

A hundred years ago the Jewish community in Kimberley was one of the wealthiest and most powerful in the world. Now it struggles to find the ten men required to read from the Torah. Ivor Powell, himself born in the Diamond City, shared the twilight with them

# EXODUS

THERE are some anxious moments before the start of the evening ritual at the historic synagogue in Memorial Road, Kimberley.

Only five men are present at 5.55pm. Two more arrive.

Finally the day is, quite literally, saved at 6.04pm, when Jules Katz and his two sons pull in, slightly out of breath and dusty with the day in their building supplies business.

Ten Barmitzvahed men. Exactly 10 men. Just enough to make a "minyan", the quorum required by the law of Moses for the Torah to be opened for the daily reading and the daily prayers communally intoned.

Today they have made the minyan. Many days, they don't.

The Griqualand West Hebrew Congregation was once probably the richest and most influential community of Jews in the world. By the end of the last century, it numbered upwards of 1 400 souls. Barney Barnato, Sir Ernest Oppenheimer (until he converted to Anglicanism, reputedly so he would be allowed to become a member of the arch-colonial Kimberley Club), Colonel Sir David Harris, Otto Beit, Bernard Klisser, the Albu brothers, Sir Lionel Philips... the register needed only the name of Cecil John Rhodes to read like a turn-of-the-century edition of Fortune International.

Even in the middle of this century, Kimberley's Jewish community gave more to the United Israeli appeal than any other in the country.

By the 60s it comprised around 400 families. Nowadays it can number barely 20 in its register. Nor, with the end of conscription, are the soldiers from the military base there any longer to bolster the tally.

By the end of last year, the situation had grown so parlous that the congregation had to let its rabbi, the Rev S M Kruglak, go. It simply couldn't afford to keep him and his family any longer. In April this year his place was filled in part by Mendel Niselow, a part-time law student from Johannesburg, who was at least able to give the children religious instruction.

Even the exquisite and historic synagogue in Memorial Road,



GOLDIE MEHL: Only one of his daughters is left in town

which was declared a national monument 10 years ago, is now under threat.

Earlier this year the congregation offered the synagogue as a house for the Northern Cape legislature. When that offer was declined, they approached Johannesburg auctioneer Stephan Welz to sell it.

Less than 100 years ago, when the synagogue was built in 1902, the congregation (which was founded about 30 years earlier) had the means and the community spirit to sponsor an international architectural competition. It had the means to import the building materials, the stones and the Victorian wrought-iron work piece by piece from England and lovingly construct it on the winning octagonal design of an Italian architect named Bociarelli. Then the priceless transcriptions of the five books of the Torah in their pre-

vious silver housings were ceremonially installed in their elaborate and specially constructed tabernacle.

"We are nearly all old men now," says Goldie Mehl, the president of the congregation.

"The younger generation get an education, they leave Kimberley for the big cities where there is money and opportunity. Or they emigrate."

Only one of Mr Mehl's four daughters has remained in Kimberley. The others have emigrated, to Canada, the US, Australia and New Zealand.

When Mr Mehl finally retired in 1989 after a lifetime spent running a Kimberley landmark, the Phoenix Hotel in Beaconsfield, there was nobody to take over.

He sold the business that his father had started when he arrived in Kimberley from Lithuania via Cape Town in 1910. And he moved

closer to the synagogue.

By doing this he robbed Kimberley of one of the events by which you could set your watch: Goldie Mehl with his patriarchal beard, his homburg and his long black coat, followed by his wife and daughters of ascending ages, a couple of steps behind, and all in equally archaic garb, trudging up Central Road and down Synagogue Street in strict accordance with the law which says you may not use transport on the Sabbath.

But nothing stays the way it was.

"It's not only the Jews who are leaving," insists Arnold Salkinder, local businessman, chairman of the congregation and Mr Mehl's son-in-law.

"Kimberley is being sidelined as a city. There is no industry, there are no opportunities. There is nothing to keep the young here after they leave school."

'We are nearly all old men now. The younger generation get an education and leave for the big cities where there is money and opportunity. Or they emigrate'

In many cases there aren't even the family businesses passed down through the generations. Although the sons of Mr Katz have gone into the business with him and Arnold Salkinder continues to run the family hardware store, many of the old Jewish businesses have closed. Klein Brothers, the wholesaler, is no more; the Benjamins closed down their department store, the Brenners have gone...

Indeed the crisis of business has reached such proportions that the Northern Cape Premier, Manne Dipico, recently issued a directive to the province's civil service that in future all official purchases had to be made from local traders. Only with special authorisation would government officials be allowed to buy goods in Johannesburg or Bloemfontein.

As diamond mining declines, it is unlikely the trend will be reversed. But for the moment the 20 remaining Jewish families hang onto the past and to the heritage built into the synagogue — just as the once thriving congregations in Benoni and Springs, and in nearly every mid-sized town in the country.

"It's not fair that a national treasure should be left to a handful of people to take care of," says Mr Mehl. "It should be in national care as a national monument."

Meanwhile, a trust fund has been launched in the hope that former members of the community will feel moved to contribute to the upkeep of the synagogue.

One donor was Dr Noel Kretzmar, who was the local vet during his working life.

"Dear Goldie Mehl, President and Congregation," Dr Kretzmar wrote. "I have, thanks be to God, celebrated my 96th birthday. I am standing here by the waters of Babylon, I am weeping at what has happened to my beautiful



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Sunday Times

# SECTION 2

# KODUS

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FAREWELL TO THE PAST... the few Jewish families left in Kimberley have been forced to try to sell their historic Italian-designed synagogue  
Pictures: RUVAN BOSHOFF