

The Baronial Street Synagogue, Kimberley consecrated 1911**

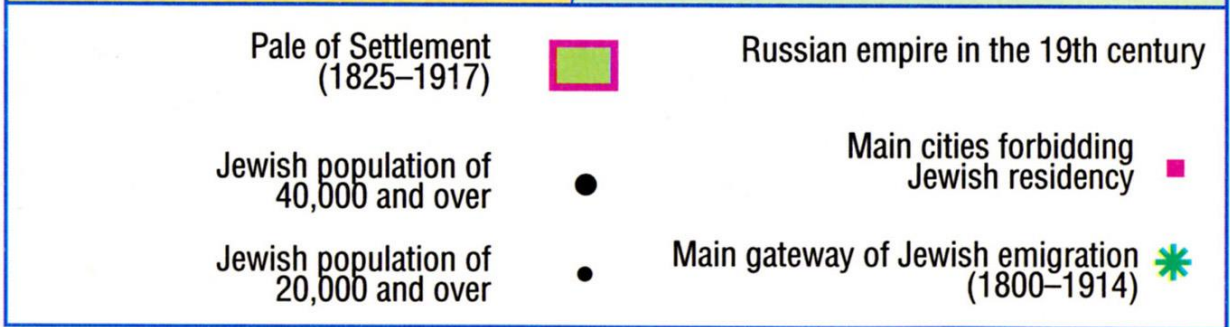
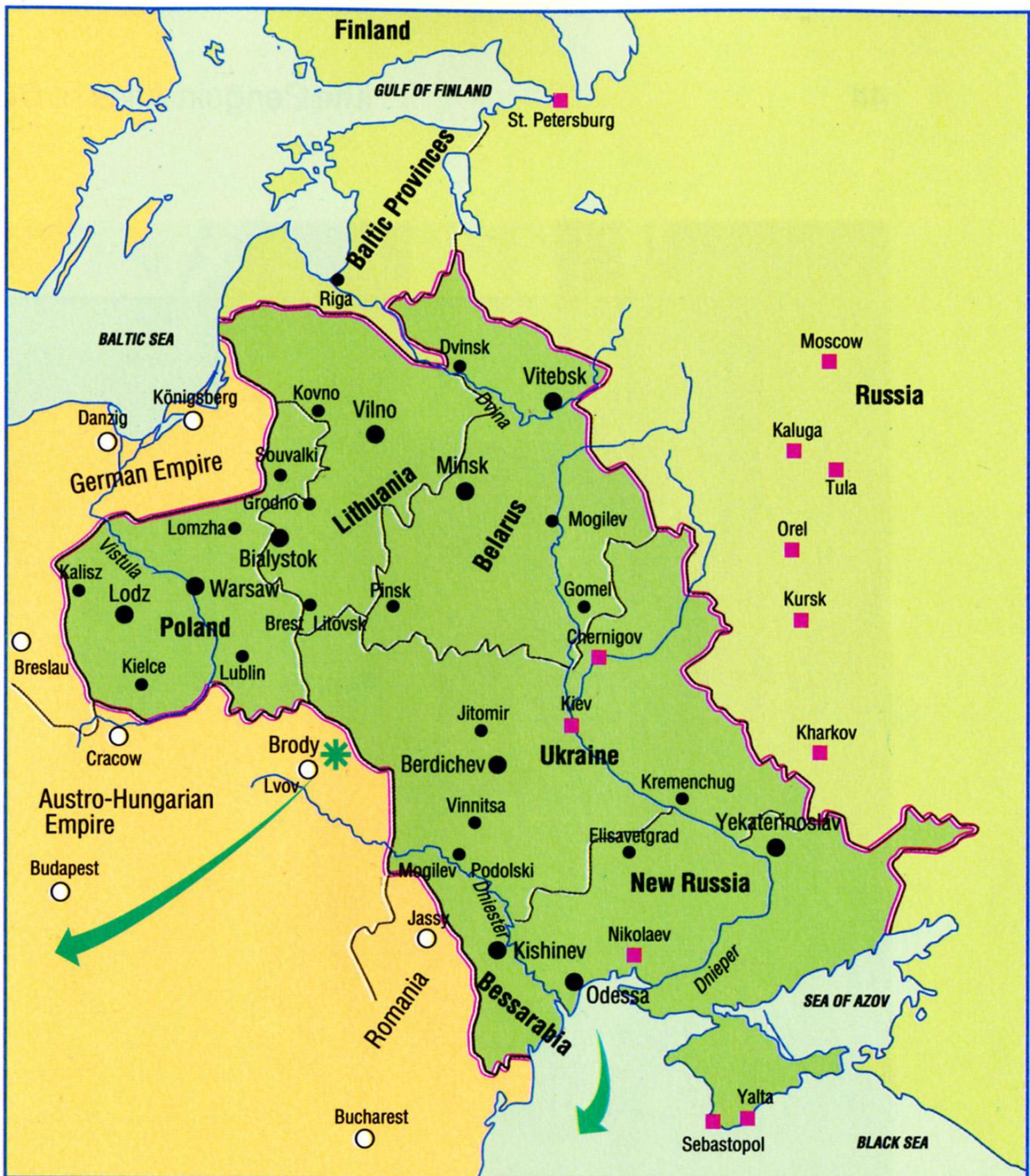


Beth Hamedrash Linas Hatzedek known as the 'Greener' or 'Grinna' Shul (photographed by Bernard Melunsky in the early 1980s, after it had ceased being a shul.)

The first influx of Jews to Kimberley had arrived from the late 1860s, shortly after diamonds had been discovered in 1867. They came mainly from Britain. Some were German, many of whom who had moved to Britain first. They set to work as diggers and brokers, company and share creators and buyers, lubricating the diamond industry. Several like Barney Barnato and his cousin Sir David Harris (who lived his life out in Kimberley until his death aged 90 in 1942) became extremely wealthy. Many of the first wave of Jew were also hoteliers, providing board and lodging, and also sports and entertainment for those engaged in the diamond business. Religion was not the first thing on their minds, but they did form a community in 1873, and build a shul in 1876 for which the Chief Rabbi of Britain sent out ministers from England. As the community grew richer and stronger, in 1902 they designed and built themselves the larger and more magnificent **Memorial Road Synagogue**.

The second influx of Jews to Kimberley was part of the great exodus of two and a half million Jews from what was called 'The Pale of Settlement' in Eastern Europe. The area, ruled by Russia, mostly falls within today's Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, and Moldova. Originally formed in 1791 by Russia's Catherine II, (the Great) this 'restricted area' (a bit like a Reservation or Bantustan) was where the Russian rulers between 1835 and 1917, had forced Jews to live in small villages and towns. They could not reside in the big cities neither could they own land. They were not allowed in Russian universities and occupations were very restricted. In the 1880s, 95 percent of the 5.3 million Jews in the Russian Empire lived in the Pale of Settlement. In the small villages, often the majority of the population was Jewish. They lived in the centre of the town and the gentiles in the surrounding parts.

Although poor, because of a lack of economic opportunity, and in fear of being harassed, attacked and robbed – the Jews nevertheless able to live an intense and rich Jewish life according to Jewish law and custom. Life revolved around their *Rebbe*, religious observances and the synagogue. They created their own educational establishments, Chederim, Talmud Torahs and Yeshivot. The Jewish sect of Chassidism, where joy in religious fervour was expressed, developed



in the Western Ukraine during the 18th century, and spread rapidly throughout the Pale. Even the 'opposers' to Chassidim called 'Mignagdim' were pious and learned in their Judaism.

When Tsar Alexander II, who had ruled from 1855 and who had made some liberating decrees like abolishing serfdom, was assassinated in 1881, Russia was plunged into new turmoil. It was rumoured that Jews were behind his death and that spelled extra trouble for the Jews. They lived in fear of attacks, of theft and even harsher restrictions. But they were permitted to leave Russia – and leave they did!

The great wave of Jewish migration began with the flight from a new wave of pogroms that had erupted in 1881 to 1883. Some Jews were helped to go to Palestine or America by Jewish organisations – but the numbers leaving grew so great that organisations could not cope. It then became based on individual initiative, as family members who had established themselves in the free world brought over their relatives. One of the main factors driving emigration after the first panic of the pogroms had died down, was the desire to live in a country where they could hope to

obtain legal equality or at least better conditions to live and work than they could ever hope for if they stayed in the Russian Empire.

In this miraculous migration, between 1881 and about 1920, more than two and a half million impoverished and pious, Yiddish-speaking Jews, made the difficult journeys to start a new life in the free world.

Jewish residents of the Pale of Settlement learned about potential destinations from the Jewish press, printed travel brochures, and word of mouth. Official representatives of emigration agencies and illegal smugglers played a key role in the physical relocation of Jewish emigrants across Russia's western border. Using the services of official emigration organizations entailed high payments and complicated bureaucratic procedures of the Russian



government. Therefore, despite the dangers a majority of Jewish emigrants preferred to work in the shadows with smugglers and cross the border illegally. See a video about this amazing exodus here <https://yivo.org/Leaving-Mother-Russia>

Men who had never been far from the surrounding area of their shtetlach, undertook the immense and difficult – and expensive – journeys across countries and oceans, to seek a better life for their families. Young men, barely out of their teens, set forth. Older men left their intended or their wives and small children behind, in the hope that they could earn enough money to send for them. Thank goodness they did so. Those left behind suffered expulsions and harrowing conditions during the first world war and after, until they were finally wiped out when Hitler invaded Poland and the Baltic States.



Eastern European Jews arriving at Cape Town at the turn of the 19/20th centuries

It is estimated that 40,000 Jews arrived in the Cape between 1880 and 1914 and a further 30,000 between 1910 and 1948. Most of these came from Lithuania, two thirds of these from the Kovno area, towns like Kovno, Ponevez, Shavli, Rakishok, Poswohl and Shadowa with the rest from Vilna, Grodno, Vitebsk, Courland and Minsk. A few others came from outside the Litvak area, like Lodz, Warsaw and Odessa.

These immigrants came from deeply religious communities with an identity tied up with upholding respect for Torah study, kashrut – kosher food and mikvahs, with community pressures ensuring conformity to those religious standards. Furthermore, there was no interest in assimilating to the community around them who were poor, illiterate and whose lack of education and way of life held no attraction and whose antisemitism ensured religious cohesiveness within the Jewish minority living amongst them.

These mainly poor and pious, Yiddish speaking Jews, being used to life in small villages, gravitated to the small towns and villages all around the country. Their *landsmen* (people from their villages or areas) already there, helped to put them on their feet, providing goods on extended credit for them to hawk around the city, town and surrounding countryside, pointing them to specific commodities and in certain directions, where the goods and services they traded would be needed and not compete. Others worked hard at what they knew; tailoring, carpentry, furniture making,

jewellery and metal work. They started kosher butcheries and bakeries and sold kosher foods. They were Mohels and Shochets and many excelled at farming. They established Yiddish cultural activities such as newspapers and theatre companies.

About a hundred of these intensely religious Eastern European Jews, settled in Kimberley.

As you can imagine, the existing, largely secular and assimilated Anglo-German community and the opulent synagogue they found there, did not feel right, or in tune with their way of life. They longed for a simpler house of prayer and to worship in their own way.



Above the market Square and Town Hall in about 1920.

Gus Habermeld, who was born in Kimberley in 1904 and whose father had come from Poland via London in 1892 explained (in an interview in 1985 for the Kaplan Centre at UCT): 'When they built the Memorial Road shul for the benefit of the English Jews in 1902, they built the Zionist Hall in Hellenic Street where the Eastern European Jews preferred to worship in the way they were accustomed.'

He said: 'In my childhood there were three places of worship. Our family first used to go to the Zionist Hall service on a Friday night, come home, make kiddush and have dinner etc. Where we lived in the city centre around Bultfontein Road, it was more or less a Jewish ghetto. There were Jewish shopkeepers all the way around. There was a milk dairy there, and at the back of the dairy, the man who used to run it had a bit of a cheder, [maybe that was Mr **Jack Maresky**]. Opposite the dairy, we had a kosher butchery, we had all little shops, Yiddish shops, around there, and they were all more or less what were called the 'Greener' community.'

The term 'greener' (or with different spellings like 'grinna' or 'grinne') comes from the word 'greenhorn', a term, used originally in America to denote an inexperienced or naive person – particularly a newcomer (as to a country) unacquainted with local manners and customs. (Jews

themselves were to use this term for those of their brethren who arrived after they were already a bit established.)

Gus explained further about this Kimberley community: 'Then in 1911 the 'Greeners' got together, there was a Mrs Cohen who had a plot of ground, and they built the Shul, in Baronial Street.



*Its official name was the **Beth Hamedrash Linas Hatzedek.**

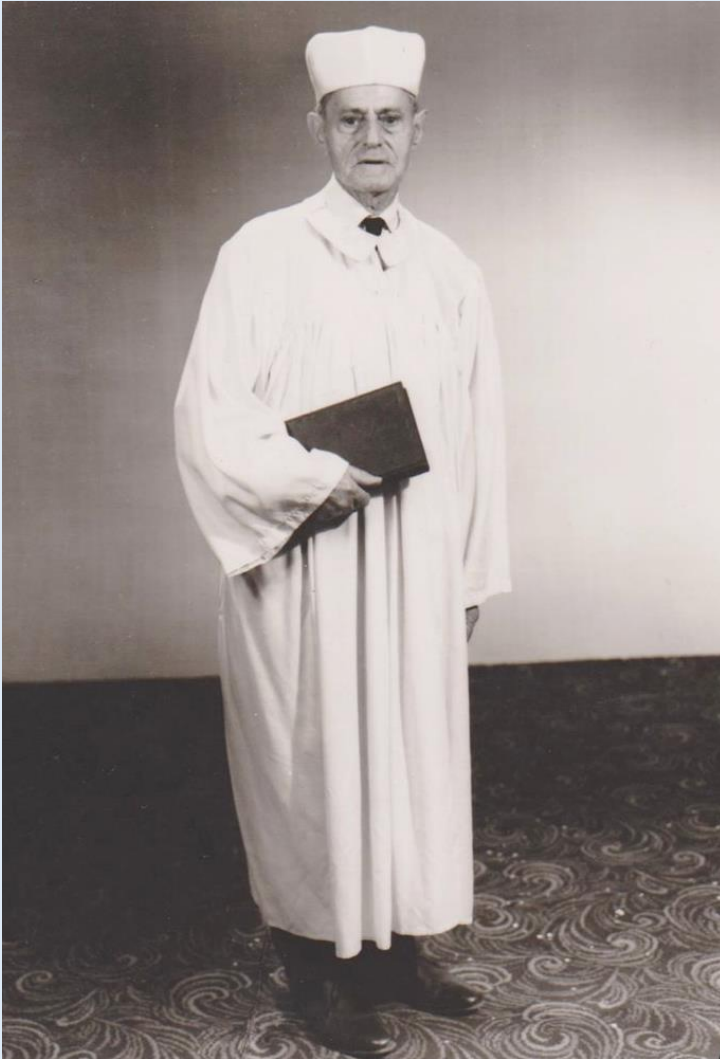
(photo Geraldine Auerbach 1988). Few of us knew that it had this name – or what it meant.

Beth Hamidrash means a place where Jews gather to study the Talmud and other religious writings; including a small synagogue.

Linas Hazedek was the name of a worthy society across areas of Poland where artisans who had worked hard all day, would nevertheless volunteer to go and spend the night in the home of a very ill person. ('*Linas*' literally means 'overnight') They cared for the sick of rich or poor – but of course the majority were poor. Most of the towns and villages did not have hospitals. There were government hospitals in the big cities, but religious Jews were reluctant to go there. So, such help by volunteers was much needed and appreciated. The members of *Linas Hazedek* kept watch over the sick all night, relieving of the members of the household. They brought doctors and medicine. (This perhaps throws a new light on Jews' yearning for 'My son the Doctor).

Gus continued: 'After they built the shul, they used to hold services there every weekday morning and evening and on Friday nights, and on Yom Tovim. I don't think they held services on Saturday morning as most people had to open their businesses on Saturday. They did not have ministers there, only lay readers. In the early days there were **Steinberg** and **Baruch Leib**. Later there was **Lipi Weinstein**. One was a shoemaker; one was a glazier; and Lipi, who led services there from 1929 to 1973, was a tailor.'

Gus added: 'I think the Greeners had a more intimate relationship with Jewish life than the others, that is how I saw it. And by the way, we did not class ourselves as "Greeners".'



Lipi Weinstein's grandson **Leon Chonin** born in Kimberley in 1952 wrote about his grandfather.

Lipi (pictured left) attended this shul running the services every single night. Being from Poland he preferred the traditional orthodox services held at what the community called the "Grinna" shul in Baronial Street, near Klein Brothers wholesale business. This appellation 'Grinna' was the Yiddish label given to the Eastern European Jews who were regarded as less knowledgeable and sophisticated than those British immigrants who had built the Memorial Road shul in 1902.

Those traditional Eastern European Jews who regularly attended the shul were members of the **Klein, Zvi, Benjamin, Sussman, Jawno, Brenner, Geller, Magid, Lincow, Frank** and **Maresky** families. Lipi invariably conducted the services with assistance from Mr Zvi and Edel Chonin (who later became his son-in-law.)

As time went on, the two groups integrated. Before and during the nineteen fifties, daily services were held during the week at the Grinna Shul, for the whole community, who needed these for those in mourning etc. Only on Shabbat were services held at the Memorial Road Synagogue. But on most Jewish festivals, in the early days, services were held at both shuls.

As the integration of the Memorial Road and 'Grinna' community took place, Lipi participated in conducting the services at both shuls. He became the chazzan sheini (second cantor) and very close friends with all the rabbis including Reverend Goldberg (the second minister from 1925 until 1955) and with Rabbi Bloch, (1954-1956). His closest friendship was with Rabbi Oscar Werner (1957-1970) who after he left Kimberley first moved to the Greenside shul in Johannesburg before emigrating to West Palm Beach, Florida in the USA in 1988 to live closer to his children. Lipi was one of the very few members of the Kimberley Jewish community (at the time) who was able to enjoy his second barmitzvah at the age of 83, one year before his passing away.

Lipi was honoured for his dedication, for most of his life in Kimberley, as chairman of the Chevra Kadisha (The Holy Brotherhood, those who look after the dead and prepare them for funerals). He was made an honorary life president of the Chevra. As a tailor he was responsible for making all the burial garments, *tachrichim*, for which he never ever claimed re-imburement as he considered it a mitzvah to perform this sacred act of service.

Joe Brenner the vice chairman was his closest religious friend, and both were elected as worthy brothers of the Kimberley Hebrew Order of David. There can be little doubt that Lipi and Hannah Weinstein were members of the pioneering Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who assisted in establishing the Kimberley Jewish community which sadly has diminished today to a few remaining souls.'

In the 1980s and '90s the Baronial Street building (seen here in 1988 in its last phase after it had ceased to be a shul) was sold and became a storeroom for a Jewish business (Trevenna). Subsequently it was demolished. The loss of the "Grinna" shul would have been a devastating blow to both Lipi Weinstein and Edel Chonin who attended their daily services and whose family thoroughly enjoyed the amazing Jewish festivals such as the Sukkot services with the brocha in



the Sukkah.

The Key to the Beth Hamedrash Linas Hatzedek

Gwynne Robins, née Schrire sent me a picture of the key (above) presented to her great-grandfather **Raphael Rodes Senderovitz** at the opening of this synagogue on 18 September 1911. The name of the building, and 'Kimberley' is inscribed on one side, and on the reverse of this key, it says: **Opened by R Senderovitz Esq, 24 Elul 5671 (18.9.1911).**



Gwynne said: 'I knew nothing about the key – or the building to which it belonged until you (Geraldine) sent the article about the 'Grinne' Shul'

Raphael Senderovitz

My great Grandfather Raphael Senderovitz was a wealthy merchant in Beaconsfield, and it seems that he had been instrumental in, and had supported, the shul's construction. He died in 1918.

The key was found when I was clearing out the surplus contents of the Old Jewish Museum, that the new SA Jewish Museum did not want, and it was given to me. It had been presented to the museum by my grandmother Sarah Neche Schrire (née Senderovitz) (daughter of Raphael). My grandfather (Samuel Schrire)'s cousin was one of the founders of the original museum and I guess he had asked her to donate it. I gave the key to my son, who is the chairman of a Cape Town shul, and placed it in a frame made by my other great grandfather, Yehuda Leib Schrire.

A Bench from the Grinne Shul

Just when we were thinking that all evidence of what was inside was lost, I was delighted when **Cyril Salkinder** wrote recently to say that his father, **Louis Salkinder**, had bought the benches from the Grinne Shul when it closed down. He has restored a four-seater which features prominently in his TV room. Thanks for the picture of this bench Cyril.



The Demise of the Baronial Street Synagogue

The Baronial Street Synagogue in its last days in 1988, photograph by Geraldine Auerbach



In June 2023 **Barney Horwitz Chairman of the remaining community** told us about the last years of the Baronial Street Synagogue. He said:

The last services in the Baronial Street shul were held in or about 1982. Subsequently it fell into disrepair and around 1988 it was sold. But the buyer defaulted, and we repossessed it. It was then rented to the Trevenna Supermarket Group as storage and the income was used for the maintenance of the Memorial Road shul.

When Jeff Selmann sold Trevenna in 2010, the new owners did not want it anymore. Subsequently we sold it to the owners of Vermeulen's Hardware Store behind it. The proceeds of that sale kept the Kimberley Community afloat for about 8 years. In about 2012 they extended their shop and demolished the little synagogue.



The Plaque left

Photo
Bernard
Melunsky

was on the synagogue wall. Sadly, its not clear enough to read the names involved. And it has been painted over. I wonder if any records exist?

Comments from readers

Alma Steinberg (nee Frank b Kimberley 1942) writes:

I remember being taken to the old Greene Shul by my dad, (Jack Frank) whose father (Ephroim Boruch (Bernard) Podlifskey – later Frank) was one of the first members. I don't know whether my sister remembers this, as we were both very young then.

Morris Klevansky writes:

I remember attending many weekday services there and pre-bar mitzvah holding a Chumash (the Pentateuch) under my arm to be able to be part of the minyan (10 men needed for a service in order to recite certain prayers and read from the scrolls) so that the men could have a full service.

Cynthia Maresky – Widow of Dr Lampie Maresky b Kimberley writes:

I heard many stories of Lampie's parents especially his wonderful father Aaron David Maresky who was responsible for the "Grinne Shul" and had been a Shochet before running a General Dealers store on the corner of Market square together with his most efficient and savvy wife. (His chalofim have been passed down to his grandson Dr Gideon Maresky a plastic surgeon in Cape Town). Not to forget all the Maresky family and their stories....Uncle Jack and his children Helen , Ita , Shim and Phyllis

Rochelle Levin (née Hotz) b Kimberley c1949 wrote

I am one of the three children of Charlie and Hilda Hotz. My dad owned Longwear Mens' Outfitters in the Market Square. We lived in Park Road. We left Kimberley in c1963 for Cape Town when I (b1949?) was starting standard 8. I did Medicine at UCT I, live with my family in Boston. We left South Africa in 1976. My brother is Marshal Hotz b c1940 a dentist who is living in Israel. My sister Pam Buckham b c1946, lives in George. With regard to the **Greener Shul** our grandfather Nathan Lincow was very involved there. He was the supervisor/custodian/shamas at the small shul. He never went to the big Shul. We used to go every Simchas Torah to celebrate with him there. I loved going there on that particular holiday. I remember all the chocolates we used to get after the service. It was quite run down by the time we left in 1960 and I don't think it was safe for the women to sit upstairs by then!

Trevor Toubé (b Kimberley 1939) remembers:

I once, as a small boy, went to the Grinne shul with my father (Abe Toubé) on Simchat Torah and afterwards was distressed to see all these respectable (and in my eyes elderly) men getting drunk behind the bimah! (The raised platform in a synagogue from which the *Torah* is read.)

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## Further reading:

[Chonin, Leon](#)

[Grant \(nee Frank\), Sheila](#)

[Haberfeld, Gus & Family](#)

[Hotz, Hilda & Charlie](#)

[Maresky, Jack, Shim & Helen](#)

[Robins \(nee Schrire\), Gwynn](#)

[Salkinder, Cyril](#)

[Senderovitz, Raphael](#)

[Weinstein, Lipi and Hannah \(nee Erlich\)](#)

[Werner, Rabbi Oscar, Tributes by Leon Chonin & Bernard Werner](#)

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## **The Baronial Street Synagogue**

Compiled, edited and illustrated by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London, 21 April 2022

\*\*Updated October 2023.

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