never had much success.¹⁸⁴ She did not put much store upon either religion, neither Judaism nor Christianity. In a diary entry in 1970 she expresses a wish to be cremated and does not desire any form of religious service.¹⁸⁵ Afrikaans friends who visited her in her final illness commented on her lack of an anchor in her faith but that at times she called on Jesus Christ while also being visited by a rabbi.¹⁸⁶ In her will she requested to be cremated and her ashes to be spread on Langenhoven’s grave.¹⁸⁷

As she adopted the cause of the Afrikaans culture, rather than that of English, the dominant culture of the Jewish community, she distanced herself from the community. Her closest friends included Maria Elizabeth Rothmann, one of the first women to obtain a degree,¹⁸⁸ a distinguished Afrikaans journalist and writer, feminist and supporter of the Women’s Enfranchisement League, very rare for Afrikaans speaking women,¹⁸⁹ as well as Afrikaans writers, Elsa Joubert and Alba Bouwer. Yet despite the claims of historical novelist, Mary Phillips, writing after her death in the *Sunday Express*, Goldblatt was never regarded as an ‘outcast’ in the Jewish community.¹⁹⁰ This despite the fact that her mother,¹⁹¹ who resented her gentile

¹⁸³ Phillips, cited in Kannemeyer, 1995, pp. 73-74.

¹⁸⁴ Kannemeyer, 1995, p.

¹⁸⁵ G 22 L. 1. NB 10 Afskrifte van aantekeninge in ou dagboeke. Langenhoven collection, Gericke Bibliotheek.

¹⁸⁶ Kannemeyer, 1995, p. 662.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Rothman obtained a degree at the South African College in 1896, Etaine Eberhard, “Woman at SAC and UCT”, 1987, p. 8.

¹⁸⁹ M.E.R. *My Beskeie Deel: ‘n Outobiografiese Vertelling*, Tafelberg, Kaapstad, 1972, pp. 72-73, cited in L. Van Zyl, 2003, p. 66; Van Zyl, 2003, pp. 44, 107.

¹⁹⁰ Mary Phillips, cited in Kannemeyer, 1995, p. 5.

¹⁹¹ Naomi Jacobson and Karen Blum-Marshall, 2010, p viii

friends and made them unwelcome in Goldblatt's home, regarded her as 'a lost soul'.¹⁹² Both Phillips and Van Zyl, underestimate the effect of her staunch identification with the Zionist movement, and that despite her choice of friends, she still identified strongly with the Jewish community that never failed to celebrate her achievements which enhanced their status in South Africa.¹⁹³

Besides, she never cut herself off completely from the Jewish community. On her arrival in Oudtshoorn she gave a lecture to the Bnoth Zion,¹⁹⁴ and on 15 June 1914 she was acting in the capacity of Honorary Secretary of the Oudtshoorn Zionist society.¹⁹⁵ On more than one occasion, she contributed articles to Jewish newspapers, such as *The Zionist Record*, *Hashalom*, and *Jewish Affairs*. She drew up a curriculum for Afrikaans language and literature for the Zionist Youth Movement Habonim, although it was possibly slightly over ambitious for a group of that nature.¹⁹⁶

However as part of the Afrikaner group, she also identified with Langenhoven's staunch Afrikaner Nationalist views, and was very critical of the Jewish community for acculturating exclusively to the English speaking group and of regarding the Afrikaners as inferior. She felt that Jewish exclusivity had contributed to the resentments towards the Jews that were expressed by the Afrikaners, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s. She was torn between the demands of her dual identities, Jewish and Afrikaner. In a letter she writes that, "I am a Jewess born and know all there is to be known of Jewish attitudes and at the same time I am Afrikaans in every fibre of my body, and I have felt the pain and anger of the contempt of superiority."¹⁹⁷

Goldblatt passed away on 22 May 1975 in a mental hospital.¹⁹⁸ On 23 May the leader article in *Die Burger* was devoted to her. Her connection to Langenhoven was described as having grown "into a lifelong connection with a new language and a new people". "Her belief in him became a belief in them as well, stronger than that of the

¹⁹² Letter from Goldblatt to a Mr Hotz in Bloemfontein in the Langenhoven archive, Gericke Biblioteek.

¹⁹³ See George Aschman, 1973: 11-14.

¹⁹⁴ *Zionist Record*, 26 February 1913, p. 25.

¹⁹⁵ *Zionist Record*, 15 June 1914, p. 6.

¹⁹⁶ Joodse aangeleentede. Langenhoven collection, Gericke Biblioteek.

¹⁹⁷ Letter from Goldblatt to a Mr Hotz in Bloemfontein; Leonie Van Zyl, Sarah Goldblatt, 2003, pp. 56-60.

¹⁹⁸ Van Zyl, 2003, p. 99; Kannemeyer, 1995, pp. 666-668.

Afrikaners themselves...” Her memorial service at the Maitland Crematorium was attended by Senator Johan van der Spuy, Minister of National Education, The Rev. Charles Hopkins, who read Psalm 23 and the first verse of the Book of Ruth, described Goldblatt as “a gift to South Africa at a time when such people were needed.” The former Mayoress, Mrs Joyce Newton Thompson, paid tribute to Goldblatt on behalf of the English speaking community to whom she was well known as a teacher of Afrikaans. The Secretary of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, Issie Pinshaw, spoke movingly in Afrikaans about “the unfathomability of the adventures of the East European Jews who emigrated to South Africa and as Boerejode identified with the striving of the Afrikaans people.” He concluded with a poem by the Jewish poetess, Miriam Yalan-Stekelis, translated into Afrikaans. The ceremony concluded with the last verse of *Die Stem*, the South African national anthem.¹⁹⁹

Goldblatt’s ashes were not sprinkled on Langenhoven’s grave as she had requested, but were placed in a container and buried in the garden of Arbeidsgenot in front of the bust of Langenhoven by I. Mitford Barberton that Goldblatt herself had donated.²⁰⁰

Muriel Alexander, Leontine Sagan and Sarah Sylvia

Another area where South African Jewish women played a leading role in the first decades of the twentieth century, was in the theatre. During this period women still risked their reputations and their respectability by venturing on to the stage.²⁰¹ In the words of Sophie Levisieur (1857-1961), who grew up in the Orange Free State Republic in early Victorian times, “hands and eyebrows were raised in horror when a girl dared to become an actress.”²⁰² Jews who embraced the stage were generally the more assimilated and some adopted a bohemian lifestyle. In effect the theatre replaced their religion. A life on the stage was not conducive to a settled home life and like Irma Stern, Muriel Alexander was briefly married, Sarah Sylvia had children but her

¹⁹⁹ Kannemeyer, 1995, pp. 666-667.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 1995, pp. 667-668.

²⁰¹ From the year 1662 when it first became law in England that women should play women’s parts, companies exploited the sexual availability of actresses in order to attract audiences. Actresses continued to be exploited as sexual commodities throughout the nineteenth century. Alison Oddey, *Performing Women: Standups, Strumpets and Itinerants*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2006, p. 9.

²⁰² Levisieur, 1982, p. 59.

marriage did not last, only Leontine Sagan had a successful marriage but never had any children.

Muriel Alexander, Leontine Sagan and Sarah Sylvia devoted their lives to the stage at a time when there were no indigenous theatre companies in South Africa. Children of immigrants to South Africa, all three brought international influences to bear on their work, and their career paths were determined by their heritage. In their dedication to their craft all three were obliged to spend lengthy periods of time working overseas - Alexander at the London Academy of Sir Beerbohm Tree (forerunner of RADA); Sagan with the great theatrical director, Max Reinhardt in Germany, Austria and with the renowned Ivor Novello in London; and Sarah Sylvia with touring Yiddish theatre companies in London and Argentina. While the achievements of all three women were seminal in their respective fields, the name of Muriel Alexander is the only name that is at all familiar in a South African context, as the Alexander Theatre in Johannesburg is named after her. Sarah Sylvia was the single most important personality in the history of Yiddish theatre in South Africa, a theatre that reflects her life and fortunes. Born into a family of Austrian Jews who immigrated to South Africa, Leontine Sagan's achievements in Germany and London are hardly remembered, while her work in South Africa is virtually unknown.

Alexander (b. 1884) and Sagan (b. 1890) share similar profiles. Both were born into solidly middle class Jewish families who had lived in England and Austria for generations and who were thoroughly assimilated. Alexander's father, Abraham Davidson Alexander, known as ADA, was born in Australia, but came from a family that had its roots in Exeter in Devon, where they had settled some time during the eighteenth century. In the words of Sowden, her biographer, "There was a generation of Jews which lived practically without religion, certainly without its forms, having drifted away from their own religion without embracing any other..."²⁰³ We are told that at the age of nine Alexander knew no Hebrew, neither did she ever express any interest in learning it or of becoming familiar with Jewish customs and rituals.²⁰⁴ When in Johannesburg in 1909 she married the gentile, Gordon Todd, the difference of religion was not considered a barrier and even when he offered to convert, his offer

²⁰³ Sowden, 1964, p. 65.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, pp. 32-33.

was turned down by her father with the comment that, “Your religion does not concern me”.²⁰⁵

Sagan was born in 1890 in Budapest to Isidore Schlesinger (1840-1905) and Emma Fasel (1854-1940) from Austrian Silesia. Sagan describes her family as “belonging to the bourgeoisie of medical men, lawyers, engineers and manufacturers. They were well-to-do respectable Jewish people who had completely assimilated with the middle class of old Austria. Their children went to schools and universities and in no way differed from other young Austrians.”²⁰⁶ Her father had immigrated to South Africa in the 1860s in the wake of the discovery of diamonds in Griqualand West but returned to Budapest to find a bride. When he returned to South Africa his family moved to Vienna where Sagan attended a convent school where she was the only Jewish girl among a majority of Christians.²⁰⁷

Although she married a German Jew, the art historian and publisher, Victor Fleischer, Sagan knew little about her religion, and describes researching it for the first time for the production of the pogrom play by Berlin Rabbi Emil Barnard, *Die Jagd Gottes* (Hunted by God) in 1923 at the Schauspielhaus, the State theatre in Frankfurt. Sagan writes that, staging *Hunted by God*, “brought me closer to Judaism than I had ever been. I did research in the Jewish Museum in the Old City. I went to the synagogues and to Jewish homes.”²⁰⁸ When after a performance in Germany in Hebbel’s *Maria Magdalena*, she was dubbed the ‘gothic Jewess’, it made her very proud.²⁰⁹

Sarah Sylvia, born Serke Goldstein, was the exception, having been born into a working class eastern European immigrant family in London in May 1890.²¹⁰ When Sarah Sylvia was two years old, the family emigrated to Cape Town, where her father worked as a shoemaker. Struggling to support his large family, he left to try his luck

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 1964, p. 65.

²⁰⁶ Leontine Sagan, *Light and shadows: the autobiography of Leontine Sagan*, edited and introduced by Loren Kruger, Witwatersrand University Press, 1996, p. 2.

²⁰⁷ Sagan, 1996, p. 2.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 1996, pp. 94-95.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 95. As Bernard Sachs wrote “She holds Jewish culture in the highest regard, and finds the Israel experiment exciting, but they are not part of her spiritual warp and woof”, *South African Personalities and Places*, Kayor, Johannesburg, 1959, p.147.

²¹⁰ “Sere Silvye”, Zalman Zylbercweig’s *Leksikon fun Yidishn Teater*, vol. 2. Varshe: Farlag Elisheva, 1934, p. 1486, gives her birth date as 18 May 1893, but this does not tally with any of the other sources.

on the diamond fields. Sarah Sylvia's mother worked as a midwife and was called out at all hours, leaving Sarah to look after her younger siblings.²¹¹ Sarah Sylvia attended the Hebrew Public school but left school very early to help to support her family.²¹²

Alexander and Sagan grew up in the Transvaal. Born in Hope Street in Cape Town in 1884, Alexander grew up on the goldfields. Her father was No. 3 on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange and made and lost three fortunes.²¹³ Sagan came to South Africa in 1899 at the age of nine, when she first met her father, Isidore Schlesinger (1840-1905) who was living in Klerksdorp, a small town in the Transvaal, where he ran a bar.²¹⁴ Six months later when war was declared, the family moved to Johannesburg where they joined a small colony of Austrian and German immigrants and Sagan attended the German school.²¹⁵

Like Irma Stern, Sagan spent only brief periods of her youth in South Africa. In 1902 she returned to Vienna to complete her education, but between 1904 and 1910, she lived with her family in Doornfontein, in those years a middle class area, of merchants, doctors and lawyers, where her brother had built himself a house.²¹⁶ Her formative years were spent in Vienna and her dramatic training and her career were pursued in Austria, Germany and London. In her own words, "I'm steeped in German culture and that is where my spiritual roots are."²¹⁷ She did, nonetheless, become very attached to South Africa, the home of her parents and siblings, returning on family visits, directing amateur theatre in Cape Town and Johannesburg, but only returning permanently in 1947.

While Alexander's dramatic imagination was fired by the tales from Shakespeare that her mother used to read to her,²¹⁸ Sagan's dramatic imagination was inspired by the poetry of Schiller that she learnt at the German School that she attended in

²¹¹ Natalie Knight, 'Sarah Sylvia: a personal recollection, *Jewish Affairs*, 60(4), 2006: 21

²¹² Zylbercweig, 1934, vol. 2, p. 1486.

²¹³ Lewis Sowden, *Both sides of the mask: the world of Muriel Alexander*. H. Timmins, Cape Town, 1964, pp. 10-15.

²¹⁵ Sagan, 1996, pp. 5-12.

²¹⁵ Sagan, 1996, pp. 5-12.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, 1996, pp. 31-32.

²¹⁷ Sachs, 1959, p. 147.

²¹⁸ Sowden, 1964, pp. 15.

Johannesburg.²¹⁹ Sarah Sylvia on the other hand, was not inspired by a love of literature, much like the famous Molly Picon in the United States,²²⁰ she began performing in a language that she did not understand.²²¹ Both Alexander and Sarah Sylvia were child prodigies. Alexander made her public debut at the age of nine, dancing and singing on the stage of the Standard Theatre.²²² Sarah Sylvia was ‘discovered’ as a child when one of the directors of the visiting Yiddish theatre troupes that travelled the Yiddish speaking world at the turn of the century,²²³ came to the Hebrew Public school to find children for his productions.²²⁴ Sarah Sylvia made her debut in 1897 at the age of seven, at the Winter Gardens, the home of the Yiddish theatre in the working class suburb of District Six in Cape Town.²²⁵ Although Sagan’s talent at recitation was recognized at her school,²²⁶ she never performed in public in Johannesburg before venturing to train overseas.

Both Alexander and Sagan, as was the custom among Anglo-German Jews in those days, were taken overseas by their parents to complete their education. After private tutoring with a Miss Buckland who would become the first Principal of Johannesburg Girls’ High School,²²⁷ in 1896 Alexander briefly attended Kensington High School in England.²²⁸ At the end of the South African War in 1902, Sagan’s mother took her to Vienna for two years to attend a ‘Boarding school for Young Ladies’ while they attended the theatre and the opera two to three times a week.²²⁹ Sylvia, on the other hand, was always embarrassed by her lack of education, that prevented her from

²¹⁹ Sagan, 1996, pp. 14-15.

²²⁰ Molly Picon was the foremost Yiddish actress on stage and screen in the United States in the twentieth century, see, Molly Picon, *So Laugh a Little*, Messner, New York, 1962, and J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish film Between Two Worlds*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1995.

²²¹ L. Godman, “Sera Silvye, interesante teater geshtalt: tsu ir 70 yorikn jubiley”, *Dorem Afrike*, May-June 1960, p. 8.

²²² Sowden, 1964, pp. 20-21.

²²³ “Sere Silvye”, in Z. Zylbercweig. 1934, p. 1486.

²²⁴ Sarah’s granddaughter, Doreen Gerassi, relates that she was discovered together with another little girl by the name of Sylvia. When Sylvia died, Sarah took over her name, becoming Sarah Sylvia. Doreen Gerassi, telephone call, 2008. Sarah attributed her name to Maurice Axelrod, the stage manager of the Waxman-Wallerstein company, who told her that it was the name of a queen, Knight, 2006: 20.

²²⁵ She was only on the stage for ten minutes, but she describes those ten minutes as the most important ten minutes of her life. Sarah Sylvia, ‘Mayne ershte teatrale shrit: zikhroynes-fragnentn fun a Yidisher aktrise’, *Dorem Afrike*, May/June 1960: 9.

²²⁶ Sagan, 1996, pp. 14-15.

²²⁷ Sowden, 1964, pp. 16-17.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

²²⁹ Sagan, 1996, pp. 21-26.

advancing in her career and going over to the English stage when she had the opportunity.²³⁰

Overseas

All the women pursued their careers overseas, in London, Germany, Austria and Argentina. Alexander and Sagan had the benefit of the finest training available at that time: Alexander with Sir Beerbohm Tree, whose academy was the forerunner of RADA; and Sagan with Europe's foremost director, Max Reinhardt's academy in Berlin.

Both Alexander and Sagan's mothers came to join them to protect their respectability and reputations. Alexander's father was not keen for her to travel to London on her own to pursue an acting career.²³¹ She was accompanied on the boat by her married sister and in London boarded with four maiden aunts.²³² When after 18 months²³³ she was offered a three-year contract with Sir Beerbohm Tree's company at His Majesty's Theatre,²³⁴ her mother came over to live with her in London.²³⁵

Her mother remained with her until 1909, when the sudden illness of her father forced them return to Johannesburg, oblivious to the negative effects this might have on Alexander's budding career.²³⁶ Similarly from 1911 when Sagan began performing at theatres in Bohemia, Dresden, Vienna and Frankfurt her mother came over to join her.²³⁷ In 1918 Sagan married Victor Fleischer (1882-1950), a Jewish art historian and publisher from Vienna.²³⁸

Sagan's great breakthrough came in 1930 when she agreed to produce the play, *Gestern und Heute* (Yesterday and Today) by Christa Winsloe. The success of this production led to her directing the film version, *Madchen in Uniform*, for the Carl

²³⁰ Knight, 2006, p. 21

²³¹ Sowden, 1964, pp. 25-26.

²³² Ibid, pp. 31-33.

²³³ Ibid, p. 38.

²³⁴ Ibid, pp. 52-54.

²³⁵ Ibid, pp. 55-56.

²³⁶ Ibid, pp. 61-64.

²³⁷ Sagan, 1996, pp. 5466.

²³⁸ Ibid, p. 84.

Froelich film studio.²³⁹ The film was groundbreaking, firstly for its all female cast, and secondly for its sympathetic portrayal of a lesbian homoerotic relationship between a fourteen year old girl and her teacher.²⁴⁰ It earned Sagan an international reputation and went on to become a classic of the Weimar and feminist cinema.²⁴¹

In 1933 the film was banned as ‘decadent’ by the Nazi regime,²⁴² and because of her Jewishness, the German distributors deliberately omitted her name from British billboards, attributing the film solely to the Froelich Studios. The downplaying of her role as director, undoubtedly contributed to the lack of speculation about her sexual identity. A forceful personality, Sagan displayed an interest in directing plays set in all women’s institutions and in the portrayal of strong independent women. However, the fact that she enjoyed a long and devoted marriage, would make any tendency to lesbianism extremely unlikely. It is more probable, as suggested by Kruger, that as an actress she was interested in exploring the continuum of women’s experience.²⁴³ The film brought her to the attention of songwriter, composer, actor-producer, Ivor Novello,²⁴⁴ whose musical productions she directed in London to great acclaim.²⁴⁵ She was Drury Lane’s first woman producer.²⁴⁶

Sarah Sylvia launched her career at the Empire Theatre of Varieties in Ferreirastown in Johannesburg, playing the lead in Abraham Goldfaden’s classic musical *Shulamis* at the age of just seventeen. With her husband, Lazarus Herbert, whom she married at

²³⁹ Ibid, pp. 110-115.

²⁴⁰ The story depicts a spirited and independent teenager, Manuela, who when her mother dies, is sent to a strict Prussian boarding school. Along with the rest of the young girls, Manuela develops a crush on Elizabeth Von Bernberg, a young teacher. Manuela’s mistake is to announce her love at a public gathering. The play was purportedly based on a true story. It is set at the same boarding school that the author attended as a young girl and according to Hertha Thiela, who played the part of Manuela in the film version, Winsloe, was herself a lesbian, and had admitted to having written it from her heart. However, Thiela also stressed that the film was as much about lesbianism as a revolt against the cruel Prussian education system. Loren Kruger, “Introduction”, in Sagan, 1996, p. xix.

²⁴¹ From its premier at the Capitol Cinema in Berlin until 1934 the film was said to have grossed some RM6 million. It was distributed outside Germany in Rumania, Japan, the United States (where it was first banned and then released in a heavily cut version), England and France. It won awards at the Venice Film Festival in 1931 and in Japan in 1934. Sagan, 1996, pp. 110-116.

²⁴² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madchen_in_Uniform_\(1931_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madchen_in_Uniform_(1931_film))

²⁴⁴ His plays dominated British musical theatre from the mid 1930s to the early 1950s. Blending musicals with opera, operetta and both modern and classical dance, these shows, had a highly individual style of their own. Paul Webb, *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, cited in ‘Ivor Novello’, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivor_Novello

²⁴⁵ Sagan, 1996, pp. 161-170, 198-200, 215, 217-218.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 1996, p. 161.

the age of nineteen, as her theatrical manager, she was engaged by the Empire Theatre. She was so popular that when the theatre burnt down, a Benefit evening was staged for her, from the proceeds of which she bought a ticket to London for herself and her two-year old son where she joined the company of Maurice Moscovitch at the Pavilion theatre in Whitechapel, the home of Yiddish theatre in London.²⁴⁷

Whereas the families of Alexander and Sagan did everything in their power to protect their daughters' reputations and respectability, from the outset Sarah Sylvia had to make her way on her own in a milieu that was renowned for acting as a cover for more salacious activities. In Johannesburg, the Empire Theatre of Varieties in Ferreira Street,²⁴⁸ where Sarah Sylvia played her first major role at the age of seventeen, was in the heart of the Red Light district. Van Onselen has established a definite connection between certain individuals in the Yiddish theatre in South Africa, who were involved in the international trafficking in women, several of whom were operating brothels on the Rand.²⁴⁹ This is confirmed by Sarah Sylvia herself. In an interview published in the *S.A. Jewish Times* in 1960, Sarah Sylvia openly admits to being well acquainted with the Jewish pimps and relates that the Jewish brothel keepers, referred to colloquially as the *chevreleit* (friends) or *tma'im* (impure), made substantial financial contributions to the Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg.²⁵⁰

In London Sarah Sylvia's success as a dramatic actress on the Yiddish stage resulted in an offer to perform in English in the West End. However she lacked the confidence as she felt handicapped by her lack of education.²⁵¹ She became Moscovitch's leading lady, and in 1913 she travelled with his company to Argentina.²⁵²

On the other hand her personal life always took second place and a travelling theatre company was not conducive to raising a family. Her second child, a daughter, was

²⁴⁷ Reuven Zygielbaum, 'The Darling of the theatre: Sarah Sylvia', *Jewish Affairs*, 33(2), 1978: 27; Knight, 2006, p. 21.

²⁴⁸ SAJC, 22 September 1905.

²⁴⁹ Charles Van Onselen, E-mail, 2002.

²⁵⁰ B. Sachs, 'Sarah Sylvia: a life before the footlights', in *S.A. Jewish Times*, 18 March 1960, p. 17; Veronica Belling, *A History of Yiddish Theatre in South Africa: from the Late Nineteenth Century to 1960*. Jewish Publications – South Africa, Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town, 2008, pp. 17-18.

²⁵¹ Knight, 2006, p. 21.

²⁵² Zygielbaum, 1978, p. 27-28.

born in Argentina, only four days after she completed the run of a play in which she had to wear trousers and jump out of a window. Two weeks later she was forced to continue on the tour. Sarah Sylvia complained that her children were literally raised in theatre cloakrooms, and she would often be obliged to rush off between acts to feed them.²⁵³ She never had a normal family life and never had a home of her own. With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the company returned to London to play at the theatre in Whitechapel. Sarah Sylvia could derive little pleasure from these performances as she was always worrying about her children. When during the interval of a performance a policeman arrived to tell her that her four-year old daughter had died, she still had to go on and says that it was on that occasion that she gave the greatest performance of her life.²⁵⁴ Nowhere does Sarah Sylvia reveal the cause of her daughter's tragic death or why it was that a policeman had to come to the theatre to inform her. It would seem that the sick child had been left on her own.

South Africa

If the major segment of Sagan's career was pursued overseas in Germany, Austria and London, Alexander's career was in Johannesburg. On her return to Johannesburg in 1909, Alexander was hired as the leading lady in the Howitt-Phillips Company.²⁵⁵ At this time Alexander married the gentile, Gordon Todd, who followed her to Johannesburg. Although initially very much in love, with Alexander frequently away on tour, the couple tended to go their separate ways. In 1918 they divorced, ending what Alexander describes as a painful episode in her life.²⁵⁶

In Johannesburg Alexander opened the Alexander School of Drama and Elocution. She also produced several plays, in aid of Jewish causes such as the Jewish War Victim's Fund. After the war she produced more ambitious productions, introducing Johannesburg audiences to Greek tragedy with landmark productions of Euripedes' *The Trojan Woman*.²⁵⁷

²⁵³ Godman, 1960: 10.

²⁵⁴ Knight, 2006, pp. 21-22.

²⁵⁵ Charles Howitt had acted with Leonard Rayne, the reigning actor-manager in South Africa at the time, but broke away to form his own company.

²⁵⁶ Sowden, 1964, pp. 66-72.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 97-119.

In November 1927, at a time when with the advent of the talkies, live theatre had become the province of the amateurs, Alexander founded her own amateur dramatic society, known as the Repertory Players.²⁵⁸ Several groups were active at the time: the Jewish Guild's Dramatic section, the Play-reading society directed by Alexander's cousin, Poppy Salmon, until 1938 the German, Kurt Baum's Art Theatre,²⁵⁹ and the Johannesburg Operatic and Dramatic society. The Reps were the undisputed leader of the group, because Alexander was a seasoned professional who insisted on the highest standards. From 1930 their productions averaged six a year. In 1942 their production of *The Women at the Standard* was seen by 14 000 people, which was about the total number of theatre goers at that time.²⁶⁰

Over the years the Reps spawned many actors and playwrights who went on to fame overseas, amongst them Sydney James (famous for the *Carry on* films), Campbell Singer, George Ross, Lawrence Harvey, John Cranko, Herbert Spencer (of *Les Miserables* fame) and most notably Moira Lister.²⁶¹ In 1960, the Reps theatre, built in Braamfontein in 1951,²⁶² was renamed the Alexander Theatre in her honour. Muriel Alexander died on 5 March 1975.²⁶³

In 1939, Sagan accepted an invitation by Donald Inskip of the Little Theatre in Cape Town, to direct amateur theatre at the Little Theatre at the University of Cape Town, as well as at the Johannesburg Repertory Players.²⁶⁴ Trapped by the outbreak of the Second World War, she was forced to stay in South Africa until 1943, producing more plays for the Reps,²⁶⁵ and giving lessons in drama at the Jan Hofmeyr College of Social Work to African students, whom she regarded as innocent children.²⁶⁶

²⁵⁸ Ibid, pp. 120-127.

²⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 135.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 148.

²⁶¹ Percy Tucker, "Muriel Alexander: Rugged Pioneer", *Jewish Affairs*, 61(4), 2006: 30-31; Sowden, 1964, p. 148.

²⁶² Sowden, 1964, p. 167-173.

²⁶³ Tucker, 2006, p. 31

²⁶⁴ Sagan, 1996, pp. 199-205..

²⁶⁵ Sowden, 1964, p. 161.

²⁶⁶ To demonstrate their naivety she describes their reaction to the idea of paying taxes to the government, with a quote from Sarah Gertrude Millin's *The South Africans*:

When an old native was told that he had to be taxed because the government like a father, protected him from his enemies, cared for him when he was sick, fed him when he was hungry, gave him education, and for these reasons, demanded money, the old native said: Yes I understand. It is like this: I have a dog and the dog is hungry. It comes to me and begs for food. I say to him: My dear faithful dog, I see that you are very hungry. I am sorry for you. I shall give you meat..." I then take

In 1936, Sagan had submitted a memorandum to the Minister of Education on the establishment of a National Theatre Organisation. When she returned permanently to South Africa in 1947 she was appointed director of the English-language section.²⁶⁷ Sagan continued to direct plays until her retirement in the mid 1950s.²⁶⁸ She lived in a small house in Pretoria until her death in 1974.²⁶⁹

From 1920 Sarah Sylvia embarked on a new career as an impresario. In August 1920, the plays that she produced at the Palladium were so successful, that African Theatres Trust was persuaded to sign a contract with her to bring out a series of Yiddish theatre companies.²⁷⁰ From 1921 she began returning to South Africa regularly, bringing out the stars of the London Yiddish stage.²⁷¹ She continued bringing out companies until the early 1950s.²⁷²

In 1951 Sarah Sylvia launched into a belated career on the English stage with an impressive performance as Willie Loman's wife in *Death of a Salesman*.²⁷³ In 1960, arts critic, Dora Sowden, commented that "South Africa had not made sufficient use of the talents of this wonderful trouper. If more producers, English or Yiddish, had the sense to give her the scope and direction she got in *Death of a Salesman*, our theatre might have been the better for it."²⁷⁴ Sadly despite all her accolades, Sarah Sylvia died disillusioned and lonely in an aged home in Johannesburg in February 1976 at the age of 86. Only a handful of people attended her funeral.²⁷⁵

off a knife, cut off the dog's tail, give it to him, and say: Here faithful dog, Take this and be nourished by this nice piece of meat." Sarah Gertrude Millin, cited in Sagan, 1996, p. 210.

²⁶⁷ Sagan, 1996, pp. 220-229.

²⁶⁸ See Tucker, 2006: 40-45.

²⁶⁹ Kruger, "Introduction", in Sagan, 2003, pp. x-xi.

²⁷⁰ H. Hirsch, 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike zint 1902', in *Dorem Afrike*, 1, 6, December 1928, p. 12.

²⁷¹ Zygielbaum, 1978: 26-28; SAJC, 29 April 1921.

²⁷² Belling, 2008, pp. 54-55, 63, 78, 82, 93.

²⁷³ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 16 November 1951.

²⁷⁴ D. Sowden, 'South African Jews in the Arts during 1960', in *the South African Jewish Year Book, 1960/61*, Fieldhill Publishing, Johannesburg, 1961, p. 41.

²⁷⁵ Zygielbaum, 1978: 26-28.

Conclusion

Today in a feminist world women such as these are lauded and admired. However in the conservative and closed South African Jewish community of their time, by virtue of their non-conformity and eccentricities, these independent women (with the possible exception of Sagan) walked a tightrope with regard to respectability, and were on occasion the subjects of ridicule, with their achievements marginalized. Van Gelderen and Purwitsky were open about their relationship and reveled in shocking the community; Stern's ample frame and imperious ways, are the butt of art historians; Goldblatt's relationship with Langenhoven is controversial and Kannemeyer, his biographer, almost revels in her excesses during her final illness. Nonetheless all seven managed to preserve their reputations, while never abandoning their Jewish identity, that with the exception of Van Gelderen, was generally far stronger in the case of the women of Eastern European origin, - Purwitsky Goldblatt and Sarah Sylvia - than the Anglo-German women – Stern, Alexander and Sagan. However apart from the artist, Irma Stern, and to a much lesser degree Muriel Alexander and Sarah Goldblatt, their unique contribution to the wider South African society, has been largely unacknowledged or at very least forgotten.

Roza Van Gelderen and Hilda Purwitsky defied traditional gender stereotypes to pursue their own lifestyle, oblivious of current prejudices. Purwitsky succeeded in overcoming the double handicaps of poverty and gender to obtain a university degree, a rare commodity for females in those days. Van Gelderen became the first Jewish principal of a government school in Cape Town. With Van Gelderen at the helm, the pair not only demanded equality with men, but flouted authority at every turn, be it the Cape School Board, the Cape Jewish Orphanage, and even the Nazi Party in Austria! As teachers, journalists and patrons of the arts, they made a large contribution to the South African Jewish community as well as the wider community, that has never before been documented. Ultimately, however, their approach to education was way ahead of their time, and the Cape Board of Education was threatened by it.

Although initially shunned and misunderstood, Irma Stern's German expressionist style was the source of her unique contribution to South African art. Alienated from Germany, the land she knew best and with which she had identified, the rise of the

Nazi regime, prevented her from achieving the recognition she deserved as a German expressionist artist. Nonetheless she continued to develop her art in South Africa in her own unique style and today Stern's pictures fetch millions on the international art market.

Honoured in and beyond her life time, Sarah Goldblatt led a lonely life, largely removed from her own community. Her hero and mentor, C. J. Langenhoven, died too soon and she was left to carry his banner on her own.

All three theatrical women, Alexander, Sagan and Sarah Sylvia made major contributions to their art. The Reps kept the theatres open in the lean years,²⁷⁶ and in the words of theatre aficionado, Percy Tucker: "At a time when the theatre in South Africa looked lifeless and almost hopeless, she [Muriel Alexander] was its inspiration."²⁷⁷ Sagan was one of the first female theatre directors in Germany and at Drury Lane in London, and in South Africa, she was one of the founders of the National Theatre Organisation, the forerunner of the later Provincial Arts Councils.

However a life on the stage during this period was very tough and all three made considerable personal sacrifices. Alexander sacrificed her own brief marriage. Moreover she never really had a chance to develop her full potential as an actress, but had to make do with working with amateurs in a company that kept South African theatre alive, before the emergence of professional companies. Sagan's made a huge contribution to her art, yet her achievements were lost in her displacement during the war years first to London then to South Africa. Her greatest achievement, her film *Madchen in Uniform* lives on, but is not even mentioned in her personal papers at the University of the Witwatersrand.²⁷⁸ Sarah Sylvia made the most severe sacrifices, rubbing shoulders with the underworld, performing under punishing working conditions, never enjoying a stable family life, and having to endure the tragedy of losing a child. Moreover the theatre to which she dedicated her life is today largely forgotten.

²⁷⁶ Sowden, 1964, p. 148.

²⁷⁷ Tucker, 2006, pp. 30-31.

²⁷⁸ Kruger, 2003, pp. ix-x.

Finally, like the political women, described in the previous chapter, migration played a crucial role in determining their careers. In this case, however, it was their Western European heritage that played the major role. Stern, Alexander, Sagan and Sarah Sylvia's careers were pioneered overseas, while Van Gelderen and Purwitsky's careers were considerably enhanced by their extensive travels in western Europe and in Israel. Goldblatt, whose inspiration was firmly rooted in South Africa's indigenous Afrikaans culture, was the sole exception.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation set out to recover the lives of Jewish women during the migration years, c1880 to 1939, beginning in eastern Europe where the majority of South African Jewry originated. By all accounts, life for women in the small towns of eastern Europe was bleak, coloured by poverty and lack of opportunity. Social and economic conditions, the lack of work opportunities, meant that unlike the United States, Jewish women emigrating to South Africa, seldom left ahead of their husbands and families. Thus women were forced to endure long periods of coping with their families on their own, and children were deprived of their fathers.

The women from eastern Europe generally made very successful transitions to their lives in South Africa. They enriched the life of the local Jewish community with the strong traditions of eastern Europe and several, such as the Hebrew teachers and Zionist workers, enhanced the quality of Jewish life in South Africa immeasurably. A few exceptional women, like Ray Alexander Simons, heir to Jewish socialist ideologies, were drawn to the plight of the oppressed and to righting South Africa's fraught racial problems. However the majority of South African Jewish women, like their men, tended to be conservative and traditional in their outlooks.

While their husbands were forced to work on the Sabbath, the eastern European immigrant women recreated the life they left behind in eastern Europe in a South African context, preserving the Jewish customs in their homes. While British style assimilation with Christmas celebration was virtually unknown among the *Litvaks*, a loosely interpreted Orthodoxy allowed many to remain within the fold, who might otherwise have strayed. The earliest women immigrants displayed resourcefulness and energy, taking over the support of their families when the need arose, while still maintaining the traditional lifestyle and extending hospitality to the new arrivals. Coming from eastern European towns and villages in close proximity to each other, to a community that was isolated at the tip of Africa, the women perpetuated the customs, the dishes and the terminology unique to that region, that was lost in the larger and more diverse eastern European diaspora communities in other parts of the world. As a result the South African Jewish community is widely believed to approximate most closely its *Litvak* antecedents. Supported by synagogues, Jewish

booksellers and food stores in the city, and reinforced by close family networks- even in far flung country towns, Jewish immigrant women managed to keep the spirit of the tradition alive for their families.

Until the outbreak of the Second World War, when the majority of the South African Jewish community were still either first or second generation immigrants from eastern Europe, the immigrants married among themselves, and it was not uncommon for introductions to be affected by a marriage broker. The upper class English and German Jews married among themselves but the Anglo-German and the eastern European middle classes frequently 'intermarried', if only because they were outnumbered. Divorce was relatively rare, as was intermarriage, except amongst the exceptionally wealthy, or in the country districts where there were few young Jewish girls. Marriage across the colour line was extremely rare, and while it definitely occurred, no records exist.

This period witnessed huge changes in the status of women. Worldwide women were gradually entering a male world. This was achieved both through education and employment. It is difficult to determine how South African Jewish women fared in comparison to their gentile contemporaries. The little statistical evidence that is available suggests that she outstripped them in the field of education, nonetheless her choices and her sites were still very limited. Her education still took second place to that of her brothers, and even when she achieved a university degree or a career, it would be abandoned midstream in favour of marriage and children.

During this period women made great strides moving out of the home into the realm of voluntary work in the welfare societies and in the Zionist movement. Although initiated by men, by the end of the period the women had thrown off the yoke of male control, and insisted on the right to determine their own affairs. With the establishment of the Union of Jewish Women, for the first time women had an organization that was neither controlled or monitored by men, an organization that was an advocate for their cause both nationally and internationally. Moreover no longer were women's efforts focused exclusively on caring for their own, but in the period following the Second World War the Union would turn its attention increasingly to the welfare of the indigent black population of South Africa. Similarly

in the Zionist movement, women achieved autonomy, with the establishment of the Women's Zionist Council that brought thousands of women into its ranks, and by 1944 the three largest fund-raising departments of the Federation - the J. N. F., the Keren Hayesod and the Youth Aliyah - were headed by women

Other than the few exceptional women, who are examined in Section Three, who gained entrée to political careers that would not otherwise have been possible, the women's enfranchisement movement was peripheral to the majority of Jewish women. Women's achievement of autonomy in their own communal organisations such as those mentioned above, as well as the achievement of the right to vote on synagogue committees, impacted more directly on the community, as unlike parliamentary elections that occurred only every four to five years, religious and communal matters affected their daily lives.

Section three examined the life and work of twelve extraordinary women, who broke the mould described in the first two sections, in the fields of politics and culture. Significantly all of the women's choices were influenced in one way or another by their experience of Jewish migration whether from eastern or western Europe. In the case of the political women, with one notable exception, this was manifested in their embracing of Russian Jewish politics, whether as Zionists or Jewish socialists and ultimately as Communists. As keen Zionists, Sarah Gertrude Millin and Bertha Solomon could easily identify with a South African nationalism, even though it ignored people of colour. Diaspora nationalism caused Ruth Schechter to change her allegiances from Zionism, via Jewish Socialism to the wider cause of humanity, that she believed was being served by the policies of the Soviet Union; for Ray Alexander it was the poverty of her childhood, and the underground Communist Party in Latvia, that sensitized her to the cause of the oppressed black people in South Africa; German Jewish Ellen Hellmann is the exception to this group as her embracing of left wing South African politics was largely spawned by her academic studies whilst she was awoken to Jewish politics by the rise of the Hitler regime in Germany.

In the majority of cases of cultural integration, it was their western European cultural experiences that determined their careers, whether English, German or Dutch. What all of these women have in common is their single mindedness and their rebellion

against traditional societal norms. Intrepid, from the early 1900s they braved the world on their own. Roza Van Gelderen and Hilda Purwitsky defied traditional gender stereotypes to pursue their own lifestyle, oblivious of current prejudices. Roza became the first Jewish principal of a government school in Cape Town. As teachers, journalists and patrons of the arts, they made a contribution to the South African Jewish community as well as to the wider society.

Although initially shunned and misunderstood, Irma Stern travelled deep into Africa to find subjects for her art, and her German expressionist style was the source of her unique contribution to South African art. Unacknowledged in her homeland of Germany, cut off at the time of the Hitler regime, today Stern's pictures fetch millions on the international art market. Sarah Goldblatt, literary executrix of the Afrikaans national poet, Cornelis Langenhoven, dedicated her life to the recognition of the Afrikaans language. Her name lives on as one of the leading promoters of the Afrikaans language in South Africa.

Muriel Alexander, Leontine Sagan and Sarah Sylvia, made huge personal sacrifices to pursue their careers. Muriel Alexander kept South African theatre alive, before the emergence of professional companies. The Alexander Theatre in Johannesburg is named after her. Leontine Sagan was one of the first women theatre producers in Germany and London, working alongside the all time greats, Max Reinhardt in Germany and Ivor Novello in London, and was one of the founders of the National Theatre Organisation, the forerunner of the Provincial Arts Councils in South Africa.. Yet owing to her displacement as a Jew at the time of Hitler's rise to power, her foreign status in England, and her brief career in South Africa, she was never able to consolidate her reputation in any single country, and her achievements are unknown other than to theatre aficionados. Her greatest achievement, her film *Madchen in Uniform* (Girls in Uniform) considered a classic of its time, lives on, but is not even mentioned in her personal papers at the University of the Witwatersrand. Without Sarah Sylvia's professionalism there would have been no Yiddish theatre in South Africa. However the theatre to which she dedicated her life is today largely forgotten.

Finally what unites all of these women, whether from eastern or western Europe, both the normative and the iconoclasts, is that they were all influenced by their Jewish

heritage to varying degrees. The eastern European women and many of the western European women were repositories of *Yidishkayt* (Jewishness), who contributed to community building and constituted the backbone of South African Jewish society. Yet even those most alienated from their roots, such as Ray Simons or Leontine Sagan, never denied and on the contrary, took pride in their identity that influenced their actions and contributed to the wider South African society.

GLOSSARY

Agudes Yisroel – Religious political party

agunah - deserted wife

alte bokherim - old bachelors

ayngemakhts - preserves

ba'al tefile – reader in the synagogue

bankes - hooping glasses

Beys Yankev school – House of Jacob school

Besmedresh, (pl) *Botey Medroshim* - House of Study

Bnoth Zion – Daughters of Zion

bob – bean

Chalitzah – custom obliging a widow to take off the sandal of her husband's brother to free her from marrying him.

challah - Sabbath bread

chalupkele hayzkele - small dilapidated house

Chevra Kadisha - Burial Society

cholent – mixture of meat, beans, barley, carrots cooked overnight and eaten on the Sabbath

chuppah - wedding canopy

Erets Yisroel - Land of Israel

daven minchah ma'ariv - to say the afternoon and evening prayers

der heim – Old Country

Dorshe Zion – Seekers of Zion

fleischik – containing meat

Gan-Eydn - Garden of Eden

gefilte fish – stuffed minced fish

Geserd, Gezelshaft far Erd Arbet – Society for Working on the Land [in Russia]

Gmiles Khso'dim Society - Charitable society

grine - greenhorn

Hashomer Hatsair - Zionist Socialist Youth movement

homentashn - triangular poppy seed buns eaten on the festival of Purim

ingberlekh - ginger carrot sweets

kashrut - dietary laws

kheyder - Hebrew afternoon school

kichel - Sugar biscuit eaten with chopped herring

kosher – adheres to the dietary laws

kitke – Sabbath bread

klops - meatloaf

kneidlekh - dumplings

kokhelefel – busy body

lamdan - a scholar

lokshen - noodles

maskil - enlightened person

med – mead, traditionally brewed on Passover

meise - story

meshulach - emissary

mezuzeh - small box containing verses from the Hebrew Bible affixed to the doorpost of a house

mikvah – ritual bath

milkhik – containing milk

milkhike - cinnamon buns

minyan - prayer quorum

parnase - a living

payos - forelocks

perenes - featherbeds

Pesakh - Passover

pletzlekh – jellied apricot sweet

ptsha - jellied calves hooves

rabbonim - rabbis

Rosh Ha-Shanah - New Year

seudah shelishit - third meal eaten on the Sabbath

Shabat – Sabbath (Hebrew)

Shabbes - Sabbath (Yiddish)

shadchan - matchmaker

Shadchanos – marriage brokerage fee

shammes - beadle

shiddukh - arranged marriage

shikses – gentile women

shmaltz – chicken fat

shochere - Blacks

shoykhet - ritual slaughterer

shul - synagogue

siddur - daily prayer book

shtetl – small village

shul - synagogue

smikha - rabbinical ordination

Talmud Torah – Hebrew afternoon school

teyglekh - round biscuit, boiled, deep fried, then dipped in syrup with sugar and ginger

tallis, (pl) *taleysim* - prayer shawl

treyf – not sanctioned by the dietary laws

tsitsis - prayer vest

yeshiva - rabbinical academy

yeshiva bokherim - rabbinical students

Yiddishkayt - Jewishness

yontef, (pl) *yomtoyyim* - festival

zmires - Sabbath songs

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