

The World of the South African Smouse – and some Kimberley connections

Compiled by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London, January 2020

Smous – an itinerant Jewish pedlar (plural Smouse)

When writing an introduction to my [Wholesalers in Kimberley](#) article I realised how **wholesale trading with commercial travellers was a natural development** of the ubiquitous itinerant Jewish peddler or smous, So many of our relatives who arrived in South Africa without a trade or profession, started off on foot selling one item (eggs, rags, fruit) door to door in the streets of the Cape Town, and then progressed to working in a store, or hiring a donkey cart and ranged far and wide.

It seems to have worked like this. An immigrant that had graduated from door-to-door peddling, and now owned a little shop, would welcome a *landsmen* and give him a start by supplying him with **goods at extended credit**. There was discussion amongst those already establishing themselves as to what commodities, and in what areas, the newcomer should peddle, so as not to compete. Once he got on his feet, the newcomer was able to hire or buy a cart and some donkeys and become a traveller for the person who set him up (or for himself) setting off into new areas to bring the necessities of life to farmers, natives and small shopkeepers throughout the countryside. Trading in this way, was part of a tight-knit mutually effective Jewish economic system. And it opened up trade routes into the interior.



Above, we see a typical smous outfit. A small cart packed to the rafters, six donkeys outspanned by the coloured servant and the smous sitting on his bags of mealies.

In this article I cover

| | |
|--|---------|
| How the smous worked | page 1 |
| The word 'smous' – was it descriptive or derogatory? | page 2 |
| The memorial plaque to the Smouse in Graaf-Reinet | page 3 |
| The Jewish museum use of the word | page 4 |
| Posing the question on the Forum | page 4 |
| Derivation of the word and conclusion | page 6 |
| Appendix 1 Jewish peddlers of Namaqualand | page 7 |
| Appendix 2 literary and other printed sources | page 7 |
| Appendix 3 Tuvye (Tobias) Kretzmar's letters home | page 10 |
| Appendix 4 Hyman Levy's memories | page 10 |

How it worked cont: The smous carried everything a household would need, sacks of grain; tinned meat and fish; tea coffee and sugar; blankets; tablecloths; pots and pans; brooms and buckets, clothing, cloth and sewing materials; jewellery, watches and even eyeglasses. The farmers sometimes **bartered with him** in livestock, skins, wool or mealies which he then brought to the towns and sold to others.

Offering to take **payment in instalments**, the Jewish peddler had reason to visit his customers on a regular basis and got to know them well. Often the farmers would give him hospitality over-night. The Afrikaners, revering the Jew as the People of the Book, might invite him to read the Bible with them.

It was a lonely life. He made sure he was home for Shabbos. He loaded up on Sundays and was out on the dusty roads with just his servants, usually a white driver and packer, and a coloured youth who looked after the livestock and the donkeys. It was also dangerous. He had money on him, usually chained to his belt or the wagon. He was sometimes attacked and robbed. **The unfortunate smous from Kimberley, Philip Borkum** was actually strangled by his servants in 1906. They escaped with his money and some items of clothing. They were later apprehended, tried and executed for the murder. (see the Borkum Story on Families)

Every smous longed to own his own store. Many of these itinerant traders were able set up shop in the small towns all over the country. Sometimes townships actually developed around the Jewish shop. Many of our Kimberley ex-pats families started off in this way. **(My own grandfather, Tuvye (Tobias) Kretzmer,** started by selling eggs door to door in Cape Town in 1899. He then became a glazier and eventually in about 1903, was able to set up a general dealers' store in Malmesbury, near Cape Town and send for his wife and four small children. (See appendix 3 page 10) Read the letters [Here](#)

The Word 'Smous'

I had thought the word 'smous' was a descriptive term, sometimes even used as a badge of honour. However, Leon Chonin told me that his parents said one should avoid using that word. There was nothing complimentary by calling a Jewish trader a smous. He said, 'The Afrikaners used this term because they also believed that the Jews exploited them by over-charging for their sometimes shoddy goods. My parents who spoke only Yiddish at home told me never to use this word as it was insulting. The Afrikaners many of whom were anti-Semitic during the war years enjoyed using this derogatory word to label many of the Jewish businesses.'

This led me to do some research.

I found the situation to be complex. In the **City of Graaf-Reinet**, a memorial plaque has been erected on the main street honouring, the 'Jewish Pedlars' / 'Joodse Smouse' in English and Afrikaans, with some Hebrew letters and a star of David. (see picture below). The plaque reads: 'In honour of the pioneer Jewish Pedlars (alternative spelling for peddlers) known as smouse, who traded in outlying and remote country districts. They supplied their customers with many of the necessities of life. In the course of their trading, they made a contribution to the economic development of the country'.



You can read on Eli Rabinowitz's Graaf Reinet kehilalinks site, about how this was the initiative of the South African Board of Deputies. It was originally a bronze plaque affixed to a boulder near the entrance to the town in 1989. It was subsequently stolen (presumably for its scrap metal value). On the insistence of the Graaf-Reinet Heritage Association it was replaced as a granite plaque in the centre of town and rededicated by Rabbi Silberhaft and many dignitaries and previous Jewish inhabitants of the town. (not sure of the year). You can read the full story here:

https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/graaff_reinet/Smouse.html There have been comments left by visitors about this memorial:

Rick214 from Vancouver wrote on TripAdvisor: Worth a brief stop because you drive right past it heading out of town toward Cape Town. The monument itself is unremarkable, but quite interesting for what it says about the important functions Jewish pedlars once had in the social fabric of this agrarian region. Also interesting, I think, was the very decision to commemorate them.

Jill dutoit of PE says: It is highly appropriate to have some recognition of the role that the very earliest travelling salesmen had in this part of the world. How very difficult it must have

been to eke out a living, but who knows how the farmers' wives would have managed without a visit from the "smous"!

Traveljunkie from Cape Town writes: 'The Jewish Traders played such a large part in the life of South Africans that a larger display would have been more appropriate in this museum. Perhaps some history can be compiled and the Smouse (traders) given more recognition and space? There were many Jewish folk in all the small towns of South Africa many years ago and many of them were the travelling salesmen who played a vital part in the economy.'

And Thabo from Cape St Francis South Africa says: It is a fitting recognition to some very special people who lived a very hard life and made the lives of the people living in the far-off rural areas a bit easier. Thanks for the recognition.

The Jewish Digital Archive mentions that the Mosenthals and other early Jewish settlers set up trading stores, promoted the mohair industry and supported the Jewish peddlers ('smouse'). You can also read the positive description of 'The Jewish Peddlers of Namaqualand' in appendix 1 below.

South African Jewish Museum

A display in the **South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town**, uses the word 'smous' in telling the story of those who chose to fan out across the country into the small rural communities. They say: 'some crossed the countryside as smouse (itinerant peddlers), where devout Boer farmers who regarded them as the "people of the book" received them warmly. They acted as intermediates between the dorps and the producers, both black and white. Jewish storekeepers and smouse bought wool, maize and skins from Boer landowners and blacks and then sent them to urban markets and wholesalers.'

In turn the Jewish country stores that developed, met the growing needs of these emergent rural consumers. These entrepreneurs were significant agents of the commercial revolution that transformed the South African countryside in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They continue, 'The footsore smous, the itinerant trader who trudged and trundled between farmsteads selling all manner of articles to farmers and their families, **has become a figure of legend within South African Jewish memory.**'

Posing the question on the SA-Sig Forum

I posted the question on the **South Africa Jewish Genealogy Forum** about their understanding of this term. The first response from **Adrian Friedman** said it was a derogatory term. Next **Jeremy Lichtman** of Toronto wrote: I don't know if the word is pejorative or not, but the travelling Jewish peddler was usually seen in a positive light, as they were the ones bringing news (gossip?) and urgently needed supplies to remote farming areas that seldom saw other outside traffic.

Brian Plen wrote: This is part of our family story as well. My Grandfather Mauritz (Morris) John Plen arrived as a 19-year-old in Cape Town in about 1890. My father Mark told me that Morris had told him that he worked as a smous for a period before moving up to Johannesburg where he worked in a store near the corner of Rissik and Commissioner Street for a year or two after arriving. Then he set up in Nigel soon after the start of the goldrush from 1896. Within a couple of years, he owned a thriving General Store and Hotel in Nigel. Except for the Boer War years (1900-1902) he spent

the rest of his long life running the store, the New Goldfields Hotel and a number of properties in Nigel. (as did my **Bergman family similarly near Kimberley** in Schmidtsdrift – you can read their story here <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/kimberley/Auerbach.html>)

And, **Dean van der Westhuizen** explained: 'I am Afrikaans speaking and as we all know Afrikaans is made up mainly of Dutch but also a mixture of other languages. We know the term Smous to be a Peddler. Growing up in South Africa we never ever thought anything derogatory about the term and as a young boy I still recall people going from door to door selling goods such as cutlery, encyclopaedias and even plastic Tupperware. We even use it as a compliment for some Sales Agents to say they can smous anything. The Jewish Community in South Africa was instrumental to the building of the Economy in South Africa, they started a lot of the main trading routes. I take my hat off to those Jewish men who walked 1000's of kilometres over rough terrain here in SA with our extreme temperatures. I personally am proud of the Smouse because they helped the Afrikaaner Nation.

Eitan Levy sent a transcript of his grandfather (Hyman Levy's) description of smousing in Johannesburg and the Rustenberg area (see below in appendix 3 page 10).

Lorna Levy wrote: after we circulated the Newsletter no 25: "I only found out in recent times, since relocating to Cape Town from London that my grandfather, **Philip Borkum of Kimberley**, was a smous who was murdered near de Aar in 1906 when he was on a smous trip. His two assistants strangled him and were apprehended, charged and eventually executed. I found the transcript of the trial in the Archives in Cape Town while I was trying to research the life and death of the grandfather who was never talked about in my life. At the time of his death my grandmother and her five children were living in Kimberley. Her brothers and sisters followed the usual Jewish pattern of South Africa in those times, prospered by the opening up of the country and the cheap labour system to become very wealthy and integrated into the fabric of the country. Lorna has written a book that was published by the Kaplan Centre at UCT in 2018 called '**The Hidden Life of a Smous**'. There were probably other murders or acts of violence on the road for the lonely smous.

Roy Ogus of Palo Alto, California (who compiles the most interesting journal of the Southern African Jewish Genealogical Special Interest Group – all of which are archived and can be read on the [SA-SIG web site](#)) says: I don't remember that the word was derogatory.

Denise Fletcher from Sydney, Australia wrote: My great-grandfather Jacob started out as a 'smous' in the southern Free State in 1895 when he migrated from Lithuania. His experience with the local Afrikaners was anything but negative. One of the local farmers worried about Jacob being alone and unable to afford to send for his wife and remaining six children (the oldest had left Lithuania in 1890 to go to the US) to join him. As a result, after the Second Anglo-Boer War, this farmer approached another local farmer who had received war compensation from the British government and asked him to give that money to Jacob so that he could pay for the rest of his family to join him. It was an amazing act of generosity from the local Afrikaners.

A further example of their concern and caring came during the Second World War. Afrikaner fascists who were militantly anti-British and who supported Hitler, had formed an organisation called the Ossewabrandwag in South Africa, and they were active in the local area where our family lived. By this time my grandfather (my great-grandfather died in 1940) had a general store in the little town, and his relationship with his Afrikaner

farmer customers was such that some of them came to warn him to get the family to safety, as they believed Hitler was going to win the war and that Jews would therefore be in danger in the country.

The Derivation of the word 'Smous'

Even the **derivation of the word** seems unclear. **Bubbles Segall** from Melbourne Australia. ex Stellenbosch. says: 'I was told that the word "Smous" has a Dutch derivation that means 'soos Moses' - in other words Jews had Moses in their bible. **Leon** says it's similar to **German** and **Yiddish** words like Shmow and Shmok which are terms of derision. Others say the Yiddish derivation is from shmooze – to sweet talk.

Dennis Kahn from Amsterdam says that according to 'Van Dale', the foremost dictionary in the Netherlands:

'Smous' is a Dutch word dating from 1657. It is derived from Yiddish for Mousje (Moses).

The word has several meanings:

1. term of abuse for a Jew.
2. ditto for a policeman.
3. cheat, dealer, haggler, trafficker.

Words derived from smous include:

smousen -- to deal in a deceptive, disorderly, inferior manner.

Elona Steinfeld the Research Co-ordinator of SA Friends of Beth Hatefutsoth says the derivation is South African Dutch, meaning hawker, pedlar, transferred use of Dutch *smous* 'Jew, usurer, supposed to be the same word as German dialectal *schmus* talk, patter' (*OED*); cf. Yiddish *schmooz*, *shmooze*, *shmooz*, *shmooze* heart-to-heart talk, from Hebrew *schmuos* '(originally) "things heard"; (in time) "rumors", "idle talk".' (L. Rostein, *The joys of Yiddish* 1968).

My Conclusion:

It seems that there was on the whole a positive response to, and appreciation of, the smouse. Some of the people who followed that walk of life, used the words 'smous' and 'smousing' about themselves or members of their family as a descriptive term. But we know, only too well, that any word can be used in a derogatory sense. Even, and perhaps often, the very word 'Jew' or 'Yid' is used in a pejorative way. There are certainly instances, in local literary sources, of the words 'smous' and 'Jew peddler' being used in a disparaging and negative way. And no doubt there were scoundrels who charged too much and 'verneuked' the Boers, earning such a reputation.

It could also be that the British administrators at the cape encouraged – or tolerated this immigration and its small-scale difficult commercial activity into the country districts as it opened up trade and increased and spread the sales of the goods that Britain exported to South Africa.

I leave the last word to South African Jewish historian Milton Shain who said '***The collective South African Jewish memory has romanticized the smous in his wanderings, but he was also not always welcome, and often a figure of derision.***'

So, we might use this word with caution.

Appendices

Appendix 1

THE JEWISH PEDDLERS OF NAMAQUALAND

Peddlers appeared in South Africa in the late nineteenth century, and the name smous or bondeldraers (men carrying bundles) were given to them by the Dutch. These itinerant travellers arrived on foot from the Cape carrying items for trading on their backs. They made their way from farm to farm selling jewelry, sewing necessities such as needles, buttons, thread, thimbles, pins and an assortment of material, as well as herbs, medicines and beauty products. They were welcomed on the farms, given food and accommodation and sometimes had their washing done for them. Travelling over the rough terrain of Namaqualand was dangerous, especially while descending the steep Kammiesberg.

This community of Jewish traders in Namaqualand came from the shtetls of Eastern Europe and at its peak in the 1930s there were about 200 peddlers, and the numbers subsequently declined until the peddlers became a part of the formal economy of the region. Fleeing repression, the peddlers started off supplying necessities — and later luxuries — to isolated farmers. Many years later they became proprietors of country hotels, spotting the need to provide hospitality to travelers in these inhospitable parts. Having been attracted to the region by the development of copper mining in the 1850s and the discovery of diamonds in the 1920s, these Jews became the area's middlemen — traders, shopkeepers and hoteliers — rather than being involved in the mining itself.

Appendix 2

Examples of the word smous in literary sources

A surprising example of this is to be found in the writings of Olive Schriener, who displayed somewhat ambiguous views of Jews. While she was a person ahead of her times in much of her writing and attitudes, this did not extend to the smous. She described him as "snivelling weasel-like creatures who come out third class and as soon as they land supply themselves with a couple of mules and become smouses, hawking false jewellery and damaged clothing among the Dutch farmers and growing rich on it." ¹⁷

- Said that he had been trading among the Zulus; he was what we call a '**smouse**' out here, and got into a row with them, I don't know how.

[Benita, an African romance](#)

- At any rate, his connection with the firm terminated, and for years he became a wandering "**smouse**," or trader, until at length he drifted into partnership with her father.

[Benita, an African romance](#)

- Then I met a Peruvian **smouse**, and sold him my clothes and bought from him these.

[Greenmantle](#)

- He had lately purchased a new gun from some **_smouse_** or trader, and he was about to exhibit his skill in the use of it, before the eyes of his admiring subjects.

[The Giraffe Hunters](#)

- Annoyed at his want of success, he had some doubts as to his weapon being what had been represented by the **smouse** from whom he had purchased it.

[The Giraffe Hunters](#)

These references below by date, are to such itinerant Jewish travellers called smouse long before the Eastern Europeans arrived:

1796 E. HELME tr. of [F. Le Vaillant's Trav.](#) I. 55 There is at the Cape a species of old-clothes men. who from their enormous profits and the extortion they practice have obtained the name of Capse-Smouse, or Cape Jews.

1806 J. BARROW [Trav.](#) II. 331 His load may consist of fifteen hundred weight of butter and soap, for which he is glad to get from the retail dealers at the Cape, whom he calls Smaus or Jew, sixpence a pound.

1827 G. THOMPSON [Trav.](#) 136 Brandy (the only luxury besides tobacco in which the poorer boors indulge) is purchased from *smouses*, or hawkers, who traverse the remotest skirts of the Colony with waggon-loads of this detestable beverage.

1832 *Graham's Town Jrnl* 74 That useful and industrious class of people the *Smouses*, to whose spirit of enterprize this town is mainly indebted for its rapid rise.

1864 T. BAINES [Explor. in S.-W. Afr.](#) 75 The chief Jan Jonken came to visit us, and complained that all the 'Smouses' hurried past as fast as possible, so that if the Hottentots wanted clothing or other goods they had to run after the wagons.

1872 E.J. DUNN in A.M.L. Robinson [Sel. Articles from Cape Monthly Mag.](#) (1978) 58 Under a handsome spreading camel-thorn tree is pitched a very tiny tent. Within is a 'smous' with his wares.

1882 C. DU VAL [With Show through Sn Afr.](#) I. 272 The wily 'smouse' or pedlar, still in a minor degree glories in the successful manner in which he is able to best the 'Mynheers' in the matter of buying and selling, swap and barter, profit and loss.

1900 B. MITFORD [Aletta](#) 21 They saw no one month in month out, save an occasional Boer passer-by, or a travelling *smaus*, or feather-buyer, usually of a tolerably low type of Jew — and therefore, socially, no acquisition.

1919 J.Y. GIBSON in [S. Afr. Jrnl of Science](#) July 3 Until late in the 19th century the 'smous,' or itinerant trader was a common visitant, carrying his wares in a Kap-tent wagon to remote habitations of trekkers and settlers.

1925 H.J. MANDELBROTE tr. of [O.F. Mentzel's Descr. of Cape of G.H.](#) II. 75 Voyagers..are sometimes badly 'stung' in their dealings with rascally sailors and are apt to classify all Cape inhabitants as 'schmouzen,' or even rogues. [Note] Hawkers or pedlars.

1916 J. BUCHAN [Greenmantle](#) 261I met a Peruvian Smouse and sold him my clothes and bought from him these. [Note] Peter meant a Polish-Jew pedlar.

1937 C.R. PRANCE [Tante Rebella's Saga](#) I. 272 The smous could always be relied on to bring a good pack of news or lies, but he would not open it until business in the contents of his other packs had been encouraging.

1937 H. SAUER [Ex Afr.](#) 12The arrival of the *smous* on a Boer farm always created a little excitement. The *smous* was a sort of travelling merchant, who went all over South Africa, visiting nearly every farmstead.

1944 J. MOCKFORD [Here Are S. Africans](#) 64 Concertinas and mouth-organs were brought to the outspans by far-travelling pedlars or *smouse*, as they were called.

1949 L.G. GREEN [In Land of Afternoon](#) 142 Another duty of the smous was to bring news of the outside world.

1949 O. WALKER [Proud Zulu](#) (1951) 31 He knew John had been in the wrong, but he was not prepared to be told so by a bunch of traders whom he despised as glorified peddlers and 'smouses'.

1956 S.D. NEUMARK [Economic Influences on S. Afr. Frontier](#) (1956) 145 The smous is known to have played an important part in the frontier economy during the time of the Great Trek (in the 1830's). It was usual for him to come to the remote farms with two or three wagonloads of wares containing articles of clothing, groceries, and most other things required by the colonists.

1968 K. MCMAGH [Dinner of Herbs](#) 32 As the population grew and the settlers moved further afield the smous followed and took to the road, bearing his pack on his back until such time as his profits enabled him to afford first a cart and horses and later a wagon and oxen.

1976 [Het Suid-Western](#) 26 May 1 George Flip S—, a fish smous of Boekenhout Street, George.

1977 [S. Afr. Panorama](#) Mar. 25 An important facet of Jewish life was found outside the main centres. Now part of history is the figure of the 'smous' or travelling salesman, who was often the farmer's only contact with the outside world.

1980 [Daily Dispatch](#) 23 Aug. 3 He left school at the age of 13! At that age, Willie took employment with a travelling pedlar (smouse) and went with him from farm to farm and so earned his first wages.

1980 B. SETUKE in M. Mutloatse [Forced Landing](#) 64 The only people, other than the train-gang, who have free passage between one coach and the next, are the smouses, who are a force to be reckoned with.

1984 S. GRAY [Three Plays](#) 134(Enter Abraham Goldenstein, aged about forty; dirty, unkempt and bearded like many a smous dealer)...Jacob:...I never sell my farm to a Jewish smous!

1984 M. MTHETHWA in [Frontline](#) July 29 Smouses — self-appointed train hawkers — are found in almost every train.

1991 I. BERELOWITZ in [Weekend Argus](#) 26 Jan. (Weekender) 2 He began his business career as a smous, a Jewish itinerant trader in the Western Cape, travelling by horse and cart and selling mainly articles required by farmers.

1992 [Natal Mercury](#) 2 Nov. 7 A thorough knowledge of merchandise — a ‘feel for the goods’ — is known in the retail industry as the key to success. Trevor K—.has that ‘smous’ instinct.

Appendix 3 Tuvye Kretzmar’s letters from Cape Town to his wife in Birzh

"I was lodging with a Rakeshiker Jew who has a bag business. He advised me to buy bags and he would buy them from me and give me a profit. Next morning, I went out to do business. He ... told me how to call out "BAGS" in English and how I should ask, I started going to the shops from one to the other but in the meantime I had forgotten the English name for bags, but I met a Jew and again I was taught and learned the language for the bags. The next week I started buying bottles, but these were too heavy for one man to carry on his shoulders, so I went to the docks and the boats daily as a stevedore. There I worked for three weeks. In the first week I earned 8 roubles (16/-) the second week 16 roubles and the third week 20 roubles but I saw it would be the end of my health before that of my money and I could not carry on any more. I was advised to become a glazier because in Johannesburg Jews made good money out of it. I had also tried a spell of trading in eggs, buying in the market and carrying it to town and made a good living."

The following year he went into partnership in a bakery in the country, bought a horse to deliver the bread and 2 cows to provide milk to sell and settled down. [Read the letters Here](#)

Appendix 4 Hyman Levy’s memories

Early days in South Africa 1896 – 1900 - Hyman Levy’s memories

The following is compiled by Geraldine Auerbach based on a handwritten transcript by Sam Levy of the recollections of his father's (Hyman Levy) of his first years in South Africa. The document is undated, and the original is with Jeffrey Geffen, Hyman’s grandson. Sent to Geraldine Auerbach by Hyman’s grandnephew, Eitan Levy

Lithuania

Hyman Levy was born in the village of Louvits? in Lithuania in April in 1876. His family moved to Skood in the district of Kovno when he was aged four or five years old. He went to a Jewish school and, as was common in that area, he learnt reading and writing in Russian and German as well as in Hebrew. He spoke Yiddish at home. Hyman’s father was a farmer. He used to deliver goods from a station 30 miles away to local shops.

Emigration

Hyman’s eldest brother, Moshe Leib Levy, had already gone to South Africa. He was married and his first child was born in Lithuania. When Hyman was about eighteen, Moshe Leib send money for him to come out too. So, Hyman too left home, travelling by boat via the Latvian port of Libau to Hull in England. From there he went by train to London. After staying in London for about a week (probably at the Jew’s Temporary Shelter – built for this purpose) he went to Southampton to board the Garth Castle bound for South Africa. He arrived in Cape Town in 1896.

Cape Town

Moshe Leib (now called Morris) met him at the docks and put him up at his house in Tennant

Street in District 6, in Cape Town. Moshe Leib was then a traveller in drapery. He stood him security at Garlicks, and Hyman went out travelling in drapery for the first year. It was heavy work carrying a bundle of drapery on his back and tray of smous in front. Sundays he collected his money.

Johannesburg

He had two uncles in Johannesburg, his mother's brothers named Michaelsons (stepbrothers to his mother). One was working for his brother who had a fruit stall on Johannesburg market. The latter asked Hyman to come up. He was pleased to make the change and was able to pay his own train fare to Johannesburg. The journey was very slow - when the train was going up an incline the passengers disembarked and walked and then got on.

In Johannesburg he stayed with Michaelson - who then had to sell his business because he had been burgled and Hyman was thus left stranded. He then went to stay in a boarding house in Commissioner Street. He had to ask for credit to be allowed to stay and look for a job. He met there a Mr Hurwitz and Mr Cohen from Skood. The former gave him a job in his general shop on Robinson's {farms} at £5/-/- a month with board and lodging. (Could be on the West Rand)

After a few months this business was also sold, and as Hyman was unskilled and business was bad, he went to the market to verify what he had heard, that a Landsman, Mr Ahrenfred, had a shop in Rustenburg and was looking for a smouser. Hyman says he didn't go into business with his brother Moshe Leib because his brother was returning to England where he stayed in Aberdeen in Scotland for two years – during the Boer War between 1899 to 1902. Hyman said he Morris had earned the fare by buying and selling property, on money advanced by the bank.)

Rustenburg

At the market he asked the farmers to take him to Rustenburg to Ahrenfred. They offered to take him {free}. He packed up and loaded up. The journey by ox wagon, took three days. Hyman was dropped at a point ten miles from this shop and had to walk the rest of the way. The next day the farmers delivered his luggage at Mr Ahrenfreds.

Mr Ahrenfred recognised him and knew who he was. He arranged to pay Hyman £15 per month plus food. He explained that Rinderpest was prevalent and therefore oxen were impossible to obtain for smousing and that donkeys only were available for spanning in. Mr Ahrenfreds's clerk's father, also a Jew, wished to accompany Hyman on his smousing trips.

Du Plessis (a local farmer) provided the wagon and donkeys on hire and the farmer drove. They went way for two months and disposed of all the goods before returning. Most of the trade was with natives and to a lesser extent with farmers. They got some cash in return for their goods, but mostly exchanged goods for mealies and corn. The also offered payment by instalments. They paid the equivalent of 18/- a bag for mealies and were able to sell them for 30/- a bag. At Machadodorp {Rovincross bros} had a shop. At that time, the law was that a smous could only remain there for 24 hours.

Branching out on his own

Then it seems that Hyman branched out on his own. He travelled to Johannesburg in search of new merchandise. It took three days by Ox-wagon, but he was given a free trip as the Dutch farmers knew him well and did not charge him for travel or overnight stays. They treated Jews very well.

On arrival there, he stayed again at the boarding house in Commissioner Street and bought unframed pictures. He returned to Rustenberg with the pictures and stayed with Theunis Eloff - Paul Krugers son-in-law and Piet Triecharadt - son of Commandant Triecharadt (a school master). This man gave Hyman drapery for him to smous – with the profits to be shared. He had the use of a wagon with 6 donkeys.

The Boer War 1899-1902

Hyman continued to smous in the Rustenburg area until war broke out in 1899. As these itinerant traders offered extended credit terms, when war broke out, the farmers and natives had no way of paying and so everything was lost. He then joined up in the Rustenburg Commando under Casper Du Plessis, Paul Kruger's brother-in-law, who was in charge of the mounted commando. He was taught to fire a Mauser (small) by the farmers and they moved off to Derdepoort on the border of Bechuanaland.

Part of the commando went to fight at Gaberones. They heard that Plummer was coming up to relieve Mafeking by going through 14 streams and they tried to prevent this. He remained with 40 men in the laager (50 wagons) at Derdepoort. The laager was triangular. Sentries used to be posted outside. One Friday night he was on Brandwag from 10.00pm – 12 midnight.

He returned at 12 and went to sleep in the wagon tent. He put his rifle in the tent when suddenly he heard shots. He got up and saw men running with their rifles inside the laager. He got up and got his rifle. The fieldcornet Stofberg (school master) and he met Mr Haarhof and his two sons who showed Hyman where to take up his position - on the ground outside the laager and to fire in a certain direction. He informed Hyman that they were being attacked by Natives with assegai and rifles. The engagement lasted one hour, and they lost all their oxen and horses.

The English were also attacking with Maxims but when they found that Natives were attacking, they broke off. The natives burned the houses. *Here the document unfortunately abruptly ends. There is archival proof that Hyman Levy was captured by the British and was prisoner of war #17122. According to the records, he was captured on 19 November 1900 and gave his age as 24. Thus, he was born in 1876.*
