

## Cecil Cohen and Family



**Cecil Cohen** (1907 – 1980) **Jean Cohen** (1913- 1979)

**1907: Cecil Meyer Cohen was born in Kimberley** – as were all the children of **Barney and Bertha Cohen** (née Kleinman). The Cohen family home was Bella Vista, 4 Lodge Road, Belgravia, just opposite Sir Ernest Oppenheimer's house.

The children were **Frances Dagmar** (b 1904) who married Alexander Kryn; **Isaac Harold** (1905) (who had 3 children Doreen, Valerie and Douglas); **Cecil Meyer** (1907); **Ruth Miriam** (1912) who married Isidore Broude and had a daughter Barbara and son Rodney; **Eric Abraham** (1915) who later changed his surname to "Conlyn"). Eric married Beulah Wahl and they had three sons, Clive (who was sadly killed in a car accident aged 6) Graeme and Trevor, and a daughter Lee. The youngest child was **Rhoda Anita** (1917) known as 'Nita' who married Masel Frank of Kimberley – and Vryburg. They had four children, Sheila, Jeffrey, Marilyn and Colin. There was another child, **Wilfred Reginald**, born in 1909 who sadly died before his first birthday and was buried in the Pioneer Cemetery in Kimberley.

Tragically, Cecil's mother **Bertha (née Kleinman)** who was pregnant at the time, succumbed to complications of the 1918 influenza pandemic while on holiday in Muizenberg. Her youngest child, Nita, was only 18 months old. Cecil was just eleven. Before dying, she had asked the children's nanny, Nurse Magrieta Susanna Reyneke, to look after her children. 'Nurse', as she was called by the children, took this to heart and devoted her entire life to the six children. According to her obituary in the DFA of 25 October 1918, Cecil's mother Bertha had taken an active interest in the public life of Kimberley. She had been a tireless worker aiding many war funds as well as the War effort. She had also organised a bazaar in aid of the Russian Jewish War Relief Fund.

Bertha's parents, **Moses Kleinman** and his wife **Leah (née Lewis)** had arrived in South Africa 1882 from the Kovno province in Lithuania. They first settled in Oudtshoorn. However, when diamonds were discovered, they 'pulled up stakes' and struck out for the diggings, first at Koffiefontein in the Orange Free State, then on to Kimberley. They settled in Beaconsfield, adjacent to Kimberley in 1888, where they lived for the rest of their lives. The Kleinman family suffered great tragedy in that devastating 1918/19 flu pandemic. It struck their whole family. They not only lost their daughter Bertha Cohen, but shockingly also their daughter Rosie Blumberg as well as Rosie's husband, Isidore, and another daughter 'Girlie' Horwitz. Moses died in 1934 and Leah Kleinman ten years later in 1944. They are buried in Kimberley Cemetery.

**1925: Cecil matriculated** at Christian Brothers' College (CBC) (below) in 1925. (His sons Raymond and David were to be pupils there as well). The school was the first Christian Brothers' College (School) in South Africa, founded in September 1897, by the Christian Brothers from



Ireland. Although a Catholic School, many Jewish families chose to send their boys there as they felt that being a private school, the education was better than at the provincial Boys' High. There was a pipe band and they ran many extramural cultural and sporting activities.

After finishing school, Cecil worked with his father Barney (Barnerd Cohen) in his diamond buying office for a year. Weekly, they toured several alluvial sites, buying stones from diggers in the Prieska area, at Brakfontein, Douglas, at the lower river diggings at Barkly West and at Lichtenburg, the last, a recently opened field at the time. Cecil and his father participated in the exciting and massive Grasfontein farm diamond rush at Lichtenberg of March 1927. (see below)



Above we see everyone who had gathered there, waiting for the rush to be signalled. Below people are already digging their claims.





## 1927: Cecil joins the Diamond Trading Company (DTC)

In 1927 Cecil joined the **Diamond Trading Company**, a separate arm of De Beers for selling diamonds. They operated from a newly built edifice, **Consolidated Building** (constructed in 1926) on the corner of Stockdale Street and Old Main Street. Below we see the Royal Family exiting from this building, on 18 April 1947, having been given gifts of diamonds by Sir Ernest. (Maybe Cecil helped to show them around?) Below that, the building festooned in lights for the Royal Visit.







**Even before consolidation of the mines in 1888**, De Beers had encouraged and created a separate organisation that would purchase the entire output of rough diamonds from the Kimberley

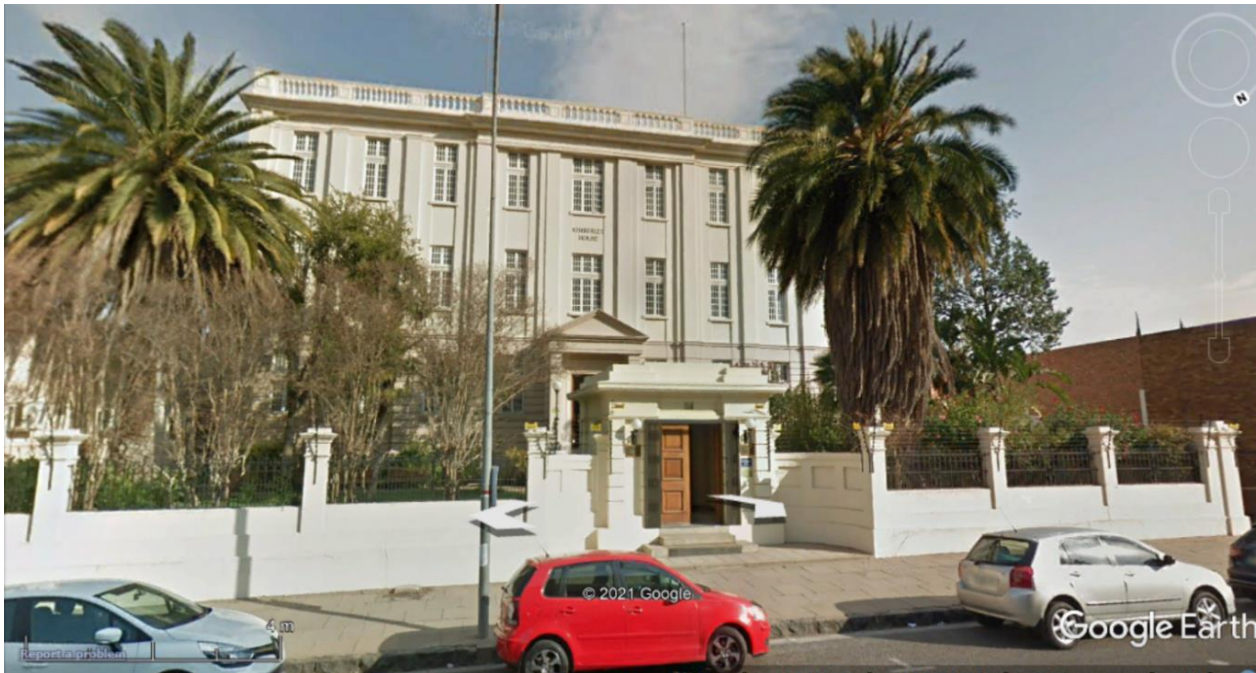


mines at an agreed price. Known just as 'The Syndicate' this consisted of several major European firms of diamond merchants (mainly, if not all of which, were Jewish).

This was entrenched after amalgamation so that both the production and the trade – the buying and selling, would be controlled, and thereby keep the diamond industry viable. (See the Kimberley Ex-Pats [Newsletter #32 December 2020](#) about Kimberley, Jews and diamonds.) The **diamond trading organisation** underwent a number of name changes over the years

## 1935: Cecil was one of three classifiers transferred to Kimberley House

Kimberley House was a large building in Dutoitspan Road near the Club. It was built in 1928 but altered in the 1940s when extra floors were added. Above, we see Kimberley House when Cecil started working there and below is a picture showing the same building with additions of the 1940s.



By this time the selling arm of the De Beers 'empire' was called **The Diamond Trading Co Ltd (DTC)**, The DTC decides what diamonds to supply and how much to supply, when to supply, where to supply, and to whom to supply. De Beers Central Selling Organisation (CSO) – under whatever name, is the supreme power of the diamond industry. The CSO determines the price of rough diamonds, which in turn determines the price of cut diamonds.

### Diamond sights:

The trading is done at a ritual held ten times a year known as the 'sights' operated by the DTC. They used to be held in Kimberley House when Cecil worked there. In the 1930s the sights moved from Kimberley to London. However, the South African sightholders continued to be issued their sights out of Kimberley. These days, since 2013, 90% of sights are in Gaborone in Botswana where De Beers' most productive mines are. There are also some sights in Namibia and South Africa. Covid has played havoc with international travel, so some diamonds have been shown in Hong Kong and Dubai.

Only the elite of the world's diamond manufacturers are invited by the Syndicate to the sights. They are the authorized bulk purchasers of rough diamonds. The DTC likes them to be active in cutting and polishing and not just selling on the diamonds as rough. There are under a hundred sightholders – maybe there used to be more – and they are from all the countries involved in diamond producing as well as cutting and polishing business, the UK, South Africa, Botswana, Belgium, Israel, India etc. Up to the 1980s, De Beers DTC managed 80% of the world trade in rough diamonds. Today it is much less.



## How it works:

About three weeks before the sight, the invitee is notified to put in a request of the size of the allocation of rough diamonds he desires and how it should be made up of large and small stones and what quality etc. The type of diamond he wants will reflect his business activity. The request is in dollars. The request must be submitted via an approved London broker who may make appeals to the DTC on behalf of his sightholder if he needs something special or is disappointed with what is in his box. (The Bonas family of early Kimberley diamond fame are one of the four registered broking companies for the DTC. Read about Gustave Bonas who was a member of the first Syndicate as well as the mastermind of the building of the synagogue in Memorial Road which opened in September 1902. You can also read about his house at 10 Lodge Road that he later sold to John Orr, too. The family is still in Diamonds. [Bonas, Charles](#)).



The tendency amongst sightholders in a period of steadily rising diamond profits is to ask for more than he received last time. Having submitted his request, the sightholder waits. On the Wednesday or Thursday before the sight, the sightholder is told what the syndicate has decided to give him.

On the day of the sight, the sightholder is required to attend the building in person and is handed a small brown cardboard box. Inside the box are paper parcels of diamonds. On the paper is printed the size and the price of the enclosed diamond/s. The sightholder is then escorted to a viewing room and left to study the diamonds. The sightholder studies the diamonds and the prices. Quite why he does this is not clear. He basically has to take what he gets and at the price that the Syndicate has decided. Above is what the sightholders boxes look like today as solid 'suitcases' and the diamonds packed in plastic bags.

**Cecil Cohen**, as a classifier and valuer of diamonds in Kimberley House, was one of those involved in fulfilling the requests and putting the required diamonds into the priced papers and into the boxes. In Emily Haan's book 'Diamond,' published in 1956, 'Mr Cohen' is mentioned as a licensed De Beers valuer and buyer of diamonds

Every effort was made by the DTC to ensure that the sightholder got what he asked for and also that the distribution was fair, based on what was available and what others had requested. The

diamonds would range in quality. This enabled the Syndicate to sell diamonds that are not of the highest quality as well as those that are.

They try to ensure that the price set will benefit the sightholders, and also the people that they in turn will ultimately sell their cut and polished diamonds on to – and so keep the diamond business stable and profitable for all involved.



Often the content was not quite what he had hoped for. But although there might have been rumblings and dissatisfaction from time to time about their

allocations, the fact was that to be on the list of sightholders, meant not only the utmost in status, but also a virtually guaranteed profit. For the sightholder this is his major source of rough diamonds. So, sightholders took great pains not to offend the Syndicate in any way – that might result in not being invited to the next sight.

Occasionally a sightholder might feel that a diamond was overpriced and through their broker, they complain. Their complaint is heard but they are told the price is fair and they still have to take it. But they may find in their next sight box, that there is a special diamond or price to compensate for what the syndicate has recognised was a legitimate objection. If they reject a box, they might not be invited again. In 1979 boxes sold for \$100,000 for those involved with cutting small diamonds for the Indian trade and \$250,000 for small shops around the Antwerp area. – and up to \$5million for dealers on 47<sup>th</sup> Street in New York.

The Great Depression of 1929 to 1934 was a tough time for the Syndicate, then called the **Diamond Corporation**. They were obliged to buy all the diamonds offered not only from the Kimberley mines but also from the several diggings. The Namaqualand deposits had recently been discovered and were being worked while Lichtenburg and other alluvial sites were concurrently producing as well. There was a surplus of production at a time when sales had fallen. According to Cecil, Sir Ernest Oppenheimer's decision to use the corporation's capital to stock-pile diamonds, buying against the market, helped to keep the diggers afloat – and the industry profitable.

**Milton Jawno writes:** 'Cecil Cohen was a friend of the great Sir Ernest Oppenheimer. He worked for De Beers in Kimberley House. Cecil was sent to Sierra Leone to crack a diamond smuggling syndicate. And, for very special services Sir Ernest rewarded Cecil with a diamond 'sight' and great fame and fortune. Cecil Cohen was the uncle of our dear late friends Jeff Frank (and Sheila Grant). Jeff's mother **Anita Frank** (who married Masel Frank) was a sister of Cecil Cohen' Read Sheila Grants story of the Frank Family in Kimberley here in [Frank, Masel and Nita and family](#).

## 1931: Cecil's father Barney becomes Mayor of Kimberley



Shortly after Sir Ernest Oppenheimer assumed office as Chairman of De Beers, in 1929, Cecil's father Barney Cohen (left) was elected Mayor of Kimberley in 1931.

You can read about his mayoral procession to the synagogue and the impressive address by Rev Maurice Konviser, in his story here [Cohen, Barnerd \(Barney\)](#) and Rev Konviser's story here [Konviser, Rev Maurice](#) (1927 - 1935). Cecil's sister Frances became her father Barney's Lady Mayoress, as we know that sadly Barney's wife, Cecil's mother, Bertha had died in the 1918 flu epidemic when her children were still small

## 1937: Cecil Marries Jean Callis in Kimberley

Cecil married **Jean Callis** on 24 January 1937. She was the daughter of **James (aka Jimmy) and Bessie Callis** of Kimberley. Jimmy Callis had been the first to emigrate to South Africa. Bessie followed, having met him at the docks at Southampton before his departure, when she and her father went to bid farewell to someone else departing for South Africa. They married on 17 April



1912 in Kimberley. Jean was the oldest, her two siblings were Sadie and Harold. Jimmy, a tailor, opened a General Dealer store, opposite the railway station, which included a tailoring section. He was originally from Minsk and Bessie's family from Zhytomyr, Ukraine and according to the 1901 British Census, Bessie's family had first settled in London.



## 1939: Cecil joins the Army

At the time war was declared, Cecil, was working at the Diamond Trading Corporation; a division of De Beers. He was 32 when he enlisted with the citizen forces of the **Kimberley Regiment (KR)** on September 21, 1939. From November 1940, according to his military records, he was in full time service. He went 'up North' and then to Italy receiving many medals.

Cecil's sons, Raymond and David recall their father mentioning that he went for training at the Zonderwater and Baviaanspoort, camps near Pretoria. 1941 he was a Vickers machine gunner instructor and, by November 1942, an Infantry range-taker Instructor.

By 1943 Cecil, as part of the **South African Sixth Armoured Division**, set sail in great secrecy on the *Ile de France* to join the North African Campaign. Cecil remained in Egypt until 15 April 1944, when they were hurriedly transferred to Italy.



Above: Laddie, Jack (Melville), Cecil and Bill taken at the Pyramids on May 4, 1943.

Cecil was part of the group climbing to the summit after the **Battle of Monte Cassino** (1944) in Southern Italy. He remained in Italy for the last year of the war serving as Warrant Officer with a unit **repatriating South African prisoners-of-war**. In the time his Division was there, he claimed he had walked the length of Italy tracking down South African POWs.

You can read the war story of Cecil Cohen on page 24 and his brother Eric Cohen on page 12 of the article about [Kimberley Jews and the Second World War](#)



De Beers held his job open for him and thus, in early 1946, he returned to Kimberley to take up employment once again with De Beers.

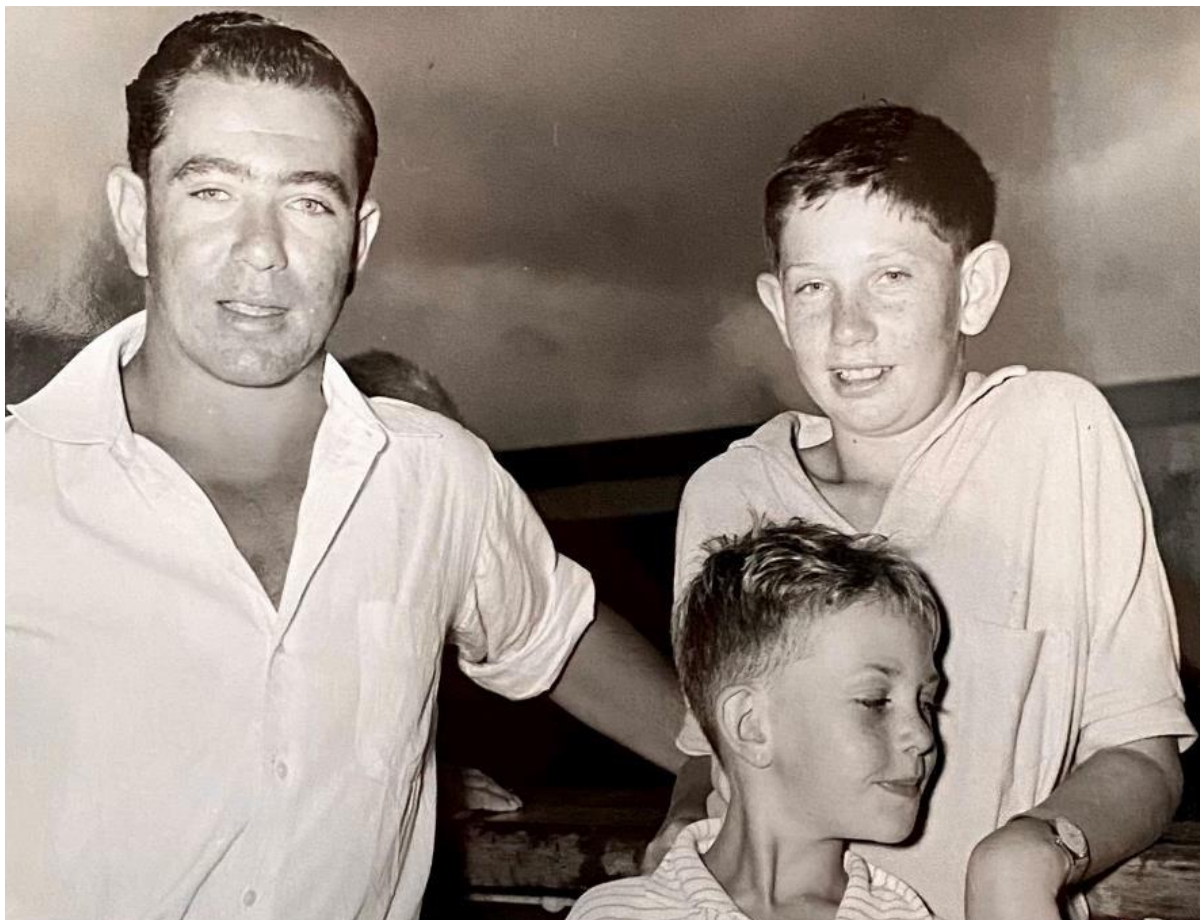




In this picture above from **1955**, we see Beryl Kretzmar, the new Chairman of the Union of Jewish Women (left) and Pearl Toohey, the secretary on the right. Next to

Pearl in the floral dress and white gloves and handbag, is **Jean Cohen**, identified by her son **Brian**. Jean became the next Chair of UJW in February 1957 – before the family moved to Johannesburg).

Jean and Cecil had three sons, **Raymond**, **David** and **Brian** Cohen (seen here in **1962**)



**Adele** Cohen who is married to David, had done much family research. Adele and David and Raymond live in Vancouver. Brian lives in Guildford UK.

Youngest son Brian says: 'I recognise many of the names you mention in the UJW story [UJW History of the Kimberley Branch](#) eg Marie Datnow, Lily Jawno, Pearl Toooh and the others. My mother talked of them often, and as a small boy, I heard all this and still recall. I am 69 now.

Brian continues 'My mother was certainly active in Kimberley with the community there. Jean's father was **Jimmy (James) Callis** married to **Bessie**. They both moved to Johannesburg later in life, after we had moved there. My other grandfather **Barney Cohen**, I sadly never knew. (He had remarried to Tilly Maisels and had moved to Johannesburg. He died in January 1951, before we got there) We are related to the Frank family. We left Kimberley as a family in about 1958 for Johannesburg, when my father set up in his new venture, courtesy of Sir Ernest.

My mother seemed to fall ill soon after, and never really recovered. She has serious eye problems and was in effect blind for many years. She passed away in 1979.

## 1955: Top Secret Mission in Liberia



In 1955 Cecil was sent to Liberia on a top-secret diamond security assignment for a year. It had to do with the tracking of diamond smuggling in Sierra Leone. He was rewarded for the success of this operation with an all-expenses paid three-month tour of Europe with his wife Jean.

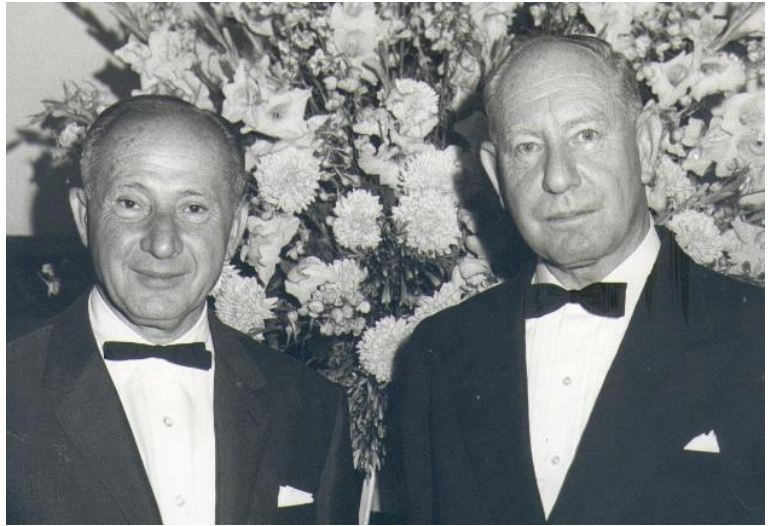
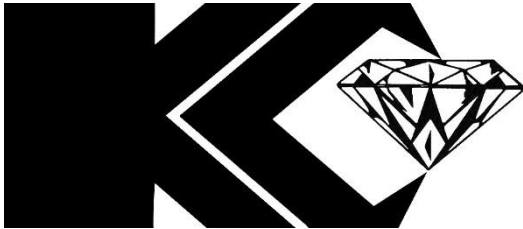
Left we see Cecil and Jean feeding pigeons in St Mark's Square, Venice

On his return, while on holiday in Muizenberg, Cecil met with Sir Ernest Oppenheimer. During a walk on the beach, Cecil confided in Sir Ernest his desire to go it alone and so in 1957 he started his own business as an independent diamond dealer and manufacturer. He was rewarded with an allocation of rough diamonds – a diamond 'sight'.



## 1957: Krochmal and Cohen

In time Cecil was able to combine his diamond allocation with that of a good friend, Leon Krochmal, who owned a diamond cutting and polishing factory.



( Leon Krochmal and Cecil Cohen in 1964).

Leon was at the time in partnership with Edward Schoutens (Krochmal & Schoutens). Cecil became part of this partnership for a while. When Mr Schoutens retired soon after, the company changed its name to **Krochmal & Cohen Diamond Cutting Works (Pty) Ltd.** The family left Kimberley for Johannesburg in 1957/8.

Krochmal & Cohen Diamond Cutting and polishing factory







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### **Krochmal and Cohen Diamond Cutting Works (Pty) Ltd.**

6th Floor Dubarry Centre  
Cnr. Berea and Anderson Streets  
City and Suburban, Johannesburg

Tourists! Special arrangements are made  
to avoid local sales taxes.

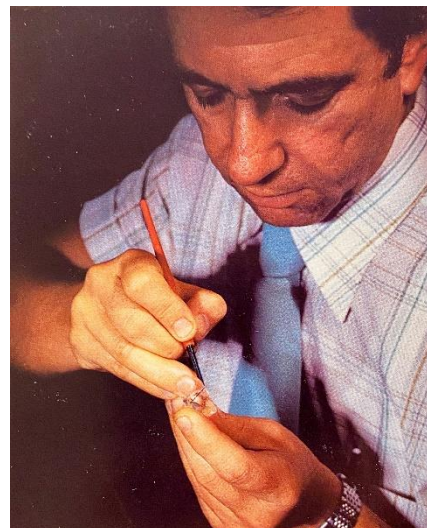


## The Next Generation

After a comprehensive apprenticeship in both Johannesburg and Antwerp, studying all branches including cleaving, two of Cecil and Jean's sons, Raymond b 1938 and David, b 1946, joined the firm of Krochmal and Cohen. In 1968 Dave and Ray founded Du Barry Diamonds of Johannesburg. On the right Raymond is marking a stone

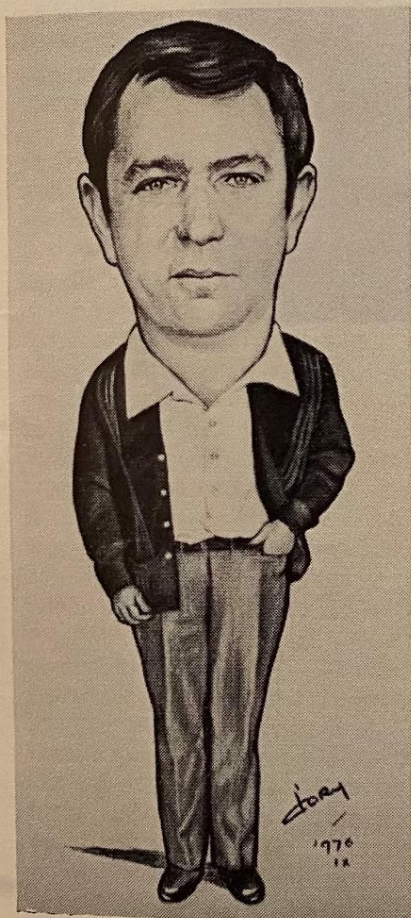
After David finished school in 1963 and before commencing his military service in May 1964, he spent 3 months under the supervision of a Mr Erasmus (who was working for Cecil at the time) prospecting for diamonds in Heuningneskloof, south of Kimberley. He lived with Mr Erasmus on site in a caravan.

Over the years David was involved in all aspects of diamonds from prospecting, purchasing, marking, sales to jewellery and tours of their factory. Cecil, Dave and Ray all used to go down from Johannesburg to Kimberley monthly to look at and purchase their 'sight'.



## PERSONALITY OF THE MONTH

*As seen by d'Ory.  
(Specially drawn for the Diamond  
News and S.A. Jeweller.)*



RAYMOND (left) and DAVID COHEN went into partnership in 1968 to found Du Barry Diamonds (Pty) Ltd of Johannesburg.

Raymond was born in Kimberley in 1938 serving his apprenticeship in Johannesburg and Antwerp and studying all branches including cleaving. Joined Krochmal and Cohen in 1960. Eight years later he became a director in his present venture which recently moved to prestige offices and factory in Dashing Centre which specialises in cutting and polishing of diamonds and exclusive handmade jewellery.

Married Miss Roslyn Sacks of Johannesburg. They have three sons. Interested in wild-life conservation and firearms, combat shooting and tennis.

David was born in Kimberley in 1946 and served his apprenticeship with Krochmal and Cohen in Johannesburg and Belgium where his father Mr Cecil Cohen is a partner.

Married Miss Adile Ostroff of Olifantsfontein. They have two children. He is interested in motor racing and rallying and collects vintage cars.







Conducted tours of the Du Barry factory are undertaken with the consent of the De Beers Diamond Corporation. It is usually then that visiting International Dealers become convinced of the many advantages that a Du Barry association would afford them when selecting gemstones for their home markets.

Dave is working with overseas clients in their beautiful new building in Johannesburg (with large woodcuts commissioned from the South African artist Raymond Andrews in the background).



### **1980: Cecil passed away**

When Cecil passed away in 1980, Dave and Ray continued to purchase their sight from Kimberley. In 1990, however, as the third generation were not interested in working in diamonds. Dave and Ray sold the company and the family emigrated to Canada.

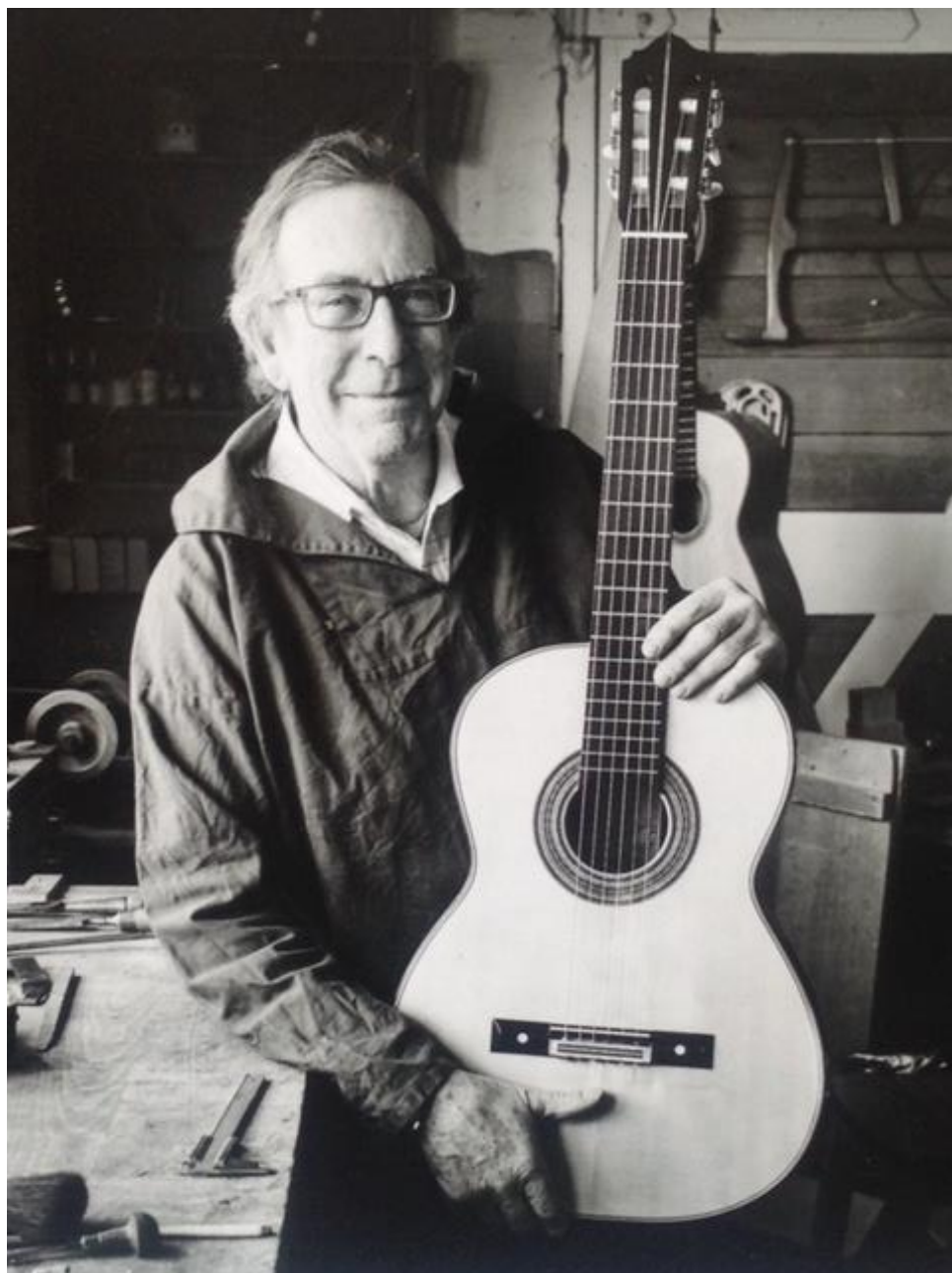
### **1990: the business was sold**



Here are David and Raymond in Vancouver in May 2020

**The youngest son Brian** (b 1952) took a different career path. He emigrated to London where he became a luthier and guitar maker. He says: The photo below of me, was taken in my studio showroom. Most of the violins and violas visible have been made by me.





My shop / showroom at that time showed mainly violin family instruments, but my main production is in fact in concert guitars, and historic lutes, not shown in the photo above, but here I am with one on the left.

Today Brian (left) can claim to be the longest-established independent string instrument and classical guitar maker in the UK.

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## **Cecil Cohen and Family**

Compiled by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London, October 2021

From texts and pictures sent by their sons Raymond, David and Brian and daughter in law (David's wife) Adele – and a note from Milton Jawno.

Further pictures kindly supplied courtesy of the McGregor Museum in Kimberley and found on the internet.

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