

Joseph Salmonsohn

Joe was born in Goldingen, Latvia on July 28th, 1890. He died in Johannesburg in April, 1967. Before he immigrated to South Africa, Joe worked in the Herzenberg family business. From the Herzenberg reminiscences: “Aunt Ernestine, in a second marriage, married a widower, Salmonsohn, with whom she had a son, whom I hardly knew. He worked in my father's business, and he was also driven out by my brother George after father died.”

Throughout his early life in South Africa Joe corresponded with his family. From his correspondence we know that life was difficult for the family in Latvia. The post cards reveal much about their different lives.



From Mara, March 1910: Dear Brother! I am informing you that I have received the money, and I thank you for it.

From Louis, 1910: Dear Joseph I have received your letter. I can tell you that I am in Libau, working for Abrahamson. I will write a letter to you next week. I will order your pictures.

From Louis: 27th October 1912. It was a very bad year.

From Mara, Goldingen, 2nd February 1915: with us there is a difficult time and we hope for improvement; but (there are) daily worries and dear God have mercy on us. Dear Josef, I must tell you, that Aunt Mina's Ephraim was handed over (died?) on January 27th. He was just 20 years old. Our brother Elias came to Libau in October. Handke lives in Teilkum with her sister. Greetings from me, your sister Mara.



Photograph of 3 children in front of a Latvian wooden house.

The children's names are given as Salomon, Hafa, Abermanns.

from the collection of Joe's photographs, courtesy of Bertha Aberman.

The handwritten inscription on the back of the picture is:

Sara – 1911

Receive many yearning kisses. Embracing you with devoted love.
Your Sara. (Joe's cousin from Goldingen)



The marriage of Joe Salmonsohn and Cissie Claff



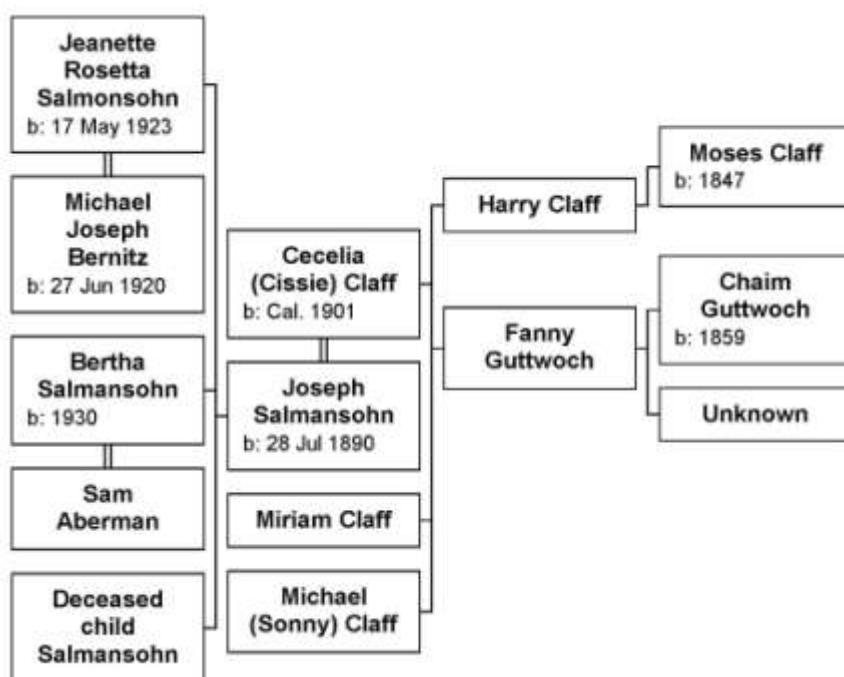
Joe married
Cecelia (Cissie)
Klaff on 9 March
1922, the day of
the General Strike
in Johannesburg.

After their marriage Joe and Cissie lived in Tyrone Ave., Lake View. In 1932 he moved to join his brother in Kuruman, where the brother had a shop. Later they returned to Johannesburg, where the Suzmans "put him into Popular Tobacconists". Ernie Bernitz remembers this business: "Joe had a Barber Shop in Shell house in Loveday Street. This was in the heart of the then financial district. It was a small shop about 50 square metres in size. There was a counter in front with newspapers, cigarettes, sweets and shaving materials, a curtain divider and 2 or 3 chairs which he hired out to independent barbers. It was not a large business, but it provided his family with a living,"

Joe was a half-brother to my grandfather Herman. They had 2 daughters, Jeanette and Bertha. Jeanette married my uncle Mickey Bernitz, son of Herman Bernitz and grandson of Ernestina. Therefore Jeanette and Mickey had a grandmother in common!

Cissie was the daughter of Harry Claff and Fanny Gutwoch. Harry Claff (birth date not established) was the son of the Rev. Moses Claff of Dalton Synagogue, London. Moses was born in Shavel, Lithuania in 1847, and immigrated to England in 1883. He was in turn the son of the Reverend Elias Claff, who was a chasan and a shochet in Shavel.

The Ancestors and descendents of Cissie Claff



Claff family photograph, including Cissie, Joe and Harry Claff.

Harry Claff (Henry, Hyman) was a well known British entertainer and operatic singer. The ability to sing apparently ran in the family, as both his father and his grandfather had been chasanim (cantors). He spent two-and-a-half years in the chorus at the Savoy, beginning in December 1897, eventually landing a starring role in *The Lucky Star* (January-May 1899) with the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company.

He then embarked on a highly successful career in music hall, appearing (under the name of Harry Claff) for many years as "The White Knight" in shining silver fish-scale armour. His repertoire included such popular songs "Let's All Go to the Music Hall" and "Till We Meet Again." On July 1, 1912, at a Royal Command Variety Performance at the Palace Theatre, Claff, in his silver armour, had the honour of leading the Company in the singing of "God Save the King."



He also appeared in three Drury Lane pantomimes: *Aladdin* (1917-18), *Babes in the Wood* (1918-19), and *Cinderella* (1919-20).

Fanny Gutwoch

Fanny was the daughter of Chaim Gutwoch, a wool merchant who was born in Latvia in 1859. He received religious talmudic training, and then immigrated to England in 1881, moving to South Africa in 1904.

Ernie Bernitz remembers him “as an importer of Textiles; his manner was that of the English gentry”. Besides Fanny, Chaim had 2 further daughters and a son.

Fanny was married to Harry in London in 1912.



The Wedding of Harry Claff and Fanny Gutwoch, 22 December 1912, New Road Synagogue, Whitechapel, London. Edward Gutwoch, father of the bride appears in this picture.

Goldingen

Now called Kuldīga, it was part of Courland. Ernestina and many Herzenbergs originated there. After Michael died Herman grew up and went to school in the town. Today it has a well preserved old town centre, and is an important historical travel destination in Latvia.



The main square and Town Hall of Goldingen. Not much has changed in the past 100 years.

History of the Jewish Community in Goldingen

It is believed that the first Jewish settlement in Goldingen began at the end of the seventeenth century. From 1799 Jews in the region were granted civic rights, and Jewish communities here and elsewhere grew quickly. In 1800, there were 658 Jewish merchants and craftsmen living in the Goldingen district (fifteen percent of the total population). In 1801, the first official synagogue was built and a burial society (chevra kadisha) was founded. A short while later a "Talmud Torah" school was built and a society for help to poor brides (gmiluth Hassidim) and other Jewish social organizations were formed. The first rabbi assumed office in 1826.

By 1835, the Jewish population had grown to 2330, fifty-seven percent of the population. In 1897 there were 2,543 Jewish residents, down to twenty-six percent of a total population of 9,720.

The first state school for Jewish boys was organized in 1850. By 1901 there were three private Jewish schools in the town; one for boys and the other two for girls. The languages of instruction at the school were German and Hebrew. Jews who had the means also sent their children to the local German high school.



Above: Jewish school, built next to the main and the summer shul and Rabbi's house. I am not certain whether Herman attended this particular school, or one similar.

Goldingen Jews were strongly influenced by German culture. Jews earned a living through small scale commerce, peddling, the sale of second-hand clothing, the leasing of inns, production of strong liquors and as middlemen.

From the end of the 19th century their economic situation began to improve, and the Jewish merchants in some cases supplanted the Baltic German businessmen.

Jews, for example, built a flour mill and factories for the manufacture of matches and needles and established a credit fund for Jewish merchants and tradesmen.



Historical dwelling houses like this were occupied by Jewish families. Business premises were on the ground floor, with the family dwelling above.

There are a number of well preserved streets like this one in Kuldiga, one of Latvia's main historical attractions.

This sign for bicycle and sewing machine repairs is from the wall of a merchant's house.



From this we can be sure that Ernestina grew up in a vibrant Jewish community. Her parents were well to do. Jews enjoyed relative safety, and she probably had a good early childhood, as did Herman a generation later (he attended a Hebrew school in Goldingen - Blumenau's cheder).

However, as economic and political times became more difficult in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Goldingen Jews began to emigrate. Some stayed in Latvia but moved to the larger port cities of Windau or Libau (as did Herman and some of the Herzenberg family) where there was greater economic activity. Others, either using these cities as jumping-off points or leaving directly from Goldingen, emigrated to the U.S. or South Africa.

It is noteworthy that developments in maritime transportation both increased the number of emigrants and pointed them in specific directions.

Not only did steamship services become more affordable, more regular and safer, but agents of large European shipping lines encouraged potential emigrants to travel to destinations according to the economic needs of the shipping companies. "Package deals" for Baltic Jews to South Africa, travelling via England, were one such incentive; passage to the U.S. via Hamburg was another.



The main shul in Kuldiga, now disused.



This was most probably the shul in which Herman had his bar mitzvah in 1898, the year after Katie was born!



Above: A street in Goldingen

The Holocaust Period in Goldingen

On August 23, 1939, the Soviet Army established bases in Latvia and in the summer of 1940 a Soviet regime was installed. Jewish public institutions were gradually liquidated. After the Nazi invasion of Russia in June 1941, about one-tenth of the Jews of Kuldiga succeeded in escaping to the interior of Russia. The young men among them were conscripted into the Soviet Army. On July 1, 1941, when the Nazis occupied the town, the majority of the community was still there. Latvian fascists immediately began rioting against the Jews and murdered several of them. Those remaining were ordered to perform forced labour. One day all the Jews were concentrated into the synagogue from which the men were taken to a forest a few kilometres from the town. There they were murdered and buried in pits which they had been forced to dig. Their property was divided among their murderers.

The Torah scrolls were put into the municipal archives. Several Jews, who were hidden by farmers, survived. The town was liberated by the Soviets in 1944. After the war a number of families returned to the town. One of these Jews was killed by opponents of the Soviet regime. The survivors brought back the remains of those murdered for a Jewish burial. The Torah scrolls were returned to the Jews who organized a minyan. The synagogue, which had been converted into a movie house, was not returned. Over time the survivors left the town, many of them going on aliyah to Israel. The minyan ceased to exist and the Torah scrolls were sold.

Julius Bernitz



Julius was the eldest son of Michael and Ernestina. When Michael died life was obviously difficult for the family. Julius being the eldest was sent to live with his uncle Leonhard in Libau, where he was raised with his cousin Robert. Robert recollected “he was a little older than I, attended Blumenau's cheder, and then in 1895, when my father and uncle Joseph founded the firm Gebruder Herzenberg, he became an apprentice in the business (aged 16).

Photo sent by Julius in 1901 from Libau

The staff of Gebruder Herzenberg (listed in the Libau telephone directory as Herzenberg Brothers: Men's and fashion wares - Owners: Leonhard, Jossel and Naftal Herzenberg. Kornstrasse 47, Tel. 379)



A number of people have commented on the remarkable likeness between myself and Joseph Herzenberg (2), brother of my great-grandmother Ernestine.

Geschäfts Personal, in firma "Gebruder Herzenberg" Libau 29 März 1906

As numbered in picture.

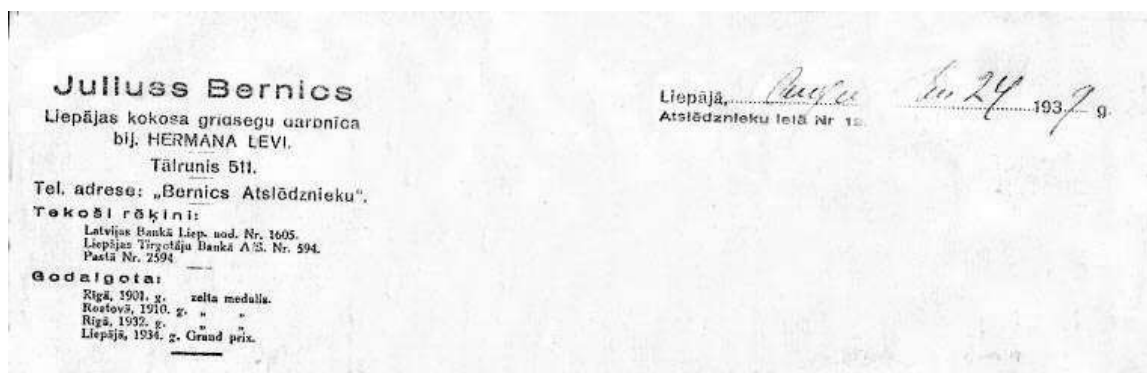
1. Mark Schwarz (1st apprentice) 2. Joseph Herzenberg 3. Leonhard Herzenberg
4. Joseph Pecker (2nd apprentice) 5. Herman Schwarz 6. Adolph Jacobsohn
7. Leopold Hirschberg 8. Rudolph Gittelsohn 9. Julius Bernitz
10. Joseph Perlman 11. Salomon Schachter 12. Samuel Katz

According to Robert Herzenberg "Julius became an apprentice in the business. He stayed there a few more years after the death of my father with my brother George. He lived in our home, sharing my room until I left home in 1902. Soon after that my brother George drove him out of the business".

Julius married Hettie Danin in Riga in 1921. He founded a factory making coconut (coir) carpets in Libau. When the Soviets nationalized the factory in 1940, it seems that they appointed him to manage it, which he did until the arrival of the Nazis in 1941.

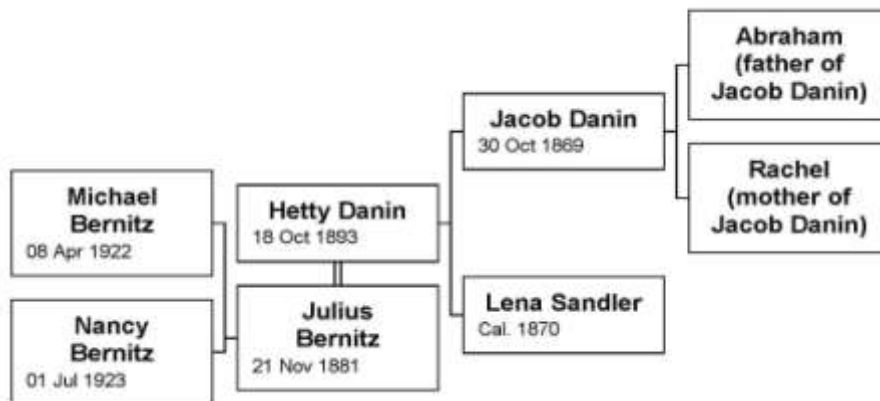
In general the Jewish population supported the Soviet regime in Latvia (a reaction to the anti-Semitism of the previous regime of Karlis Ulmanis). They believed that the Nazi threat would be eliminated by the arrival of the Red army. In 1940 left wing Jews actively participated in the formation of the Soviet administrative apparatus. Jews were appointed as employees of commissariats and managers of nationalized enterprises.

These facts were used by Latvian nationalists a year later in pro-Nazi propaganda to blame Jews for all crimes committed by the Soviet NKVD in Latvia and to encourage Latvians to take revenge against all Jews. Many Latvians believed that the Germans would give them a free and independent Latvia.



Letterheading from Julius, 1937. An inscription shows that they had been awarded 3 silver medals and a Grand Prix for his products between 1901 and 1934.

Hettie Danin



Hettie (Hetty, Harietta) was born in Latvia in 1893. She was one of eight children born to her father Jakob Danin and her mother Lena, nee Sandler. Her family immigrated to England around 1910 (when she was 17), to follow her father, who as a Socialist had been forced to flee Latvia to avoid arrest. Jakob dealt in amber, and after becoming British he used to visit Libau to make purchases. As a young adult Hettie had accompanied him on one of his periodic trips to Libau. She met Julius; the two courted and were eventually married in Riga in 1921.

They had 2 children, Nancy and Michael (Mischa). They were accomplished musicians, Nancy on the cello, and Michael on piano.



Above: Hetty

Left: Julius, Michael and Nancy

This photograph was taken on the footpath by the main road bridge across the river in central Libau. Although slightly modified now, the place is still clearly visible in Libau.

Life in Libau

Unlike his siblings, Julius had decided to remain in Latvia and make his life there. After the independent Republic of Latvia was proclaimed on November 18, 1918, Jews were granted full civil rights for the first time. Interwar Latvia was a comparatively pleasant place for Jews to live in. A right-wing takeover in 1934 was not accompanied by anti-Jewish violence. By the time that Jewish community life was interrupted by Soviet occupation in 1940, it was too late for most to leave.

Libau (now called Liepaja) is a Baltic port city on the northern end of Lake Liepaja. After Courland passed into the control of the Russian Empire in 1795 the city had grown rapidly. Breakwaters had been built and by 1876 the construction of a number of railways ensured that a large proportion of central Russian trade passed through Liepaja. The city was fortified against possible German attacks, including formidable coastal fortifications and extensive quarters for military personnel (In 1915, during WW1 Liepaja had been occupied by the German army).

Early in the twentieth century the port of Liepaja became a central point of embarkation for immigrants travelling to the United States. By 1906 the direct service to the United States was used by 40,000 migrants a year.



The former offices and passenger hall for the Russian-East Asian Shipping Company in Libau. Bands played as families bade farewell to each other.

The ports of Liepaja and Ventspils were targets for Stalin. In 1940 upon the annexation of Latvia by the Soviet Union all private property was nationalized. Many thousands of former owners were arrested and deported to Siberia, but it appears that the Soviets allowed Julius to continue to manage the carpet business.

The following is a description of life in Libau as remembered by Immanuel Blaushild. ⁶

"... we know that Libau was a beautiful city. There was a belt of parks between the town and the sea with its clean white beach. In August the sea spewed out sea tang where amber was found nestling there for perhaps many millions of years. In the fall there was a rustle of trees and a roar of waves enveloping the whole town. In winter we used to toboggan from the "Millionenbergs" or "Nikolaibergs."

"We used to swim for hours in the balmy sea and then lingered on the beach eating sandwiches which our mothers had prepared from fresh barley bread still warm from the bakery. Summer was a wonderful season. In the park, where mothers wheeled their babies and where lovers sat on benches, there was a fairytale pavilion and a bathhouse built in neo-classic style.

(Note: This description almost exactly describes my own experience of these places when I visited in July 2008. The parks, the beaches, the tennis courts, the bandstand, the swan lake, the boathouse, are all still being used).



Jews would go here every Friday afternoon for their weekly bath prior to the Shabbat.

⁶ A taste of life in Libau taken from Libau, By Immanuel Blaushild

“From the main harbour there was a huge port for ocean liners but there was also a small fishermen's harbour permeated by the smell of smoked cod.



“Libau was also a naval port. The "Kreigshafen" was the place where the army was stationed. Every spring the high school pupils were taken for military training, and we learned at a tender age to handle the Lewis gun and how to use gas masks.

In summer the entire youth was strolling down Lilienfeld and Lindenstrasse, along the beautiful villas of the rich, stopping at the German tennis court where the snobbish "high society" was engaged in their singles and doubles.

(Note: many of the villas and the tennis courts are still in use today).



Clockwise, from top. Libau beach, now and then. Bridge and Yacht basin, then and now.

Bottom: Two Synagogues in Liebau



“Kornstrasse and Grosse Strasse had rich shops, most of them owned by Jews. There were cafes, and we used to sit in Stein's cellar or at Peter's opposite the Post Office. Libau had many schools, Jewish and gentile and many synagogues - - and beautiful churches of many denominations.

“Until 1933, when the Perkonkrust Nazis⁷ started attacking Jews from their headquarters on the Weidenstrasse and their lair, the "Artists' Cellar" on Rožu Laukums, Jews lived in peace with their gentile neighbours. Only on Good Friday when Jesus was crucified Jews were advised to avoid the vicinity of the churches. The young people had a good life in Libau, though few had bicycles, nearly none had a camera, and tennis was only for the rich. Anti-Semitism was felt only sometimes by those who had contact with gentiles. But when the war started, it all exploded into an inferno of hatred, fire and death.

Julius had a good business. Libau was a city with good music facilities, a great orchestra, good teachers (and the children excelled at music, often playing with the orchestra). It was a sea side resort, and Julius was the commodore of the local yacht club. For a long time they would have lived well, whilst he would have known that life for his brothers and sister in South Africa was not always easy. He doubtless heard of both good and bad experiences from cousins who had gone to the USA. We know that when he received visits from his own family (his nephew Alfred visited Libau) and Hettie's family (see the account written by Philip Shapiro of his visit) shortly before WWII. They urged him to at least send Nancy and Michael to either England or South Africa. He initially refused, believing that the Latvian Jews would not be affected. By the time he acquiesced and asked the family to take his children, it was too late. They were all murdered in 1941.

Visit by Philip Shapiro to Libau.

Philip is the son of Hettie's late sister. This visit would have presumably taken place shortly before the start of WWII. He described his visit: “The eldest of the Danin children was Hettie, who was one of three daughters, the others being Pauline and my Mother, Rose. Mother had corresponded regularly with Hettie, since she had married Julius Bernics and settled in Libau (also known then as Liepaja). In addition to his nautical activities as Commodore of the Latvian Yacht Club, Julius had a thriving business, manufacturing raffia and coconut matting which he exported all over the world.

He and Hettie had two fine children, Michael (known as Mickey, or Mischa) and Nancy, aged 20 and 19 respectively. (Note: I believe they would have been younger; they were born in 1922 and 1923 respectively). They were both outstanding musicians, Mickey a cellist and Nancy a pianist and they played regularly with the Latvian State Symphony Orchestra. They were anxious for all of us to go over there for a holiday with them and Hettie pressed Mother constantly in her letters. Father refused to go, but, he allowed Mother to go, taking Tina and myself with her.

⁷ Perkonkrust (Thunder Cross – the Thunder cross was the swastika) was a Latvian anti-Semitic organisation active in the 1930's. The organisation sought to create an atmosphere in which Jews would feel pressurised to emigrate. Under Nazi occupation it was heavily involved in Jewish extermination.

The ferry from Harwich to the Hook of Holland and the long, long train journey to Berlin is somewhat hazy now, but my memories of Berlin are as clear as if they were only yesterday . . . later that magic day, we boarded our connection for the long, boring train journey through the Polish Corridor, Memel and finally Libau.

“. . . arriving at Aunt Hettie's was really wonderful. I remember the delicious smell of real coffee brewing, (something we never ever had at home) and the enormous kringl (a traditional plaited honey-cake made to welcome visitors). The Bernics' house was shabbily elegant, warm and comfortable, a place where, even as a child, I felt there was love in abundance. It was set among lovely gardens with orchards full of fruit trees and soft fruit bushes, a delicious place for a child to get lost in. Sometimes, in the evenings Mickey and Nancy would play for us, to my particular delight, with my leanings towards following a career in music even at that young age.

The family dog was Bubitchka, a bad tempered little black and brown elderly Dachshund who would lurk under the table and nip any ankles or hands which came his way. I gave him a wide berth. Custor, the factory guard dog, was altogether different. He was an enormous German Shepherd with a reputation for being unapproachable, but with me, he was a 'pussy-cat'. For some unaccountable reason, that dog adored me and followed me everywhere. He even let me ride on his back, jockey-style. We were a sight for sore eyes, I can tell you, and the workers in Uncle's factory looked on in sheer amazement at the spectacle of a thin, pale boy astride an enormous, ferocious dog.

I don't remember much about the factory, except that it wasn't too far from the house and full of strange and wonderful machinery for making coir and raffia mats, which I found out later were exported all over the world.

During our three month stay in Latvia, Uncle Juley (as we called him) would take all of us out for long, warm, sunny days, sailing up the long peaceful rivers. We would moor up somewhere and picnic, and there were always wild strawberries and blueberries to be found in the woods. Other times we would go to the sandy beaches to paddle in the Baltic Sea and pick up the abundant amber washed up by the tides.

But all too soon our idyllic holiday came to an abrupt end. The Nazis had become all-powerful in Germany and Uncle Juley thought it best that we make tracks for home and safety. That was easier said than done, as it would have been foolish to attempt travelling across Germany with their violently anti-Semitic regime. In the three short months that we had been there, things had changed dramatically.

Uncle Juley used his considerable influence in maritime circles to get us passage on a cargo boat of the Baltic Line, a scruffy old 'tub' named 'Baltanglia', which plied regularly between Memel (now Klaipeda) and London. We had to take a train from Libau to Memel and board the boat there.

The goodbyes were harrowing and tearful. I think they all must have had a presentiment of what was to come. After we got back, Mother had only one more letter from Aunt Hettie. Because of censorship, she had written cryptic messages such as, 'It looks as if our neighbours are planning to move in with us. At least they will be better than our other neighbours' Mother could only interpret the first set of 'neighbours' to mean the Russians and the second set the Nazis - the rest is history! We heard nothing more from Aunt Hettie and her family.



An old street in Goldingen

The Soviet Occupation of 1940-1941

Although there were growing levels of anti-Semitism (in common with other countries in central Europe at that time), life was tolerably good until June 1940 when the USSR occupied Latvia. Latvia had effectively been ceded by Hitler to Stalin under the Molotov/von Ribbentrop pact. The annexation by the USSR split the Jewish community. Many working class Jews (and many Latvians) initially welcomed the Red Army, trusting communist claims of social justice and worker power. Other Jews feared persecution as Bourgeoisie and class enemies.

It soon turned out that persecution also extended to others including Zionists, religious Jews, moderate leftists, former politicians etc. Under the Soviet occupation, mass deportations to exile or Gulag camps in Siberia became the order of the day. Some 15,000 people were deported at this time - with Jews being nearly three times over-represented in the deportations. With hindsight, perhaps they were the lucky ones - although many of them would not have survived either. Records show that 60% of those who fled to the Soviet Union survived the War. (compared to just 2% who survived the Nazi killings in Liepaja).

The Nazi Occupation of 1941-1945

The Soviet occupation lasted almost exactly one year. Germany occupied Libau on 29 June 1941. By that time the remaining Jewish population of Libau numbered 6500, with many having been previously deported by the Soviets, killed in the battle for Libau or having fled to the Soviet Union in the days immediately preceding the German invasion. More might have fled the Nazi invasion but men were not allowed to leave (other than party and government officials) and others were turned away at the Latvian/USSR border for lack of proper papers. Besides, many Libauer Jews remembered their affinity to Germany and its culture and language as well as the benign occupation of 1915-18, and they expected nothing worse than discrimination and perhaps forced labour. This hope was soon shattered.

In 1941 Liepaja was among the first cities captured when Nazi Germany began the war with the Soviet Union. The first SS Einsatzgruppen arrived on the very first day of the Nazi occupation, killed a number of Jews and recruited volunteers for the Latvian "Self-Defence" unit. Some 47 Jews were shot by the Einsatzgruppen and their Latvian collaborators on 3 July 1941 and from then on mass executions became commonplace.

Executions took place every few days. Jewish families were evicted from their apartments and were forced to live on rations that were just one-half of the skimpy Latvian rations. The synagogues were razed on the order of the SS, who forced Jews to trample on their sacred scrolls.

Mass round-ups and shootings (now including women and children) continued first near the Libau Lighthouse, then by the nearby fish factory, then by the Navy base and finally on the sand dunes of Skede. The victims were force marched to Skede, made to undress in the freezing wind and snow and shot in front of mass graves. During a three day period from the 15th to 17th December 1941, in the height of a freezing Baltic winter, 2749 Jews (mainly women and children) were killed by three German and Latvian firing squads.

We do not know exactly when and where Julius, Hettie, Michael and Nancy were murdered. The archival records do have an entry to show that Julius Bernics and Michaels Bernics were arrested. And a further record states that Julius Bernics, together with his wife, daughter and son were shot during the period of German occupation. According to testimony given to Yad Vashem by her brother Adolph Danin, Hettie was murdered at her home together with her husband and children.

They are all commemorated on the Wall of Remembrance in the Jewish Cemetery in Libau. The wall lists the names of the over 6500 Libau Jews who died during the Nazi occupation.



There is also a moving memorial on the dunes at Skede. I have visited all of the murder sites, including the dunes and the memorial at Skede. I cannot begin to imagine the horror and terror of our family, knowing that your spouse and child had been murdered, and probably having been forced to witness the murder. At Skede I felt strangely at one with these relatives I had never known.

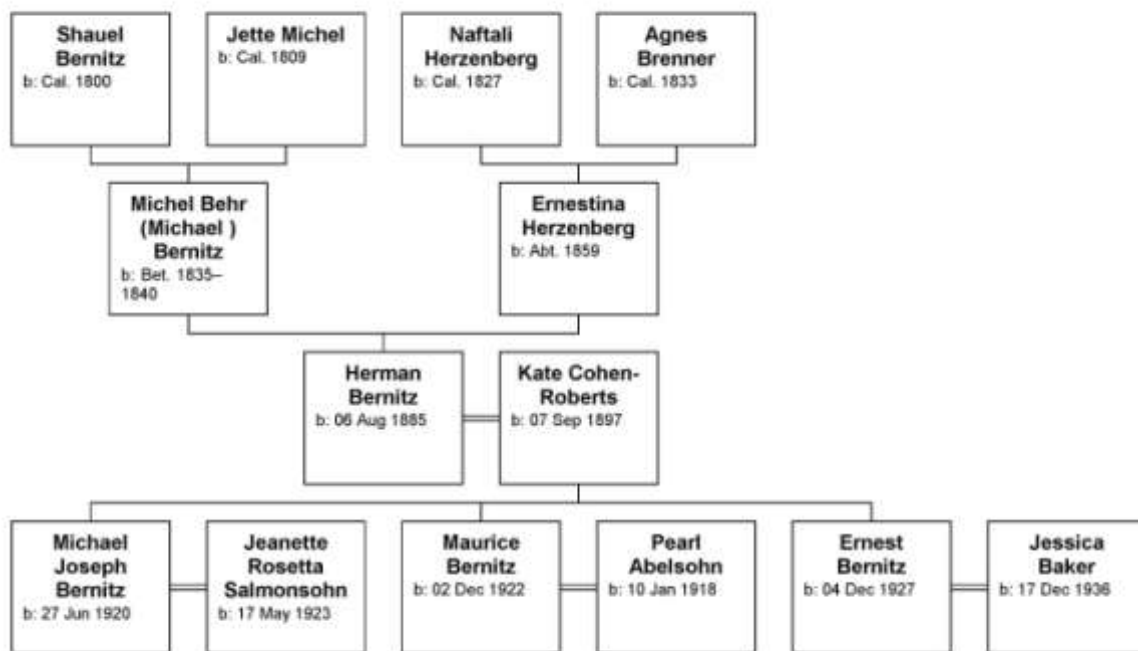
Photographic evidence of these Nazi atrocities exists. The photos of the killings at Skede are amongst the most notorious images of the holocaust, and may be viewed on the internet. In recent years, the Jewish community in Libau and outside benefactors including Prof. Anders (himself a childhood survivor) have erected a moving memorial at Skede, in the form of a vast stone menorah lying in the sand, and a memorial wall at the Liepaja cemetery.



Part of the Skede memorial, looking out to sea.

In June, 1942, a ghetto was established. This ghetto was liquidated in October, 1943, with the remaining Jews sent to the Kaiserwald camp, near Riga. When the Red Army entered Liepaja on May 9, 1945, there were no more than 30 Jews remaining.

Herman Bernitz (My Paternal Grandfather)



We know from the Certificate issued by the assistant to the district Rabbi of Telz (see below), that the second son of Michel Behr, himself the son of Shaul Bernitz and his wife Esther, (who was the daughter of Naphtal) was Hirsh (written in German as Herman). He was born on August 6 1885 in the estate Gross-Dahmnen: and he was circumcised on August 13 by Morduch Shatz.

The certificate itself was issued on June 25th 1889, probably to Ernestina after Michel had died. We can calculate that Michel died around that date, possibly even before Frida was born in January 1888. We know that Herman went with his mother and sister to live with their grandmother in Goldingen whilst still young children. There she married Shlomo Salmonsohn, and their son Josef was born in 1890.

Herman lived in Gros-Dahmen until the age of four. We know that he was sent to Libau as a young man to be apprenticed at Gebr. Herzenberg, and lived with his uncle Joseph Herzenberg. According to Robert Herzenberg “times there were not good for him, but he was so cheerful and imperturbable that he tolerated it very well.”



Certificate

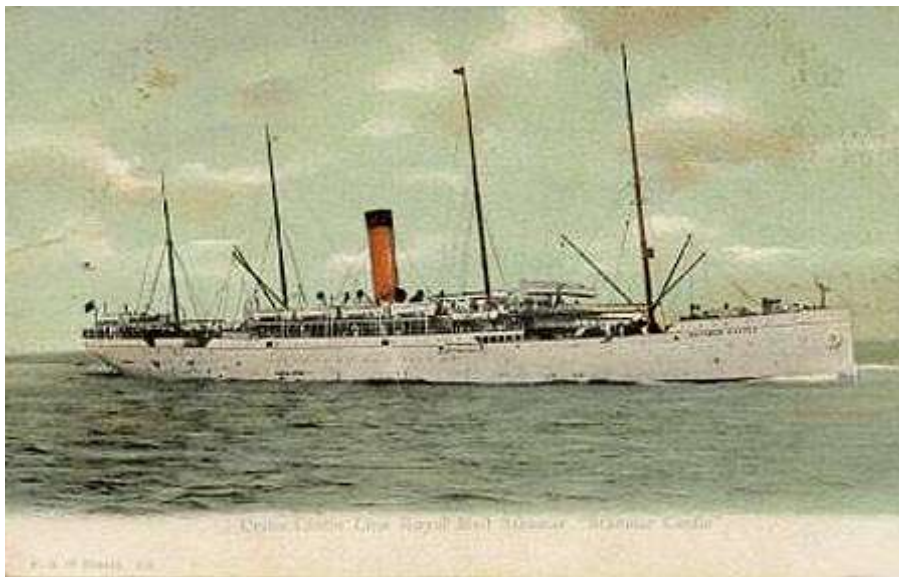
This is issued by the assistant of the Telz district rabbi in the estate Shkud and I certify that I know that the Hasenpoth petty bourgeois Michel Behr son of Shaul Bernitz and his wife Esther daughter of Napthal had two sons and one daughter born in the estate Gross-Dahmnen: the first son Joel was born on November 21, 1881 and was circumcised on November 28 by Hirsh Kobrya, the second son Hirsh listed in German as Herman born on August 6, 1885 and circumcised on August 13 by Morduch Shatz, and the daughter Frida was born on January 11, 1888 what I do certify on June 25, 1889.

(Signed) Jankel Joffe

Emigration to South Africa.

His passport was issued in 1906. He would have travelled initially to England, probably from the port of Libau. He sailed from London to Cape Town aboard the Braemar Castle, and then overland to join his brother Isidore. Ship's records described him as a draper (this follows from his apprenticeship at Gebr. Herzenberg).

His ticket showed that he had paid for the transport of a saddle and a plough as excess baggage. I do not know whether these were for personal use, or trade goods for Isidore.



The Braemar Castle.

Shipping line brochures give us some idea of the conditions onboard during the long journey:

THE FARE in every case PROVIDES the Passenger with everything requisite for the Voyage, including Bedding, Linen, and all the cabin fittings. The Passenger is called upon to purchase nothing except Wines, Spirits, Malt Liquors, and Mineral Waters, which are provided at moderate prices on board. The Tariff of Prices is open to the Inspection of Passengers. The Company purchase their

THIRD CLASS.

Breakfast.—Porridge, Beefsteak and Onions, Boiled Eggs, Potatoes, Bread and Butter, Tea or Coffee.

Dinner.—Corned Beef and Carrots, Roast Mutton (2 Vegetables), Pastry, Biscuit and Cheese.

Tea.—Cold Meats (Assorted), Pickles, Lobster, &c., Bread and Butter, Tea.

LANDING.—The Company have made arrangements at the various ports of call to land Passengers and their Baggage Free of Expense.

ELECTRIC LIGHT, REFRIGERATING APPARATUS, &c.
—The Mail Steamers are fitted with Electric Light, and with Refrigerators, Cooling Chambers, &c.

ICE-HOUSE, PIANOS, AND LIBRARY are among the means provided to increase the comfort of Passengers.

PATENT WIRE-WOVE MATTRESSES are fitted in all the steamers. These are an immense improvement on the old style of bed-place.

PATENT IRON BEDSTEADS are fitted in the Third-class accommodation, in lieu of wooden bunks.

Once he had arrived in Cape Town, he would have travelled overland to join Isidor in Smithfield. He probably took a steam train to Ladybrand and then horse-drawn transport from there. The journey from Libau would have taken about 2 months. Herman joined Isidore in Smithfield 1906. The Anglo-Boer war had ended in 1902.



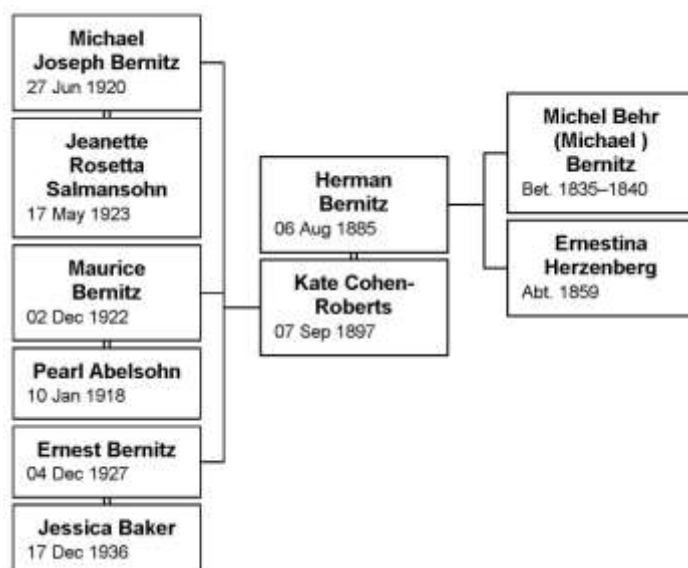
This is a postcard addressed to Herman in Smithfield, Orange River Colony, February 1907.

Early Life in South Africa



Smithfield Supply Store. Isidore at centre in doorway. Herman to his right (hand in pocket)

According to Ernie Bernitz - "I don't know how long Herman stayed and/or worked there, probably until he married Kate Roberts. He then went to Pyramid where grandpa Joe Roberts had a store." My cousin Prof. Herman Bernitz has a silver plated trophy presented to Herman Bernitz, on September 1st 1911 for achieving first place in a billiards tournament at the Royal Hotel, Smithfield. Herman married Kate Cohen-Roberts on the 15th September, 1919 in Johannesburg. They had three children.



I am not sure whether Herman went to work for Joe Roberts because he married Kate, or whether he met Kate when he went to work for Joe.

Pyramid is a very small town in the Transvaal, not much more than a railway stop. The store was probably a general dealership supplying the local farmers. It was called 'Pyramids' or 'Pyramid' as a reminder of the discovery by the Voortrekkers, in about 1840, of a river flowing northwards, which they believed to be the source of the Nile.

Ernie continues “He must have stayed in Pyramid until at least after Mo was born (1922). I don’t know where Mickey was born. It could also have been in Pyramid in 1920. I do know that Mickey went to school in Bethlehem, and Mo was sent to Bethal. Herman must have left Pyramid after 1923, when he went to Davel where he took over the 7-room Davel Hotel. Davel was/is a very small town, between Bethal and Ermelo in the Transvaal. This part of the Transvaal was farming country, including potato farming. They struggled there until 1934 when he and Kate went to Johannesburg to start an agency for the big potato farmers, a business that never took off during the two years they were there.

He was then financed by a liquor company to buy the Carlton Hotel in Witbank. When they went to Johannesburg I was sent to Bethlehem, where I joined Mickey, who was in the last few years of school. When they took over the hotel in Witbank I joined them.”

The early Carlton Hotel

From the Witbank News Centenary edition:⁸

“The Carlton Hotel was a centre for travellers en route to the then Lourenco Marques (Maputo) and the hub of social activities for miners, farmers and local socialites. It was situated on the corner of Main and President Streets and was housed in the first building that was made from wood and iron.

After the railway line from Pretoria to Delagoa Bay had been completed in November 1894, there were regular trains running from Pretoria to Delagoa Bay and back, which took in coal at Witbank Station.

The area in the vicinity of the station was still underdeveloped.

One of the strong points of this hotel was that a porter would meet guests at the station. Each room was provided with hot and cold water on tap and electric lights and fittings. The hotel had 60 rooms, two large dining rooms and a beautifully furnished public lounge as well as a large hall for concerts and dances.

Next to the hotel a large concert hall was erected, which was later known as the Carlton Theatre. As from 1909 regular electric bioscopes were shown in the theatre. ”

⁸ Supplement to WITBANK NEWS Friday 24 November 2006



Herman married Kate Cohen-Roberts on the 15th September, 1919 in Johannesburg.

From Ernie Bernitz:

“When Dad took over, the original building had been demolished, and the new double story building had been built. It was of brick construction, but it had wooden outside passages, as the sewage system was the old style bucket system. The municipality would come around at night and collect the buckets. They used mule drawn carts, with African labourers carrying the buckets. This was changed to a motorized system (tankers with petrol suction pumps) a year or so. Later proper water borne system was installed. Imagine, you could not have en-suite bathrooms; they all had to be built on to landings and passages accessible to the "Shit" (unseen and unsmelled heroes.)

It was in 1939 that the big changes came. The building ‘Escombe Chambers’ next to the then ‘Witbank Theatre’, later to become the ‘Carlton Theatre’, was demolished.



The early Carlton Theatre (called the Witbank Theatre in its earliest days – pre 1939).

In its place we built the ‘New Wing’ - 14 new rooms, 6 toilets, 4 Bathrooms (Communal) plus a room en-suite for my Mom and Dad, and a small room for me, 2 new bars and 2 new lounges. All the wooden verandas were replaced with concrete ones.



*A photo of a room at the Carlton Hotel circa 1940

The entire wooden framework was removed, as now all the toilets would be connected to the newly laid town waterborne sewage system. All this was completed before the war. The Carlton was now state of the art, and was more than my Dad had ever dreamed of”.

At this point in time the Bernitz and Blum families first came into contact!

Ernie continues:

“I first met Ruth's parents, Paul & Bobbie in 1940 or 1941. Witbank was very different in the pre war days, the Carlton was the hub of the business and social scene, amongst the then mainly Welsh and Scottish coal mining community, the Bar trade was the back bone of the business, and was totally run on credit. (Bar Cards which were paid at month's end). Mom and Dad (Herman and Kate) were so busy trying to run the business, that they needed a Bookkeeper and someone in the office. I don't know if Dad advertised, but Max Frenkel (see Blum section for relationships) arrived, and took over all the office and bookkeeping functions.

‘With the addition of a new wing of bedrooms, new Bars and lounges completed. The business needed more staff, and Frenkel recommended the Blums who were at the time working at the Alexander Hotel in Germiston for a Mr. Shatz. I don't think they were related, but friends. The Blum's then came to the Carlton in Witbank. Paul took over the Bar, and Kitchen while Bobbie helped Paul with the Kitchen and Frenkel in the office.

They were experienced, and most certainly did not need any coaching; they proved to be popular and polite. They spoke English well (with an accent). Max then married Irma, who was appointed as a housekeeper (the Hotel by then had 76 rooms and was always full)”.

“Granny Louise, after becoming a widow lived with Mabel (now married to Lou Tyler) in Bethlehem. Later Mickey and I lived with them there. Your Dad was in boarding school in Bethal. Later Mickey went to WITS University and your Dad to Pretoria Technical College. I went to school in Witbank. In December 1936 the Tyler’s re-located to Witbank, together with Granny Louise. Mabel and Lou helped in the Hotel for a while, and then they left to take over the Central Hotel in Newcastle. Granny Louise remained with Kate in the Carlton. In those days the family had a flat in the Hotel. A new wing was added where my Dad & Mom built an en-suite room with an adjoining room for me. I well remember Dad recovering from his first heart attack, coming up every afternoon for his rest, and you and Henry being brought to him so that he could play with the two of you. You were only a few months old, so that must have been at the end of 1944.”



Herman, Mickey and Mo



Ernie

The War Years

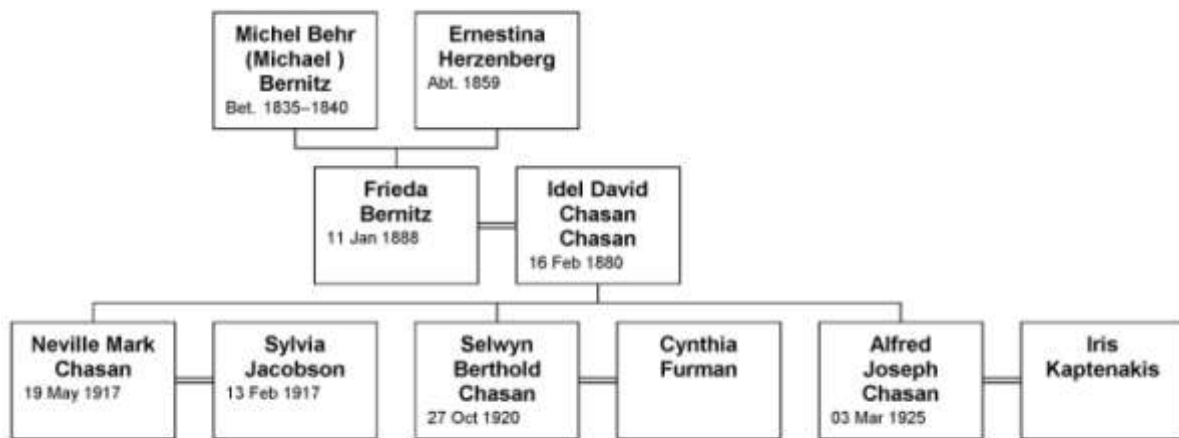
“My experience of the war was limited. We had a RAF flying school in Witbank, The Sixth Armoured division had almost all of the locals from Witbank; seeing the bulletins being put up daily, detailing the deaths, wounded and missing was very traumatic, especially as the sixth division took a terrible beating from Rommel in the beginning of the desert campaign. Each casualty listed was known to the whole town. My eldest brother Michael was a bomber pilot, in the Desert campaign, while Maurice was also in the air force, as an armourer in the Italian campaign.

“My contribution?? I used to go to the Natal South coast with my Aunt and Uncle every year on holiday. It was packed with wives and children who were evacuated from London during the Blitz for safe keeping, All the men were in service, so I was a volunteer teenage life saver, and I pulled many kids and mothers out of the unfamiliar surf they had never before seen. (Ernie had contracted polio as a child and has always had a severely wasted leg. He has never allowed himself to be handicapped, and as a child he compensated by becoming an extremely strong swimmer. His lifesaving in spite of this handicap is a testimony to his determination).

“Dad was persuaded to move out of the Hotel, and to go home every night, and so they bought the house at 21 Rhodes street. And for the first time in the history of the Herman Bernitz Dynasty, the Bernitz's had an official home. Sadly it was too late. Although he moved in he never enjoyed the genuine pleasure of retirement. Granny lived her last few years, as did Dad, in Rhodes Street. He passed away in your Granny Sara Tsipe Abelson's house in Sea Point. Your Dad and Mom, you and Jill, moved in with Kate, until moving to your own new house in Plumer Street (1949).

I was at Varsity and only visited in the holidays.”

Frida Bernitz (Herman's Sister)



Like Herman, she lived with her mother at her Grandmother's (Herzenberg, in Goldingen). She was probably educated in the Jewish Girls school. She apparently had a fine, classical education; like most Kurlanders she considered herself of fine stock – Jac Herberg told me the following:

“Frieda Chasan (nee Bernitz) told me that they'd have Heinrich Heine soirees whereas the Litvaks she married into had never got much further than the Talmud. Mary (Herberg) confirms Frieda had an “echt-deutsch” accent unlike the Slavic of the Salanter Zusmans”.

She immigrated to South Africa around 1912.

She married Idel David Chasan on 21 Feb 1916 in South Africa. Idel was the brother of my maternal grandmother, Sara Tsipe Abelson (née Chasan), born in Salant, Lithuania. (see Abelson /Chasan Family History.)



Herman and Kate with Mo, Mickey and Ernie, and Frieda with Alfred. Picture circa 1930?

I have a copy of a document which is in fact a “passport” issued by the Russian Consulate General in London, authorizing her to travel. The document is printed in English and French.

(translation of shortened French version)

Imperial General Consulate of Russia In London
 BY ORDER OF HIS IMPERIAL MAJESTY OF ALL THE RUSSIAS
 ETC.ETC.ETC. (sic)

The bearer of this passport, Mile Frieda Bernitz, Russian subject going to
 Russia

In good faith, and to assure her free passage, I have delivered this
 passport appending the seal of the Imperial General Consulate of Russia.

London 30 March / 12th April 1912 No.n/18

(signed) The General Consul of
 Russia For the Secretary: L. Morgan
 Signature of holder