

Rev Bernard Wulf in Kimberley – during the War – 1941-1943



Bernard Wulf served in Kimberley for two years during the war. I knew nothing about him – but reading the transcript of the interview from the archives at UCT, I have learned what a forward-thinking and interesting man he was.

He was a graduate of the famous Ponewyz Yeshiva in Lithuania, who came to South Africa as a very young, qualified Rabbi in 1925. He served smaller congregations like Carnarvon and Victoria West before going to Upington for eight years.

Bernard Wulf married an Upington girl, Mollie Nurick, who's mother Sally Sarah Nurick (née Goldberger) was born in Kimberley. Sarah's sister Dora married Maurice Friedman of Kimberley and her sister Julia Goldberger of Kimberley married Adolf Friedlander, the brother of my grandmother Amalie Bergman (née Friedlander). Mollie's father Abram Nurick was a well-to-do businessman in Upington. Rev Wulf and Mollie went back to Upington

afterwards. His time in Kimberley was truly special as he relates.

He said: 'Kimberley always had ministers provided by England, trained at Jews College. Kimberley tried to maintain the same status, the same type of congregation as Gardens Shul, because the original congregants were English pioneers there, the Oppenheims, Harrises, Barnatos and all that history. And then they had an advert in the paper they were looking for somebody with my qualifications. I applied and it turned out to be a temporary position at the time when a minister that they had brought out from England (Rev Yesorsky) joined the forces and went 'up North' as a Chaplain. I took it on, and we got on very well together. I was the first from Eastern Europe who occupied the pulpit in that shul, beautiful shul (above), the most beautiful shul in South Africa. Somehow, I fitted in with respect

He describes the situation he found in Kimberley

'There were three types of Jews in Kimberley. There was still a remnant of Jews who used to talk about Rev Harris Isaacs of 50 years ago and there were the Eastern Europeans, my fellow immigrants from Poland and other parts, older than me of course who came out long before, and there were quite a number of local born.

Somehow or other, I managed to fit in with all sections of the community and we got on very well together.' I wonder if anyone remembers Rev Wulf or has any photographs of him?

Rev Bernard Wulf's adventures as Chaplain to the Air Force

Rev Wulf describes his time in the Army: 'There was a big Air Force camp in Kimberley, and I was made the Jewish Chaplain and given the rank of Captain. I organised services and other facilities for the boys there and I got to know them each one and I took a lot of interest in them as well as generally in the city. 'The army was very cooperative. Every Friday night the Air Force boys used to come in full force to shul and during the week when I used to go there to give services, they were all available and I had good attendances. I used to give the other Chaplains a chance to come to my services, the Methodist ministers and so on ... in this respect I would like to tell you a little incident.



'One evening I arrived for service and there was a YMCA hall which had various rooms. We the Jewish boys were supposed to assemble at a certain room. When I came, I found that most of the congregants were on duty and I only had 3 or 4 Jewish recruits, so we started talking. While we were talking, I noticed a sergeant passing by up and down, eventually he came up to me: I was in uniform, which for me had Mogen Dovid on my cap and epaulettes and he saluted. He said Sir may I speak to you, I said certainly what can I do for you? He said we of the Dutch Reform Church assembled in room so-and-so, but our padre Bekker has not turned up, will you take our service?

'I looked at him and said you realise to what denomination I belong, he says yes, I know, and you know the best attendance you had was from the Afrikaners, so I said to the boys in my room, the 3, 4 boys "Come on" let's see what we can do.

'So I came into the room and they all stood up and I introduced myself, I could have done it in Afrikaans but by that time I was quite fluent in English. I had my set service, so I said to them you can sing any of your Psalms that you know and then we will carry on. They sang a Psalm, I read to them another Psalm, I addressed them on the goodwill, the usual address in war years, what we are up to and what we are trying to achieve by doing this, and it turned out to be quite successful evening, half an hour, they all filed by past me and saluted, and thanked me. To take part in inter-denominational services was not uncommon, we often used to come together in services for the soldiers on parade ... but to be directly delivering a non-Jewish service was something else!'

Death and Funeral of Colonel Sir David Harris (b London, 1852)

Rev Bernard Wulf related his experience of something else, which he says does not happen to every Jewish minister. He explained: 'Colonel Sir David Harris, KCMG, was a well-accepted Jew in his day, He was a Director of De Beers when it was formed. He was also the Colonel of the Kimberley Regiment and had been in the Parliament.

When I came, he was about 90, paralysed, sitting either in a chair or in bed. I used to visit him very, very often, at least once a week and we became quite friendly. Contrary to other pioneer Jews like the Oppenheimers and so forth, he kept to his Jewish faith and remained in Kimberley. [His marriage to Rosa Gabriel had been the first Jewish wedding solemnised in Kimberley in 1873 even before there was a synagogue.] He was very much Jewish in his behaviour and so on and eventually he became very ill. One afternoon, the nurse said to me, it looks to me like we are coming



to the end. People called me when there was a death any time day or night, so I said to her don't hesitate to call me.

'I was called at about five o'clock the following morning, (23 September 1942). I actually held his hand while he died, I said a prayer, his daughter was with him, his daughter was married out of faith. She turned round to me and said Mr. Wulf I married out of faith, but I'd like my father to have a proper Jewish funeral, I said certainly.

'Now in all the years of my service I have spoken on all different types of occasions, but I made up my mind from the first day never to prolong a funeral. I never delivered an oration, whoever it is, I looked for opportunities at later dates, maybe the shiva house, maybe at a special memorial service and so on, so I said certainly, I immediately phoned the Chevra Kadisha to make arrangements but everything got stuck, the minute his death was announced – they came.....'

He said: 'I don't know if I was right, it depends on which way you look at it. He was Colonel, pre-Boer War and so on, he was an ex-Member of Parliament a man of great standing and all wanted to give him honour, and they came together, the Mayor from his side, the Army from the other side, they wanted to give him a military and civic funeral.

Reverend Wulf had to think on his feet how to marry, without offence to either, the Jewish requirements and the honour the military and civic authorities wanted to pay to this great and popular soldier, statesman, politician, financier and Jew.



'Now what does that consist of: the Mayor, the Councillors and so on, in all their robes following the hearse: the military wanted to give a company of soldiers with a band, now this gave me a bit of a shock, I did not know what to do, if it means giving honour to a Jew – and through this perhaps we can bring together closer the Jewish sections, the Jews and the non-Jews, and they want to honour a Jew, I said all right we will do it. They said, we want three days to organise it, so they were organising this.

I stipulated that from the house, the pall bearers, from the house to the hearse, and from the hearse, I mean the Chevra Kadisha will do their job as usual. I followed the hearse in the car and then followed the military and the Mayor and Civic Dignitaries and the band, all this, down to the cemetery the pall bearers even non-Jews until the gates of the cemetery.

'Once we arrived at the cemetery gates (left) I insisted the Chevra Kadisha must take over. It was quite an occasion, quite an occasion, and I said to them I am not

going to make any oration I do not want to treat Sir David in any other way than any other Jew, but I said to the Mayor, the City Council can organise a memorial service two weeks later or so, they had a daily newspaper there, advertise as much as you can, and we organised a memorial service two weeks later in the shul, in the synagogue, and there I will deliver my oration. And that is what we did ... this is something maybe a minister of a big congregation will not have this opportunity. As I say it gave me a bit of a sleepless night, I know in certain respects I am not doing right, but I had to weigh the pros and cons. I thought to myself ... it was a very trying time, (1942) we had the Nazis working, we did not know what's happened to our people and this gave us an opportunity to bring us together.' What a brave and forward-thinking man. I am sure he did absolutely the right thing.