

Philip and Ella Borkum (née Heydenreich)



The Tragic Smous

Contributed by their granddaughter, **Lorna Levy (née Borkum)**
Cape Town, January, 2020

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Lorna Levy writes: Although I myself have never lived in Kimberley, my father **David Borkum**, was born there on 8 August 1902. His birth is noted in the Shul Register as 15 August 1902. At the time the Borkum family lived in Fergusson Lane, Kimberley.

His father, my paternal grandfather, **Philip Borkum** was born in Riga, Latvia in January 1861. His wife **Ella, née Heydenreich**, was born in 1866 in Mitau, also in Latvia). They married and first lived in Riga where he was a hatmaker and where the first three of their five children were born.

My grandmother, **Ella (née Heydenreich)** was keen to join other members of her family who had already settled in Kimberley where records show that her eldest brother, **Hermann Heydenreich** was a general dealer. Their parents, my paternal great-grandparents, **Celena** (pictured above) born in 1843, and **Samuel Heydenreich**, were also in Kimberley.



In this picture the sad woman on the right is clearly my grandmother Ella. The two men are her brothers David and Sydney (with the glasses) Heydenreich. The two sisters are Fanny and Anna but I cannot say which is which. The photo is from decades before I entered the world.

Samuel died in 1897 and Celena in 1907. They are both buried in the old cemetery in Stead Street. So, the family have strong roots in Kimberley, which ended suddenly in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Philip becomes a Smous

**Philip and Ella Borkum** arrived in Kimberley in about 1898, where their next two children (including my father, the youngest) were born. Philip who seems to have been the only member of his family to have come to South Africa, became a travelling salesman or smous – as many did to start on the commercial ladder maybe supplied with his goods by brother-in-law Hermann who was already a general dealer. But before he could progress, disaster struck.



This picture above, is not of Philip Borkum but it shows a typical smous outfit. A small cart packed to the hilt, six donkeys outspanned by the coloured servant and the boss sitting on a folding stool reading the paper.

It was a fortuitous time to be a new settler to South Africa as the country opened up with the discovery of its immense mineral wealth and a cheap labour system. This enabled that generation of the **Heydenreich** brothers and sisters to become very wealthy and integrated into the fabric of the country. This was sadly not the case for my grandparents **Ella and Philip Borkum**.

I knew that my grandfather had died young but assumed this to have been of natural causes. He was never spoken of nor were there any images of him available. I was aware that my grandmother Ella had battled on her own as a widow at times but strangely no one referred to Philip Borkum.

It was only when I got a copy of my great aunt, Anna Hoffman's written history called **The Heydenreich Saga\*** during the 1970s, that I discovered that my grandfather had a 'tragic death' but no details were given. Through prodding I eventually established

that the tragedy meant a murder. I put this aside at the time because there were no further details at hand.

When I relocated to Cape Town after having lived in London for many years, I decided to investigate this in the State Archives. It was there, in Cape Town, that I found the records of the trial of the two culprits for the murder of my grandfather – the smous from Kimberley **Philip Borkum**. He was murdered near de Aar in 1906, aged 45 when he was on his selling travels. It appears that his two assistants, a young white man and a coloured stock carer that he had recently employed for the journey, strangled him and absconded with his money and some clothes. They were soon apprehended, charged and eventually executed.



Geraldine found this postcard (above) on the internet of the synagogue in Kimberley in the early days. The inscription reads 'With Compliments from Ella Borkum and children'. I had never seen this postcard before. It was very exciting as it was the first piece of new evidence I have had of her and the family for years now. I had quite given up on that. It is probably something she sent after 1906 because that was when Philip, her husband was murdered. My father would have been four years old!

My grandmother Ella with her five children then went to England for a few years and stayed with her cousin Alexander Bernstein, father of the TV mogul, Sydney Bernstein in Ilford. She returned to South Africa a few years later to remarry and live in Vrede with her second husband, Abraham Glatt, who ran the local hotel. She eventually left him and moved to Johannesburg where she died when I was about thirteen. She was an amazing character.

My father **David Borkum** (known as Dink) the youngest in the family, thus left Kimberley in about 1907 at the age of 5 for England. After returning to South Africa and finishing school in Pietermaritzburg, he studied law at Wits. He practised as an attorney in Johannesburg where he died on 28 August 1981 aged 79.

My mother **Gertrude Borkum, née Jankelowitz**, was born in Cape Town in May 1908. While she had trained as a piano teacher, she lived most of her life as a housewife in Johannesburg. She died in London on 28 June 1993.

Her parents, my maternal grandparents, the Jankelowitzes, were from Plungyan in Lithuania and had no connection with Kimberley. They originally lived in Cape Town where grandfather **Yehuda Leib Jankelowitz**'s naturalisation papers referred to him as a 'general dealer.' Later in Johannesburg where they spent most of their lives with their four children, he was a 'shechite' (a ritual animal slaughterer) and a Torah scholar. My grandmother, **Chaie Riva Jankelowitz** was maternal grandfather's second wife. He died in 1936 and she in 1953 and they are buried in Brixton Cemetery.

I was **David and Gertrude Borkum**'s only child, born in Johannesburg in 1937. I did a BA at Wits and a BEd at Middlesex University, London. I married **Leon Levy** in Johannesburg on 1 May 1962. As activists in the struggle against apartheid, we were forcibly exiled from South Africa in 1963 and lived in London until we decided to retire to Cape Town in 1997.

Leon is a retired labour relations consultant. Our **daughter Emma Mary Levy** was born in London in 1968. She is a labour Law Consultant and she and her family now also live in Cape Town.

I wrote a book on **Philip Borkum** and his murder – ***The Hidden Life of a Smous*** \*\*, (published by, Kaplan Centre publications, UCT, 2017) in which I cover the life of a smous, my grandfather Philip Borkum's murder and the ensuing court case with relevant documents, including a most interesting executor's inventory of the liquidation and distribution for the account of the late Philip Borkum which gives a list of the very extensive array of goods that he carried.

The name Salkinder (when you circulated the Salkinder family story) rang a bell. I have now looked up the story of my murdered grandfather, Philip Borkum the smous from Riga who was murdered while travelling from Kimberley in 1906. Yes, there was a connection. Among the documents I retrieved on this case from the Cape Town Archives was a letter on behalf of a Mr. P Salkinder dated 1 August 1907. It says that *'Mr P Salkinder is willing to forego his share in the sum of three pounds sterling being money owed at the time of his death in view of his widow's circumstances.'*

Today the family members over the generations are so scattered across the world and I moved onto other things. Those who could have kept documents didn't so a treasure trove is lost!

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The Philip Borkum story supplied by Lorna Levy, Cape Town posted 2020

Compiled and edited by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, updated November 2022
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\*Read [The Heydenreich Saga](#)

\*\*Read Lorna Levy's [Hidden Life of a Smous](#)

Read Geraldine's compilation of thoughts on the life and times of the [Smous](#)