

A
HUNDRED YEARS
OF
KIMBERLEY JEWRY

by

Cyril B. Haberfeld

It is a matter for regret that this essay on 100 years of Kimberley Jewry is not as complete as it would have been desired. This is due to the fact that, shortly after the outbreak of World War II, a call went out for the salvage of all old, and waste or scrap paper. In a burst of (perhaps misguided) patriotism most of the old records, minute books, correspondence, etc., prior to 1940 were given to Anti-Waste, pulped down and thus irretrievably lost.

C. B. HABERFELD.

ONE HUNDRED years in the many thousands of years of Jewish history, is but a short period. Seen however against the background of the fact that the total period of European presence or occupation of South Africa is merely a little more than 300 years and that Kimberley itself is only a hundred years old, the history of a hundred years of Kimberley Jewry does assume some import and significance.

The history of the Diamond Fields or Kimberley is inextricably bound up and interwoven with that of Kimberley Jewry.

Since time immemorial Jews have been connected with the diamond and jewel trade. It is, therefore, not surprising and is understandable, that with the discovery and exploitation of the Diamond Fields, Jews from all over the world, with the major proportion from England and Germany, flocked to Kimberley.

Dating back from 1870, Jews were connected not only with the trading in diamonds and the development of the Diamond Fields, but also perhaps with the discovery of mines. It may not be common knowledge, but one of the four original discoverers of the Kimberley Mine was one by the name of Kisch.

Not only Jews connected or interested in the diamond trade or mining were attracted to Kimberley by the news of the discovery of diamonds, but also people from all walks of life. Itinerant traders, storekeepers, artisans and tradesmen, professional men, adventurers, etc., all found their way there. A very colourful and celebrated character of the very early days was one by the name of "Ikey" Sonnenberg, an American Jew who had fought in the American Civil War. A giant of a man, he was said to have had, apart from his other remarkable characteristics and qualities, a pair of amazingly big feet matched only by "The size and softness of his heart".

One of the earliest transport companies to convey passengers and goods from the Cape to the Fields, was operated by a Jew from Ceres named A. Arnholtz.

Among the best known of the first Jews to arrive from England and to embark in prospecting, digging and trading in diamonds and also finance was David Harris (subsequently Sir David Harris) who arrived in 1871. He was followed a year later

by his cousin Harry Barnato and in 1873 by Barney Barnato. A few years later the nephews of the Barnatos, Solly and Isaac Joel arrived on the Fields.

Other early Jewish arrivals, who made and left their marks, not only on the Kimberley scene, but also on the national scene of those early and subsequent years, were men like Maurice Marcus, a partner of Sir J. B. Robinson. Alfred Beit, a member of a well known Hamburg family, who became a close associate and confidant of Cecil John Rhodes. The Mosenthal family who had come to South Africa in 1841 and who were involved in trading, the hide, skin and wool trade and transport, and who were instrumental in importing the first Angora goats into South Africa, soon made their presence felt in Kimberley.

Harry Mosenthal, son of Adolph Mosenthal, and one of the first South African born members of the family, was concerned, together with John X. Merriman, in unsuccessful attempts to amalgamate the various diamond interests. Something afterwards accomplished by Barney Barnato and Cecil John Rhodes.

Several other Jews who attained prominence in mining and financial circles in Kimberley in the very early days were Lionel Phillips (later Sir Lionel), George Albu (later Sir George) and the well known combination of Lewis and Marks.

While Kimberley was still in the process of settling down after the hectic and wild days of the Rush, and developing from a mining camp into a town, a number of Jews felt the need and the urge to form a Congregation. To hold Divine Services and to perform such religious acts as the initiatory rite of Circumcision, Barmitzva's and marriages and burials in accordance with the tenets and traditions of Judaism.

The first steps towards bringing this desire to fruition came about in 1871 when a temporary or loose congregation called "The Griqualand West Hebrew Association", came into being. Divine Services were held and circumcisions and marriages were performed by Rev. Joel Rabinowitz of Cape Town and Rev. Samuel Rappaport of Port Elizabeth, on their rather infrequent pastoral visits.

At this stage the Jewish community numbered some 1 400 souls of whom some 600 were adult males. This is according to

the writings of Dr. J. W. Matthews who is cited by the historian of the early days of Kimberley, Mr George Beet. Mr Beet goes on to say, further, "There was no Synagogue, Rabbi or Reader. The Congregation utilised a Hall in Woodley Street where services were held and conducted by lay members on High Holydays. These lay members were young men who gave their services gratuitously." A Burial Ground was commenced in 1871 by Mr C. Sonnenberg and completed by Mr E. R. Moses. The first burial to take place in this cemetery was that of a youth Arthur Marcus who died at the age of 17 on 27th December 1871.

The earliest birth to be recorded is that of Victor Albert Rosettenstein who was born on 22nd August 1873 and circumcised by the Rev. Joel Rabinowitz of Cape Town on one of his visits.

Eighteen seventy-three saw the formation of a permanent congregation and the first full time minister was the Rev. Berthold Albu who served the community until 1876.

A grant of a site (now occupied by the statue of Cecil Rhodes) was made by the London and South African Exploration Company for the purpose of erecting a Synagogue. The foundation stone of this building was laid in 1875 by Mrs C. Sonnenberg, wife of the first President of the Congregation in the presence of Sir Henry Barkly, Governor of the Cape Colony and Sir Richard Southey, Administrator of the Diamond Fields. The building which held 250 and proved much too small, was a rather unpretentious, galvanised iron structure and cost £3 000 (R6 000). Rev. Albu performed the consecration in 1876. The President then in office was Mr L. Goldsmith.

Rev. B. Albu, who ministered to the congregation for almost three years, was succeeded by Rev. M. Mendelsohn, who made a terrific impact on the community. Born in 1833 he was distantly related to the composer and also to the famous philosopher, Moses Mendelsohn. He arrived in Britain, from Germany, in 1850 at the age of 17. After completing his studies he became the minister of Exeter Hebrew Congregation at the age of 22. In 1878 he was chosen by the then Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Dr Adler, to replace Rev. Albu, his brother-in-law, in Kimberley. He remained in this post until 1884, when he retired from the ministry. Although he had retired from the ministry, he resumed office for a short while after the death of his successor, Rev. Ornstein, and from

time to time, he performed the duties of Minister in an acting capacity. He died in 1889. Apart from his duties as Minister he took an active part in non-Jewish activities such as the Library Board, the Hospital, Education Board and other local affairs.

According to Mr Frank Bradlow, Rev. Mendelsohn's son, Mr Sidney Mendelsohn came to South Africa about 1880. He entered the Diamond Trade in which he prospered, and became a director of the Bultfontein Mining Company, of which he was later chairman until 1900 when it was taken over by De Beers Company. He was also chairman of New Vaal River Diamonds which laid out the township of Sydney-on-Vaal some 40 miles from Kimberley. The township was named after him. Always a great collector of bibliography and Africana he established a Public Library at Sydney-on-Vaal. His enormous personal collection of Africana bibliography and paintings was bequeathed by him, together with a large sum of money to be utilised for the acquisition of further books, to the South African nation. This collection is presently housed in the Mendelsohn Library (opened in 1922) in the South African Houses of Parliament.

In the foyer of the Memorial Road Synagogue is a beautiful brass and enamelled mural memorial tablet, commemorating the memory of the 114 members of the Jewish faith who fell in the Anglo-Boer War. This was presented by Mr S. Mendelsohn "in loving and filial memory of his father, Rev. M. Mendelsohn and also his daughter Ruby" who was drowned when the Drummond Castle sank in 1896.

Rev. A. Ornstein, a young man of 21, replaced Rev. Mendelsohn in 1884 and in the words of Mr George Beet "literally worked himself to death". Described by Dr Matthews (a non-Jew, previously quoted), as a "young man of infinite charm and capability" he was full of enthusiasm and threw himself into his duties with great zeal and conscientiousness. He died a year after his appointment on the 18th June 1885 at the early age of 22. Reference to the marriage register of the day, reveals the rather poignant fact that he was married to a young girl of 18 named Betty Cohen, only six months prior to his death. The marriage ceremony had been performed by his uncle, the Rev. A. F. Ornstein of Cape Town. He had so endeared himself to his congregants and other

sections of the town, that a memorial tombstone was erected to him which had been subscribed to by members of all denominations.

Rev. Mendelsohn, as mentioned earlier, stepped into the breach until the arrival of Rev. Mark Harris in 1887 who continued to serve until his departure for Johannesburg in 1889.

Then came a reverend gentleman who was perhaps the doyen of Kimberley Jewish Ministers — the Rev. Harris Isaacs who arrived from London in 1890. After serving for three years, he left for Johannesburg in 1893. Returning to Kimberley in 1897, he ministered to the wants of the Congregation with unflagging and indefatigable zeal and devotion until his retirement in 1927. A total period of service of 33 years spread over a period of 37 years. During his incumbency, he took an active interest in communal affairs in the town — Jewish as well as non-Jewish. A great scholar and a brilliant orator he took a deep interest in education. He was instrumental in collecting funds for and establishing the Stockdale Street School and was, for very many years Vice-Chairman of the Kimberley School Board. He was "mentioned in despatches" for his services to the Town during the Siege of Kimberley. He also rendered yeoman services to the town and the community during the terrible 1918 Flu epidemic.

An interesting sidelight in connection with Rev. Isaacs is a photostat copy, reproduced in this pamphlet, of a page from his notebook, dated 1888, just prior to his arrival in South Africa. The salary paid to him of £25 (R50) *per annum*, and the conditions of service is rather revealing. Further investigations show that he was then a married man with two children.

Following the death of Cecil John Rhodes, the De Beers Company was desirous of erecting a statue to his memory on the site then occupied by the Synagogue. In exchange they offered the Congregation the ground in Memorial Road where the present Synagogue stands. The laying of the foundation stone was performed by Mr G. H. Bonas, J.P., in 1901, President of the Congregation at the time. Consecration of the Synagogue was performed by Rev. Isaacs, on September 14th, 1902.

While by no means one of the largest Synagogues in the country, it is certainly one of the most beautiful. A high, graceful

dome surmounts the building and the Ark of the Law is a glorious marbled architectural fantasy of pillars, minarets and domes presenting an Eastern atmosphere. At the same time as the Synagogue was erected a School room was erected alongside. This Hall now known as the Minor Hall was originally known as the "Queen Victoria Memorial Hall". The first marriage to be solemnised in the Synagogue was that between Mr Aaron Rauff and Miss Selima Satisfosky on 11th January, 1903.

After the retirement of Rev. Harris Isaacs, the following ministers held office: Rev. M. Konviser from 1927 to 1935 when he left for Rhodesia. He later became Chief Rabbi of Rhodesia and was awarded the O.B.E. On his retirement he returned to South Africa and officiated in Cape Town until his death. Rabbi Dr Wald from 1935 to 1938. Rev. W. Yesorsky from 1939 until 1941 when he enlisted in the Forces as a chaplain and served in the Middle East as Jewish Chaplain to the 2nd South African Division. On his return to South Africa in 1943 he returned to his post where he remained until 1945, when he took a position in Bulawayo and where he died a few years ago. During his absence on War service the wants of the Congregation were looked after by Rev. W. Wulf. Rabbi A. R. Abrahamson took over from 1946 to 1951, followed by Rev. C. M. Bloch, 1952 to 1957. Rabbi O. Werner who served the Congregation for the second longest period in its history, remained for 13 years namely from 1957 to 1970, until his departure to become the Spiritual Head of Greenside Congregation. The present incumbent is Rev. J. Matzner who was inducted by the Chief Rabbi, Dr Casper on 24th September, 1971.

Mention must also be made of Rev. Ch. Goldberg who served this Community as Schochet, Mohel, Teacher and Assistant Reader for 30 years from 1925 to 1955. Tribute must also be paid to Mr Sam Levin who came out from England at the turn of the century to take up the position of Secretary to the Congregation. He rendered invaluable services in this full time capacity from 1900 until 1935 and from then on after his retirement until 1952 as part time assistant.

Mention is also to be made of Mr L. Weinstein, happily still with us and in his 84th year who has, and still renders devoted

assistance in the Synagogue services on Sabbaths and Festivals.

Since the establishment of the Congregation, the following gentlemen have presided over the interests of the Congregation from its inception to the present. For the period from 1873 to 1914, the chronological order may not be strictly correct, due (as aforesaid in the preface) to the loss of records.

C. Sonnenberg

Dr Louis Goldsmith

Mr Joseph Saber

Mr Flavien E. Lezard

Mr G. H. Bonas, J.P. (Life President)

Mr Sam Stone

Mr Isaac Lewis

Mr Abraham Greenberg

Mr William Sagar, J.P. (Life President)

Mr Sagar served with great devotion as President for over 25 years.

Mr M. M. Aronson 1932-1936

Dr S. Zweiback 1936-1938

Mr Bernard Goldberg 1938-1944

Dr Noel Kretzmar 1944-1947

Mr Gustav Bowman Haberfeld 1947-1954

Dr Harry Wolfsohn 1954-1961

Mr Harry Stein 1961-1962

Dr Hymie Tocker 1962-1965

Mr Solomon Alufovitz 1965-1966

Mr Dr Isadore Hammar 1966-1967

Mr Solomon Alufovitz 1967-1972

Mr Nathan Cohen present Incumbent.

Parallel with the development of the Congregation came the establishment of Kindred Societies. Eighteen eighty-five saw the foundation of the Griqualand West Jewish Helping Hand and Philanthropic Society. This society which has been under the chairmanship of Mr A. Pollen for many years, has fortunately only had minimal calls on its funds for several years.

The Griqualand West Hebrew Burial Society came officially into being as a separate entity in 1896. This society, which takes care of the performance of the last rites according to Jewish custom and also the maintenance of the cemeteries, has been presided over by Mr L. Weinstein for the past 23 years. The old cemetery in Stead Street had filled up and a piece of ground was acquired in the West End and first taken into use in 1929. Both the old and the new cemeteries are very well tended and are veritable "gardens of rest". Both the above Societies have been admirably served for nearly 40 years by Mr Joe Brenner in an Honorary capacity as Secretary.

A Griqualand West Ezzrath Zionist Society has been functioning since about 1904 and is now under the chairmanship of Mr P. Klein. For many years after the war, and up to his untimely death, Mr Harry Klein was the chairman and rendered dedicated service to the Zionist Cause. About 1933 a branch of the Women's Zionist League was formed and is presided over at the moment by Mrs M. Datnow. The two organisations have raised considerable sums of money for Israel, comparable per capita with any other branch in the country.

A hall called the Zionist Hall was built in 1907 in Lennox Street and used for meetings, Hebrew School classrooms and the holding of weekday afternoon and evening services. This Hall was sold in 1940 and subsequently demolished.

In 1910 a small number of the newer Yiddish-speaking settlers, being out of sympathy with the existing congregation, hived off and founded a separate congregation. They built a Synagogue in Baronial Street which was opened in 1911 under the name of "Beth Hamidrash Linas Hatzedek". For a long period services were held regularly, daily, on Sabbaths and Festivals. Nowadays only daily afternoon and evening services are conducted there.

Between the two World Wars a Kimberley Jewish Guild was founded, functioned, flourished and foundered.

A lodge of the Hebrew Order of David of South Africa (a fraternal organisation) and named after Mr Louis Isaacson, an esteemed and valued member of Kimberley Jewry, was consecrated in 1931. The President in office at the time of writing is Mr R. Benn.

Another Jewish organisation which renders service to all sections of the community irrespective of race, colour or creed, is a branch of the Union of Jewish Women. Started in Kimberley in 1939 the co-chairladies are Mesdames L. Cohen and B. Benjamin.

A society which no longer functions, having become defunct in 1913 or 1914, was the G.W. Jewish Sick Benefit Society, which operated along the lines of a present Medical Aid Society. Started in 1907, mainly due to the efforts of Rev. Harris Isaacs, who was the first Chairman, the membership was 122, later considerably reduced by an exodus from Kimberley because of a depression in the Diamond trade. In the light of the present day costs of medical services, it is most interesting to note that the subscription payable was originally 2/6 (25c) per month, later increased to 1/- (10c) per week. For this small amount, medical attention, free hospitalisation, payment for loss of income, while ill or during the 7-day compulsory period of mourning (Shivah) was provided. In the event of death payment of £10 (R20) was made. It should be mentioned, that at that time, hospital fees were 5/- (50c) per day! Despite the low rate of subscriptions paid, and the wide range of benefits offered, the Society was able to balance their budget.

Throughout the 100 years Kimberley Jews have fully indentified themselves and have played their part in every facet of local and national government.

Sir David Harris sat in Parliament for an unbroken period of 32 years. Firstly in the old Cape Legislative Assembly from 1897 to 1910 and then in the South African Parliament from 1910 to 1929. Mr Barney Barnato was another Jewish member of the Cape Legislative Assembly. Messrs F. K. Lowenthal, L.F. Lezard and Dr S. Zweiback were at different times, members of the Cape Provincial Council.

Jews have also been most active in Civic affairs. Apart from many who were City Councillors, the following have occupied the Mayoral Chair:

- 1906 WILLIAM SAGAR, J.P. (18/4/06-31/12/06).
1907—1908 WILLIAM SAGAR, J.P.

- 1931—1932 BERNARD COHEN,
 1953—1955 GUSTAVE BOWMAN HABERFELD.
 (The first Kimberley born Jew to be elected Mayor).
 1959—1961 LIONEL JAWNO.
 1964—1965 CECIL JACK SUSSMAN (April 64 to Sept. 65).
 1965—1967 GUSTAVE BOWMAN HABERFELD.

Two Jews, Messrs M. Datnow and J. Brenner are members of the Divisional Council.

Jews have always been loyal to the land of their birth or adoption and in Kimberley they proved to be no exception. During the Siege of Kimberley many enlisted in the Town Guard. This unit was commanded by Col. (Sir) David Harris who had already shown himself to be an efficient soldier. In 1877/8 he was on active service in the Gaika-Galeka campaign and was mentioned in despatches.

He also saw service in the Bechuanaland rebellion and led a relief column to the beleaguered Whites in Griquatown. He was Commanding Officer of the Kimberley Regiment and later Colonel-in-Chief. His son, Colonel Herbert Harris, followed in his footsteps as Commanding Officer. The marriage of Sir David to Rosa Gabriel was the first Jewish marriage to be solemnised on the Diamond Fields.

As Chairman of De Beers Company he was acknowledged as an authority on diamond mining and finance. Many charitable organisations have reason to be grateful for his benevolence.

Full of years and honours he died in September 1942 at the age of 90 and was laid to rest in the West End Jewish Cemetery.

It is not known how many of Kimberley Jewry served in World War I—1914/18, but nine made the supreme sacrifice. A bronze memorial to them stands in the Synagogue. Of these Lieut. William Joffe was awarded the D.S.O. and Captain Michael Liebson the M.C.

The outbreak of World War II saw upwards of 50 of Kimberley's Jews on Active Service. Many also served in the National Volunteer Brigade as did many women in the Women's Auxiliary

Services. Of those on Active Service, Private S. Odes was awarded the M.M. and Staff Sergeant C. B. Haberfeld the E.M. and a Military Commendation.

Considerable contributions were made in the field of Letters, Literature and Journalism by such well-known writers as Sarah Gertrude Millin, Benjamin Bennett, Dan Jacobson, and to a lesser degree, Cyril Harris.

Throughout the ages Jews were known as the "people of the Book". The cult of learning was esteemed more than that of wealth. The furtherance of education, both religious and secular has always drawn support from Kimberley Jews. Several have served on the Kimberley School Board. As mentioned earlier Rev. Harris Isaacs was instrumental in the foundation of Stockdale Street School. He served on the School Board from 1899 to 1927 being Vice-Chairman from 1918 to 1927. Mr William Sagar from 1927 to 1932. Mr G. B. Haberfeld from 1948 to date, being Vice-Chairman from 1951/1953, Chairman from 1953 to 1960 and Vice-Chairman from 1960 to 1969.

One of the tenets propounded by the Jewish sages, namely the practice of philanthropy, has been well observed by Kimberley Jewry. Without any regard to any denominational or colour distinctions the community has responded to the calls of welfare and charitable organisations.

Sir Alfred Beit left a large sum of money to the city for the Alfred Beit Memorial Fund and this was further supplemented by the bequest of Mr Bernard Klisser of the major portion of his estate in the neighbourhood of £45 000 (R90 000). The fund which is now known as the Alfred Beit and Klisser Bequest functions for the benefit of the needy in the city. Another substantial bequest to the city was made by Mrs H. Siew.

The amount of charity disbursed by Mr Frederick Hirschhorn, who was interested in various mining organisations, will never be known. Large amounts were given by him in a quiet and unostentatious manner in keeping with his character.

Health services have also attracted the support of the community. Various members have served on the Hospital Board

and Mr William Sagar served for many years and also as Chairman. Dr H. Wolfsohn one time Medical Officer of Health, devoted himself most energetically to combatting T.B. and the H. M. Wolfsohn Santa Centre bears testimony to his efforts. Endowments and bequests to the Kimberley Hospital have been made by Messrs George Mosenthal, Harry Mosenthal, S. B. Joel, Mrs H. Siew, Sir David Harris, Mr and Mrs M. Aronson and Mr H. van der Heim.

In the field of Commerce local Jews have been prominent. Several have been on the committee of the Kimberley Chamber of Commerce. Mr G. B. Haberfeld has been President and Mr H. L. Shein, President from 1968-1972, which is a record period of service in this capacity. He also served as National Vice-President of the Associated Chambers of Commerce of South Africa, representing the Northern Cape.

Griqualand West sport has drawn its share of devotees, both players and administrators, from local Jews. Players too numerous to mention have obtained their Griqua colours in Rugby, Cricket, Soccer, Tennis, Hockey and Bowls.

Two of the highlights in the history of the congregation, have been the occasions on which it was honoured by visits by Chief Rabbis of the British Empire. Once by Rabbi Dr J. H. Hertz, of revered memory, in November 1920 and by Rabbi Dr Israel Brodie in April 1950. The latter laid the foundation stone of the Helena Siew Memorial Talmud Torah.

For many years the congregation had felt the want of a suitable Communal Hall. This want was filled ultimately. Funds were collected and a hall was built adjoining the Synagogue. This hall was officially opened on 26th November 1950, by the President, in office at the time, Mr G. B. Haberfeld.

In conclusion, it is regrettable and a matter for deep concern, that, numerically the congregation is dwindling. It is, however, to be hoped, that with the expected development of the resources of the hinterland, that many more Jews will be attracted to Kimberley and help to reinforce and revitalise the Congregation.

Griqualand West Hebrew Congregation Committee 1973 — 1974

LIFE TRUSTEES:

Mr Joe Brenner — Mr Abe Pollen

PRESIDENT:

Mr Nathan Cohen

VICE-PRESIDENT:

Dr Shim Klein

TREASURER:

Mr Solly Alufovitz

COMMITTEE:

Mr David Allen
Mr Bobby Benn
Mr Webby Cohen
Mr Saul Ginsburg

Mr Derrick Horwitz
Mr Goldie Mehl
Dr Leon Maresky
Mr Elly Shles

MINISTER:

Rev. J. D. Matzner

SECRETARY:

Mr Casper Klewansky

KINDRED SOCIETIES

JEWISH BENEVOLENT SOCIETY

KIMBERLEY

PRESIDENT:

Mr Abe Pollen

VICE-PRESIDENT:

Mr Solly Alufovitz

TREASURER:

Mr Joe Brenner

COMMITTEE:

Mr Dave Capon
Mr Webby Cohen
Mr Saul Ginsburg

Mr Derrick Horwitz
Dr Leon Maresky
Mr Hymie Seidle

HON. SECRETARY:

Mr Joe Brenner

GRIQUALAND WEST JEWISH
BURIAL SOCIETY

HON. LIFE PRESIDENT:

Mr Lippi Weinstein

VICE-PRESIDENT:

Mr Solly Alufovitz

TREASURER:

Mr Webby Cohen

COMMITTEE:

Mr Arnold Bayer
Mr Bernard Benjamin
Mr Cyril Haberfeld
Mr Gustave Haberfeld

Mr Boris Kaplan
Mr Mike Klein
Mr Casper Klewansky

HON. SECRETARY:

Mr Joe Brenner

HON. LIFE MEMBER:

Mrs Bessie Klein