

Robins (née Schrire) Gwynne

Compiled by Geraldine Auerbach, London October 2019 – updated July 2021
from information and pictures sent by Gwynne Robins, Cape Town.

This story includes

- My immediate family
- How we got (back) to Kimberley
- My Batmitzvah /memories of Chagim in the Kimberley shul
- Life in Kimberley 1949-1955
- How my mom became Chair of the Women's Zionist League in Kimberley
- Why we left Kimberley
- Connections with the Kretzmars
- Great Grandfather Raphael Senderovitz and the Grinne Shul, Kimberley, also the Beaconsfield Peace Medal



Gwynne writes: I was born in Johannesburg in 1943.

Our family came to Kimberley in 1949 when I was six years old. We stayed until 1955.

My father, Louis Schrire (Yehuda Leib), was born in Kimberley on 29 September 1914. He was a brilliant scholar and sportsman – a Dux Medallist at Boys High School as was his younger brother Velva. (See them on page 2). They both became doctors. In 1941 my dad married **my mother Mary Katz** from Johannesburg, whom he had met on holiday in Muizenberg. When I was due in 1943, my parents were living in Piet Retief where my father had been posted in the army. My mom went home to her parents in Johannesburg to have her first baby. My father was then posted up north. He got a foreign body in his eye in the train going up and was sent back. (His replacement later died of dysentery.) My dad was then posted to the Wynberg army camp, and they moved into a flat in Wynberg belonging to his father Sam. After the War, my father went to England and Cardiff to specialise in ophthalmology. My mother followed in a troop ship with their two small children – my younger brother and myself – along with lots of soldier's wives. We will read how my father came to set up in practice in Kimberley from **1949 to 1955**; my memories of Kimberley; and how we came to leave Kimberley for Cape Town.

My paternal grandfather was Samuel Schrire. His father Yehuda Leib Schrire had arrived in Cape Town in 1892 bringing the family over two years later. In 1901, during the difficulties of the Anglo-Boer War, Yehuda Leib took the family back to Europe and settled in Frankfurt. Samuel went to school in there, and later studied at Jews' College, London. A depression hit the Cape after the end of the South African War, the family lost their money and had to return to Cape Town. Sadly, they had to remove Samuel from College before he was able to qualify.

When Lampy Maresky's father, a commercial traveller from Kimberley, was on his visits to Cape Town on business, he would stay in the District Six boarding house of Samuel's widowed mother. He told her that there was a wealthy, but jilted, heiress in Kimberley – **Sara Neche Senderovitz**, (born 11 November 1893). His mother dispatched Samuel to Kimberley forthwith to meet her. Happily for all they hit it off, and were engaged a few days later. They were married in the Roeland Street Synagogue, Cape Town, on 18 December 1913, with prominent MP Morris Alexander and Rev Bender as the witnesses. They lived at first with my great-grandparents **Raphael and Chaie Eta Senderovitz** in Beaconsfield

and Samuel helped his father-in-law in his business (providing free advice where he could to his customers). Later, they bought a house at 17 Carrington Road.

Samuel and Sara Neche Schrire (née Senderovitz) had two brilliant sons: **Louis** and **Velva**, and then three daughters, **Ruby**, **Edna** and **Cynthia**.

Louis (my father) b1914 and Velva b1916 both achieved the top marks in matric in the whole Cape Province. They were each presented with gold medals from the Kimberley City Council in 1931 and 1933 for this achievement. My father also came first in Latin and second in Greek in the College of Preceptors exam, an Empire wide exam. They were great sportsmen too. my father was presented with the



Dux medal for all-round achievement from the Kimberley Boys high School in 1931 – and my uncle Velva achieved the same two years later. (See Louis' Dux Medal from KHS above)



On the left we see the brothers aged about 8 and 10, all togged up for cricket at Kimberley Boys Junior School in the 1920s. (Louis also played cricket for Varsity). Velva was the first pupil in Kimberley to study modern Hebrew for matric. [taught by the exceptional minister **Rev Maurice Konviser** – see his story under families] They both went on to study medicine.

My father Louis became an ophthalmologist. Velva became an internationally famous cardiologist who instigated and created the first Cardiology Clinic in South Africa at Groote Schuur Hospital. He was **THE key partner in enabling Christian Barnard** to accomplish the first and subsequent

successful Heart Transplant operations in the world.

See Velva Schrire's story here: https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/kimberley/Schrire_2.html



Pictured here are Sam and Sara Neche Schrire and their five children in about 1922.

How Gwynne's family got back to Kimberley

After the war my father **Louis Schrire** went to England to specialise in Ophthalmology, studying in London and then in Cardiff. We joined him there.

We arrived back in Muizenberg where his parents Sam and Sarah Neche Schrire were now living, deciding what to do next.

Gwynne recalled her mother Mary saying: 'He met a man who had been in the army with him who told him they needed an eye specialist in Kimberley. He said, 'You will not only get the job as eye specialist for De Beers mine, you will also get it for the Railways, so while you are sitting waiting for patients, you will straight away be earning an income.' So, Daddy decided to set up practice in Kimberley. Grandpa Sam lent him money to buy a motor car and he motored back to Kimberley – he could not be a specialist without a car. Being a railway Doctor, Dad got discounted rail tickets for his family so we frequently spent weekends in Johannesburg with my mother's parents, going up by train, and arriving back early on Monday in time to go to school. My parents had a very happy marriage with never a cross word.'

Gwynne's school days

Gwynne says: 'Although I had started school in London aged four and could read and write, the teacher in Kimberley said my handwriting was so bad it would do me good to spend another year in Sub A. I remember the teacher holding my work up in class to ridicule and saying, 'Look children - Gwynne's writing looks as though a spider has been walking all over the page.' The following year they moved me straight up to Std 1, missing out Sub B - but my handwriting has never improved'

My Batmitzvah in Kimberley

Gwynne wrote that:

*After seeing a picture in the Kimberley Ex-Pats Newsletter no 20 (January 2019), that **Delia Benn** had sent to Geraldine, of seven little girls at their Bat Mitzvah Ceremony in 1959 – claiming it to be a first for Kimberley and a ceremony that the Werners had introduced – I had to put the record straight.*

*I do not intend to boast, but mine was the first Bat Mitzvah in Kimberley. My Mom used to keep the clipping from the Diamond Fields Advertiser '**Kimberley Girl Makes History**' and there was I with my thick plaits! This was four years earlier, in 1955.*



The caption reads: Miss Gwynne Schrire, daughter of Dr and Mrs Louis Schrire of 19 Hesperus Street, who received her Batmitzvah earlier this month. She is the first person to receive the Batmitzvah - the Jewish confirmation for girls – in Kimberley. With Miss Schrire is Rabbi C.M. Bloch who conducted the service.

My Mom had decided I should have a Bat Mitzvah. She persuaded two other mothers to join. It was winter and she took me to a tailor to have a white suit made with a jacket and pleated skirt in a thick material – I hated it. Fortunately, the other two girls pulled out, the event was moved to summer and my Mom, who used to make my clothes, made me a pretty, white summer dress which I much preferred.

***The Rabbi** had never conducted a Bat Mitzvah before. I would visit him once a week and he would read me a chapter from a thin book called something like 'What Every Jewish Girl*

Should Know'. The only thing I remember was that the Jewish wife should not gossip when they sat down at meals and the only conversation should be about the Torah.

*'Our family was Jewish, but we used to discuss all sorts of interesting things at the table. I do not remember getting **fountain pens** as gifts. Because of my thick plaits, lots of people decided that the most suitable present would be a dressing table set with a hairbrush, comb and mirror. We left Kimberley at the end of that year'.*

Memories of Jewish holidays in the Kimberley Shul

Gwynne writes:

I remember sitting upstairs in a fluffy white angora bolero my Mom had knitted for me and pulling off bits of fluff and watching them floating down to stick onto the men's hats and jackets below. And worse – the pictures here seem to show that the railings upstairs have been changed. They used to be of brass with solid brass balls on top, here and there and I remember playing with the ball, screwing and unscrewing it until – oops – it fell out of my fingers! I watched in horror. Fortunately, instead of braining some unfortunate soul underneath, the heavy brass bullet landed onto an empty hat placed on a seat.

Memories of life in Kimberley

*We used to go to **cheder five times a week** – the Reverend used to complain bitterly when the children chewed chewing gum, comparing us to cows with the cud. He had taught my father Louis and used to compare us unfavourably to him. I remember picking the pink pepper corns off the pepper trees while waiting for my mother to fetch us from cheder. We joined the Bnei Zion youth movement and made a guard of honour when their madrichah got married.*

*I also attended **dancing classes with Miss Joyce Hooper**. She taught in the sumptuous ballroom of diamond magnate, Sir David Harris's house in Pan Road. [In the picture is Geraldine's daughter Loren Auerbach posing in 1998 in this ballroom that has been meticulously removed and rebuilt at the Big Hole Museum]. Miss Hooper would hold an annual dancing display. One year we needed five changes of costumes – that certainly kept our mothers busy sewing. Miss Hooper used to show off with solos until one year my little brother walked onto the stage when she was dancing to look at her – that was the last time she included herself in the programme. (Read about David Harris here*



https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/kimberley/David_Harris.html)

*I also used to go **to piano lessons** with a very fat woman next door to the wonderful Kimberley library, which had beautiful wrought iron balconies upstairs and ladders to reach the books. My mother would spend the afternoons lifting us to and fro in the car. I remember when my mother heard that the convent nearby was screening the 1936 film 'The Rainbow on the River', she sent my brother and I to see it and we were to walk home afterwards. Everyone sat on the floor in the darkened hall, the film strip kept on breaking and having to be repaired – so by the time we finally got home, my mom was in a panic.*

*On the weekend we would drive to **'the koppie'** for a picnic tea and look for shells from the Boer War. Or we would drive to a pig farm on the outskirts and get out of the car to look at*

the pigs – my little brother loved this. Or we would drive to the Modder River or the Vaal River. When the Vaal River came down in flood one year, we drove out to look at it and returned some weeks later to marvel at the grass and refuse stuck high at the top of trees no longer submerged.

*One holiday my **cousins came to stay with us** when their parents were overseas. Robert was keen on insects and spent much of his time digging in the compost heap to collect the ants. Our ants apparently were much bigger than his, in Cape Town. He wanted to find a queen ant, My parents always encouraged us in any of our Interests, so my Dad drove us out into the country where Robert tackled an ant hill. We soon gave up, when the soldier ants came pouring out, leaving him manfully banging away until he too decided that discretion was the better part of valour. My father brought him many small test tubes and formaldehyde and put him back on the train with his treasured box of specimens – which his mother threw away as soon as he arrived home. She was furious with my dad for aiding and abetting him. (Perhaps that is why he became a professor of political studies, not of entomology)*

*We started a little **museum with bird's nests, stones, and rock engravings** a farmer had given my father. The museum was in a large budgie cage. My grandmother loved animals and had sent the cage up to us to look after the birds when she went overseas. One night was bitterly cold and all the birds died. My grandmother was angry with us when she returned but the cage made a fine museum. When we moved to Cape Town, I sneaked some of my favourite stones into the furniture van. The driver was very worried when he heard things shifting up and down as he went over hills on the way to Cape Town - he thought the furniture was shifting.*

Here is how Gwynne's mother Mary Schrire became the Chairlady of the Kimberley Women's Zionist Organisation

She told Gwynne, 'We had spent two years in London and one in Cardiff after the war. The antisemitism was horrific – I thought I was living in Nazi Germany. At the end of the war the United Nations were meeting and to their horror they discovered that there were Jews in Auschwitz the Germans forgot to burn – NO ONE WANTED THEM – NOT EVEN USA! Meanwhile Jews from Russia were sneaking off to Palestine, but the British caught them and put them in a concentration camp in Cyprus. Some Jewish settlers fought the British, killing some of them. The British did NOT want Jews there – it would upset their friends, the Arabs, who were giving them oil!!! I decided if the United Nations gave the Jews their land, I would use every bit of my energy to work for it.

'Three weeks after arriving in Kimberley I was invited to a meeting – World Jewry had decided to form a women's campaign and Doris Lankin came to Kimberley speak about it. They needed someone to take charge in Kimberley. She asked the lady who ran the Blue Box and Trees Fund to do it, but she refused – she said she helped her husband in his clothing business in the Market Square. (In her old age I discovered them both living in Beit Protea in Israel!!). She asked other women, but all declined.

'Doris looked down, I was sitting in the front row, and she recognised me, we had been to university together., so she just said "Mary Katz" will do it! "But," I said, 'I don't know anyone – I only arrived three weeks ago.'" Someone yelled out, "It's better to collect money

from people you don't know." Then it hit me – I had made a vow to help my fellow Jews hounded out of Europe and here was the opportunity. "Yes," I said, "I'll do it!"

'They made us promise to collect money, the only way we could do it was to have functions, there were quite a lot of boys due to have barmitzvahs so I suggested we cater kosher and we would cater for barmitzvahs and that was how we raised money. It was an advantage that I was a newcomer as half the women did not talk to the other half and they were all prepared to share their recipes with me, but not with the others. I soon learnt who made the best kichel, the best chopped herring etc.

'I have been a campaign collector ever since. They made me vice-chairman and the following year, 1951, chairman, and I held that position until we left Kimberley at the end of 1955.'

Leaving Kimberley

Leaving Kimberley was also a professional / political decision. Gwynne's mother said: 'One day a Dr came to see Daddy, an Afrikaans man, who said, "Look, I have a farm in the district. I have just become an eye specialist and I am going to set up here. This town is not big enough for two eye specialists. I shall go to the two Afrikaans churches and the minister will announce that there is an Afrikaans man here, a good Nat and now you must support him and who do you think the patients will go to after that? I shall take away your patients from you. What is more, I shall even buy your house from you if you like. I drove past it and I like it and I believe it has a swimming pool."

'Daddy said let me think about what you have said. He discussed it and said "Gwynne is now in std.6. In another four years she will leave school and will not be coming back to Kimberley. She will be coming back for the winter holidays and that is all – in summer we go away, and she will spend the rest of the time as a boarder in the university. So, we realised it was not a bad idea to move to Cape Town and with their savings from Kimberley my parents felt sure he could build up a practice from scratch there." We said OK to the man, we put the house on the market, he bought it. Daddy went off in October to start a practice, I made this man wait for the house till the end of the school year 1955. A wise decision.

Gwynne and the Kretzmars

Gwynne (Schrire) Robins lived in Kimberley with her family from age 6 in 1949, to age 12 in 1955 when they relocated to Cape Town. Geraldine says her parents Noel and Beryl were friends of the SchIRES. We used to meet up with Val (Velva) and cousin Toddy Schrire in Cape Town and Geraldine was friendly with their niece Tamar Schrire. (It could well have been Noel or Julius that had suggested there was an opening for an eye specialist in Kimberley in 1949 – as Noel himself had just gone onto the specialist register as a general surgeon in 1948 with a railway practice etc). Gwynne told Geraldine (née Kretzmar) that her parents were friendly with her uncle Julius and Althea Kretzmar both in Kimberley and later when they moved to Cape Town, and often had them round. She says: 'I adored Julius – he had so much wisdom. I used to visit them in Dennekamp, their flat in Wynberg, and take him to meetings of the Jewish Seniors to talk about his Dad's letters from Cape Town in 1899 to 1903 to his wife Taube in Birzh Lithuania. The Kretzmars had moved house several times and every time a large trunk came with them. Finally, once

retired, Dr Kretzmar decided to open his late father's trunk and found it stacked with letters in Yiddish.

When Tevye Kretzmar had left home in 1899, he had told his wife Taube that he would write every week and she was to do the same and they were to keep each other's letters to serve as a diary. She arrived with all his letters intact – but her letters had sadly not been kept. Julius Kretzmar and Nathan Stein (Sorrel Kerbel's father) used to meet after shul every Thursday morning in Wynberg and he would translate the letters – they form an invaluable record of life for the 'greeners' in South Africa.

Read [here](#) the letters from Noel's and Julius's father Tevye (Tobias) Kretzmar, in Cape Town to his wife Taube in Lithuania, 1900 - 1903. This includes a description of Jewish life in Birzh and the Kretzmar's life in Malmesbury, Cape. Gwynne has made this portfolio.

Gwynne used to work in the old Jewish Museum and when the curator of the Malmesbury Museum, the former shul, wanted to start a Jewish section, Gwynne put her in touch with Julius (whose parents had set up home in Malmesbury – where he was born – Noel was born in Birzh. See the [Kretzmar, Noel](#) story here). Julius was a great resource to the museum and donated family Jewish artefacts to the ark area of the old Malmesbury synagogue. ~~~~~

Gwynne's Great Grandfather Raphael Senderovitz and the Grinne Shul



Gwynne Robins, née Schrire sent me a picture of a key (left) presented to her great grandfather Raphael Rodes Senderowitz (d 1918) on 17 September 1911.



Gwynne said: I knew nothing about the key – nor the building to which the key belonged until you (Geraldine) sent the article about the Grinne shul (above - (official name *Beth Hamedrash Linas Hatzedek*). The key was found when I was clearing out the contents of the old Jewish Museum that the new SA Jewish Museum did not want, and it was given to me. It had been presented to the museum by my grandmother Sarah Neche Schrire (née Senderowitz). Her father Raphael was a wealthy merchant in Beaconsfield (see his story here [Senderovitz, Raphael](#)) who had clearly been



instrumental in, and had supported, the construction of this second shul in Kimberley built to suit the wishes of the newer Eastern European Jewish immigrants to Kimberley. The inscription on this key says:

*Beth Hamedrash Linas Hatzedek Kimberley
Opened by E Senderowitz
24 Elul 5671 (18.9.1911)*

Gwynne gave the key to her son, who is the chairman of a Cape Town shul, and placed it in a frame made by her other great grandfather (Yehuda Leib Schrire). The inscription said

*Key presented to Raphael Rodes Senderowitz d 1918 Grandfather's mother's father
On the opening of the Beth Hamedrash Linas Hatzedek Kimberley
by E Senderowitz
24 Elul 5671 (18.9.1911)
Frame made by Yehuda Leib Schrire 1851-1912 Grandfather's father's father*

There was a Photo of Grandfather Louis Schrire, Yehuda Leib 1914-1986 on the back.

Boer War Medals for Beaconsfield Children

Gwynne writes in July 2021:

When the South African War broke out in 1899, Kimberley and Beaconsfield, a mile apart, though until 1912 separate municipalities) were besieged. Col Robert Kekewich who commanded the garrison in Kimberley had originally intended to exclude Beaconsfield in his plans for the defence of Kimberley, but the Beaconsfield residents had protested so strongly, that he was forced to include the defence of Beaconsfield with his defence of Kimberley, although independently of the main defensive enclosure.

When the siege was lifted, the relieved Beaconsfield residents (pun intended) decided to strike a Beaconsfield medal for their schoolchildren. Fifteen hundred were made of white metal and were presented by the Mayor of Beaconsfield, Mr J.M. Pratley, to schoolchildren of all races in Beaconsfield whose parents had filled in an application form. My grandmother's parents (**Raphael and Chaie Eta Senderovitz**) did so.

Suspended by two links from a rather crumpled red and white ribbon, the one face contains the full figure of the Roman goddess Pax extending an olive branch in her right hand, cradling a cornucopia in her left and standing on a small plinth. Underneath her is the word: **'PEACE'** and around the medal it states: **'COUNCIL CHILDRENS MEDAL PRESENTED BY THE TOWN'; '1900'**

The coat of arms of Beaconsfield is on the reverse with motto: **'FORTI NIHIL DIFFICILE'** (nothing difficult for the strong) on a ribbon below with **'SIEGE OF BEACONSFIELD' '14 OCTOBER 1899 - 15 FEBRUARY 1900'** around the medal. This medal was presented to my grandmother (Sara Neche Schrire (née Senderovitz) and many other children at a large ceremony only late in 1901 because although the siege had been lifted, the peace took longer to arrive than anticipated.

I now have the medal.



Read the story of Gwynne's Great Grandfather [Senderovitz, Raphael](#) here.

Gwynne is now (2019) the **Deputy Director of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies** in Cape Town. She is described by SAJBD as, 'Indispensable and erudite and an expert on the Jews of South Africa and Cape history, she is a fountain of knowledge that keeps us informed.'

Gwynne Robins (née Schrire)

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