

Reverend Harris Isaacs

Minister in Kimberley for 33 years

between 1890 and 1927

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The background: 1870s and 1880s

Diamonds were first discovered on the riverbanks near Kimberley in 1867. By the early 1870s the 'dry diggings' had been discovered and Jews were already well represented in the digger community and nearly half the brokers and buyers were Jews. There were also Jews who ran transport to the fields and who traded goods and services.

They also took a prominent role in the social life of the diggings and emerging city. They featured significantly in boxing, racing, theatre, and other entertainments as well as in journalism. (They were also highly suspected of dealing in IDB – Illicit Diamond Buying)

It followed that they met and formed a congregation for divine service, at first, praying in homes which were no more than tents. As early as 1871 a tentative congregation was set up, called the Griqualand West Jewish Association. Among its members (who were later to become millionaires) were Isaac Lewis, Woolf Joel and Lionel Phillips.

For the High Holydays, a corrugated iron building in Woodley Street was hired and filled to overflowing with worshippers. This was on the initiative of **Joel Myers** (who was a pioneer of the domestication of ostriches in Oudtshoorn) supported by **Rev Joel Rabinowitz**, the Minister in Cape Town who sent up festival prayer books and a Shofar as a gift from the mother community.

Getting Ministers to come to Kimberley

At first, there was no regular minister. Kimberley Jews had to rely on the infrequent visits of Rabbis from Cape Town and Port Elizabeth for circumcisions and marriages. High Holydays services were conducted by lay members. It is on record that there was an unscrupulous self-styled 'rabbi' engaged in these early times, who had to be dismissed – and who revenged himself by sitting at the door of his tin habitation near the synagogue publicly desecrating the Day of Atonement by eating forbidden food in sight of the congregation.

Griqualand West Hebrew Congregation established in 1873

Kimberley established a permanent congregation in 1873 and built a shul which opened with much fanfare and civic pomp in 1876. The building, like all buildings in the township was a simple wood and corrugated iron structure designed to hold 250 people. When it was consecrated on 17 September 1876, it was already too small for the size of the congregation.

There were about 1400 Jewish souls in Kimberley by then, 600 of them adult males. They were mainly from Britain though some were German Jews who has spent some time in England. They were clean-shaven (except for popular moustaches) and strove for assimilation and acceptance into the predominantly British population.

The main difficulty was getting a good minister. For British Ministers it seemed a step too far into the wild. It took the chief Rabbi of Great Britain to nominate and encourage ministers to go to Kimberley. The leaders of the congregation were wealthy diamond magnates, yet the salaries they offered were not really enticing.

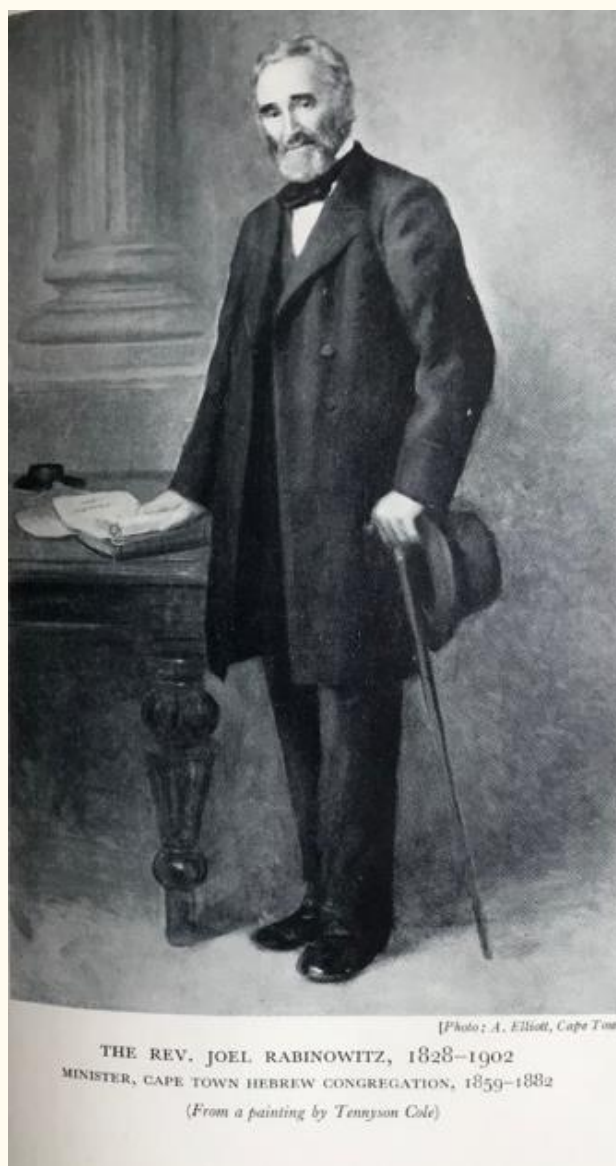
So, who were the Kimberley ministers?

1875 – 1878: Rev Berthold Albu was installed as the first spiritual leader (possibly related to mining magnate Sir George Albu)

1878 – 1884: Rev Meyer Mendelssohn was chosen by the then Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Dr Adler

1884: Rev Joel Rabinowitz (right) came to minister in Kimberley for a time after he had retired from service in Cape Town. He saw where his bread was buttered and in retirement trained as an assayer of minerals and had a lucrative practice in Johannesburg (with some brisses and burials on the side)

1884 – 1885: Rev Abraham Ornstein (nephew of the Cape Town minister AF Ornstein) A young man of 21, he made a huge impression and was much loved. He died a year later – of overwork it is said – and was given a civic funeral.



1886-1888 **Rev Mark L Harris** served for 2 years until he was called to Johannesburg to be the first minister of the first Witwatersrand Hebrew Congregation at their brand new President Street Synagogue dedicated in 1888. (see some gossip about him later)

1888-1889 **Rev E Joffe** served for a while. (I do not know anything about him)

1890. **Rev Harris Isaacs** of London, was invited to Kimberley – **and stayed for a total of 33 years!** (with a short sojourn in Johannesburg)

Kimberley in 1890

By 1890, the community was growing in numbers, stature and wealth. The diamond mines had been brought under the control in De Beers Consolidated Mining Co in 1888, thus maintaining a high price for diamonds, which were expensive to extract from the earth.

The community craved some stability. Rev Harris Isaacs from Britain was found and invited as their hope for the future. He had been a popular teacher at the Jews Free School in London. When he became a minister, he served with distinction at the South Hackney Synagogue. He was a great scholar and brilliant orator.

The Kimberley community took him to their hearts as soon as he arrived in 1890. Yet, after just three years, like many others before him, he too was ready to move on to bigger ponds and went off to Johannesburg to be the minister of the 'opposition' Park Street synagogue.

The dire situation in Johannesburg

In the late 1880s and early 1890s the very new city of Johannesburg had many more Jews, and more wealthy ones, than Kimberley (many of whom had come from Kimberley). The Anglo-German Jews built a sumptuous synagogue in **President Street** creating the '**Witwatersrand Hebrew Congregation**'. For the foundation stone laying in **November 1888**, they had poached **Rev Mark L Harris** from Kimberley (not to be confused with Rev Harris Isaacs) and they subsequently appointed him as Rabbi. But to some, he was a disaster because he was suspected of pocketing money due to the congregation (see below). There was much so dissatisfaction, that some the originators of this community attempted to dismiss him. But when this failed (he remained as minister there until 1898) they promptly upped sticks and obtained a plot round the corner in **Park Street** from President Kruger and created the alternative '**Johannesburg Hebrew Congregation**' in 1891. It had an equally sumptuous building, opened by President Kruger himself. Now Johannesburg needed twice the number of 'suitable' Ministers – and Kimberley seemed the place to supply them (Kimberley had already supplied the financiers to open up the gold mining industry.) So, it seems that **Rev Harris Isaacs** was lured to be the minister the 'new' Park Street Synagogue in 1893 – where he stayed until 1896.



This is a rare postcard of Rev Harris Isaacs at the New Park Street Synagogue. Johannesburg. Interesting to have this picture of Harris Isaacs in full rabbinic regalia, and of the interior of that short-lived synagogue. Courtesy, Terry Lynne Harris, Pretoria

Religious differences with the Litvak immigrants arriving in Johannesburg

To many of the Eastern European Litvak Jews arriving in South Africa in the 1880s, the Anglo-German attitude to religion that they found there, did not chime well. It was completely alien and not what they were used to – so (also in 1891) they spurned both the opulent Anglo-German-Polish communities and formed their own congregation with a Beit Hamidrash (synagogue) (probably in Doornfontein) with Rabbi Dagutsky as Dayan.

Cantor Yehuda Leib Schrire at Park Street:

In 1892, the 'new' **Park Street** Johannesburg Congregation also brought out from Latvia, Yehuda Leib Schrire, (great Grandfather of Gwynne Schrire) to be the Cantor. He was a very religious and learned Litvak. What he found was very problematic for him. He wrote in his diary: 'it is unbelievable that in only eight years the great veld would have beautiful buildings orderly and organised, according to the rules of Europe and thousands of people would be on its streets. Horse coaches, tramway, train-tracks, electric fire, rivers of water, shops were not missing there.'

The first thing the committee demanded from Shrire when they met, him was for him to shave his beard and cut his hair and they quickly got a tailor to make him new clothes in which to present himself in shul. Then on the first Thursday they brought him a set of completely new music they required him to sing for shabbat 'according to the English manner and style'.

Shrire stuck it out, singing on shabbat for a few weeks, but the atmosphere was very painful to him and his relationship with the shul was strained. So instead of doing their bidding – he prayed Slichot – to the 'properly' orthodox Beit Hamidrash who appreciated his voice and his sincerity and erudition. After letters to and fro, Schrire did serve in the Park Street Synagogue as cantor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in 1892, (and 'received a great Yasher Koach') but they only paid him £25 which was half of what he had expected. When he could stick it no longer. Shrire left the synagogue employ and became a free-lance mohel and shochet and turned to his previous craft of baking. Eventually he was so disappointed that he decided to go back to his family in Russia.

He was saved from doing so at the very last moment before boarding the boat in Cape Town by being offered a good job in a religious shul – that became the Roeland Street Shul in Cape Town. (South Africa could have lost a great family, in his outstanding progeny, and he himself would surely have perished in the Holocaust. (For Shrire's insights into what it meant to leave family and travel to the tip of Africa at that time, and his view of the state of the communities I recommend that you read 'The Reb and the Reble' by Gwynne and her cousin Carmel Schrire. Also see **several Schrire stories** on 'Families'.

1897: Reverend Harris Isaacs returns to Kimberley.

I am not sure what prompted him to go back to Kimberley in 1897. (*see the end of this article for more about the Johannesburg story.) But he did. Perhaps he was persuaded by the promise of the magnificent new synagogue that was being planned for Kimberley.

So, leaving the tumult of Johannesburg behind, the Harris Isaacs family settled back into Kimberley life - **and stayed for a total of 33 years**. He was loved and admired within the Jewish Community and in the wider community of Kimberley in whose affairs he took a deep interest. Kimberley was too small for a Jewish school, so he evolved extracurricular Jewish studies and took a great interest in education in the city as a member of the School Board. He also initiated a Griqualand West Jewish Sick Fund, providing free medical services for a weekly sum of one shilling.

In this wonderful picture below of Rev Harris Isaacs and his wife Bella and their 10 children taken in Kimberley in about 1910, we see:



*Standing – L-R: Ruby, Seymour [tbc], Leonard [tbc], Zephyrine
Seated on chairs – L-R: Henry [tbc], wife Bella, Philip, Rev Harris Isaacs, Solomon
Seated on floor – L-R: Robert, Ethel, David*

The Siege of Kimberley and the ‘New’ Synagogue, Memorial Road

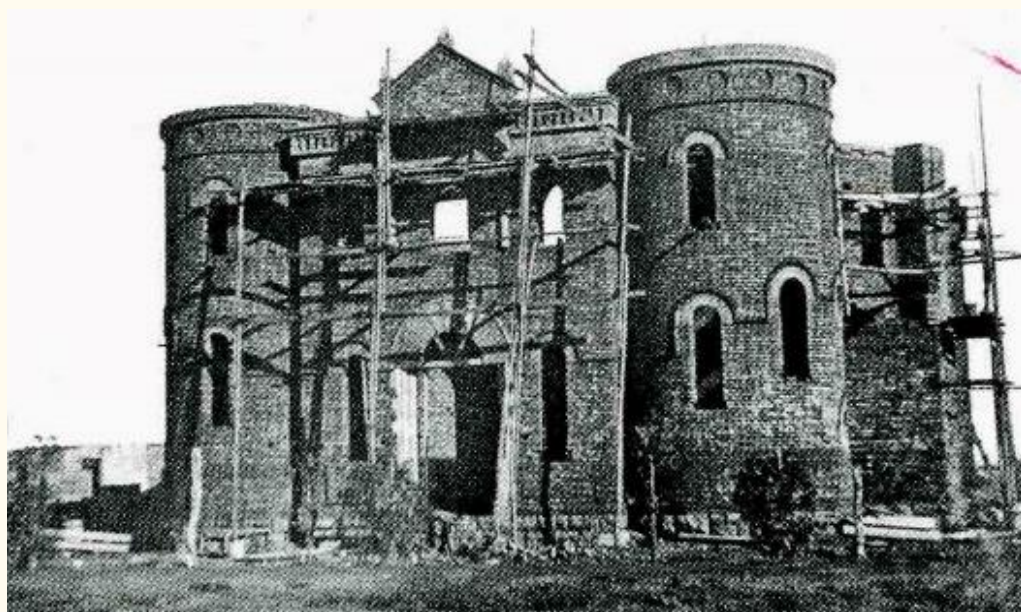
As the diamond community grew stronger and richer, they desired a more appropriate and larger synagogue on a new site in what is now **Memorial Road**. This site was donated by the De Beers Consolidated Mining Company – of which several of the members of the synagogue board such as **Gustave Bonas, David Harris, William Sagar and Barney Barnato**, were either directors or closely associated. Many were part of the syndicate that bought the complete output of all the mines. Perhaps it was this prospect that drew Harris Isaacs back to Kimberley or the persuasiveness of the high-powered synagogue committee?

1899 to 1900 were turbulent times for the whole country. In October 1899 Kimberley was besieged by the Boers as the precursor of War with Britain. This was a test for the Jews in South Africa to show their allegiance to Queen and Empire.

Reverend Harris Isaacs gave great service to the town during the siege, for which he was given a medal and mentioned in dispatches. The war years were very disruptive with the mines being closed and people out of work. Nevertheless, the community pressed on apace with their plans to build the new synagogue.

Construction of the Memorial Road Synagogue: 1901 – 1902

Rev Harris Isaacs was the Minister in charge of the community during the building and transition from the previous corrugated iron building in Dutoitspan Road to the consecration of the spectacular new building. He explained that the old synagogue had served its purpose for 25 years, but towards the end of the century, it was felt that a new era had arisen. Rev Harris Isaacs said: the building operations were begun immediately after the relief of Kimberley in 1900, as a thanks offering to God who had spared the inhabitants.



I was pleased to find this rare picture (above) of the **Memorial Road Synagogue under construction** from a SA Permanent Building Society book. I was also delighted to be sent (by a relative David Leboff) Rev Harris Isaac's own description of the construction. He also answered questions on Jewish life in Kimberley in an article that appeared in the Jewish Chronicle (JC) in London in August 1912. He was interviewed for this article while on a four-month Sabbatical in England from April – to August 1912). (see pages 10/11)

He explained that every bit of timber and all other materials used in the erection, bore the stamp of the military authorities. On several occasions building operations had to cease owing to the difficulties in getting the military to pass certain materials. Weeks, and sometimes months elapsed, before work could be resumed.

1902: Harris Isaacs consecrates the Memorial Road Synagogue

On Erev *Rosh Hashanah*, 14 September 1902 the magnificent Memorial Road Synagogue was consecrated by **Rev Harris Isaacs**. It is possibly the most beautiful in Southern Africa.

It was designed by a Kimberley architect DW Greatbach, apparently based on designs in Byzantine style with twin towers with domes on either side of the front façade, drawn up by Cape Town architect Edward Simkin.



The picture above is probably from its first decade about 1912. The elegant brick and silver ironwork perimeter fence had been constructed in 2011. (Note the newly planted palm trees that now obscure the towers!)

Gustave Bonas

The cornerstone of the new synagogue was laid by the President of the community Mr **Gustave Bonas** (pictured right). He was a prominent member of the original syndicate of European Diamond merchants who bought the whole of the Kimberley mines output.

He must have had a close relationship with Rev Harris Isaacs.

It was said that it was 'in great measure, due to Bonas's exertions, that the Jews of Kimberley are erecting such a splendid house of prayer in one of the best parts of



town. Bonas and Col. David Harris (another of the Syndicate of merchants) were for many years, alternate presidents of the synagogue.



This is a picture of Gustave Bonas's exceptional and beautiful house 'Lilianville', at no 10 Lodge Road. For his home, Bonas also commissioned the celebrated architect Greatbach. Bonas sold this house in 1907 to Department store owner, John Orr who called it 'Dunluce' after a village in Northern Ireland. and left Kimberley. See further reading about Bonas and Harris at the end of this article.)

Here is how **Jono David**, one of the photographers on the website described it:

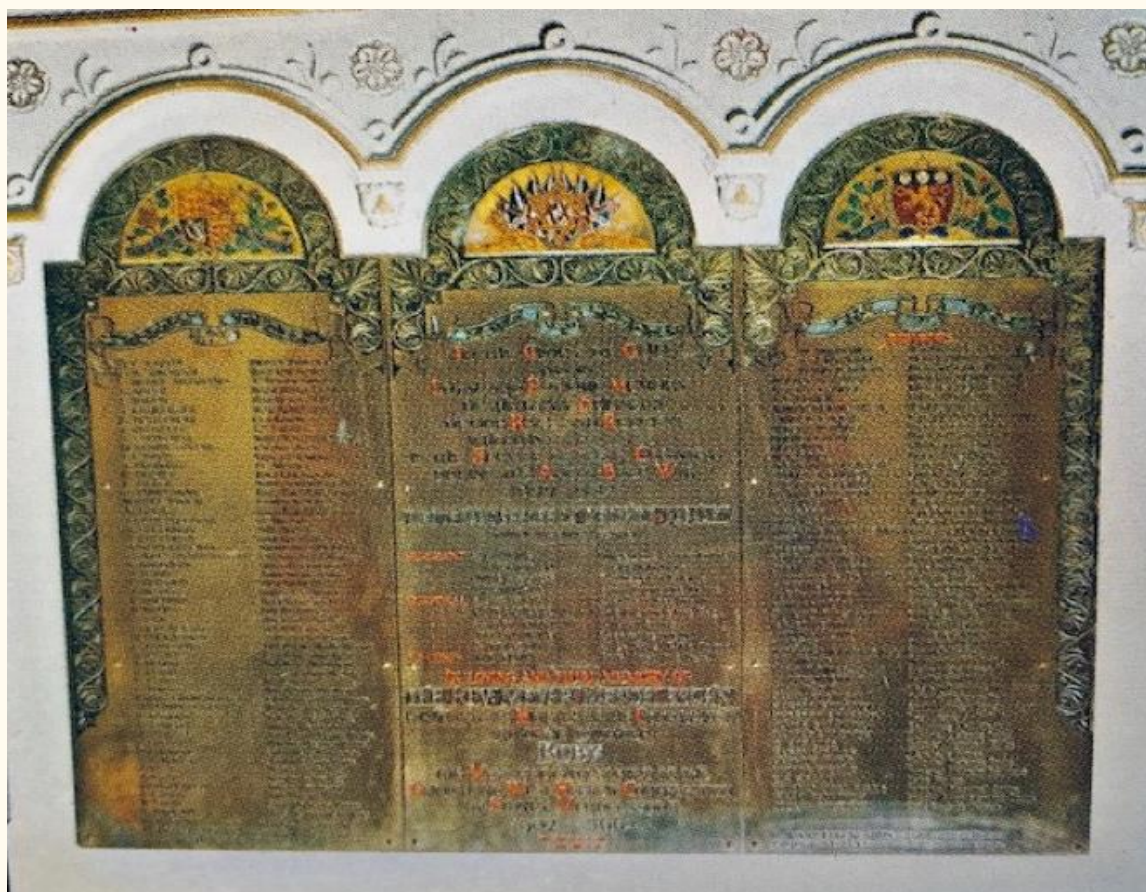
'The octagonal house of worship was completed and consecrated in September 1902. It features prominent front turret-like stairwells, complementing spires, and interlaid zipper-like stonework at the corners. It's a cross between an English castle, a French chateau...and a synagogue. Inside, all eyes are drawn to what is surely one of the most comely Aron Hakodeshes in all the Jewish world. It seems to tower above the eight folds of the ceiling, if that were possible, capped by gorgeous domes which give the holy ark a notably spiritual aura. From a photographic point of view, a synagogue like this one is fun to photograph because there are many nooks and crannies and unexpected angles'.

Rev Harris Isaacs performed the bris of Harry Oppenheimer, and also attended the foundation stone laying of St Cyprians Cathedral in Kimberley. The First Marriage in the 'new' synagogue, was solemnised by Rev Harris Isaacs on 11 January 1903. It was that of Aaron Rauff to Selina Satisfsky. There have been numerous weddings in the Kimberley shul since then. See pictures on the wedding gallery [family weddings](#). Since it opened, this

beautiful synagogue has been in continual use, celebrating every shabbat and Holy Day- until Covid-19 struck! After a gap of 30 years, a wedding took place in September 2019.

Memorial plaque in the foyer of the synagogue

This beautiful brass and enamel memorial 'plaque' has pride of place in the foyer of the synagogue. It's the first thing you see when you enter. It commemorates the memory of 114 members of the Jewish faith who fell serving the British in the Anglo-Boer War.



It was baffling at first to wonder which soldiers this was referring to – were they from Kimberley or South Africa etc even on whose side did they fight. But there has been recent research at the Willesden Cemetery in London, where a similar plaque exists, (and there was also one placed on the outside wall of the Central synagogue in Great Portland Street in London). This research shows that these were made and prominently displayed to show the British public how devoted their British Jewish subjects were to the Crown and Empire laying down their lives to fight with the British army in South Africa.

This particularly beautiful tablet in Kimberley was commissioned and presented by the diamond magnate, Sidney Mendelssohn, son of the Rev Meyer Mendelssohn. The inscription is 'In filial and loving memory of my father Rev M Mendelssohn and also my daughter Ruby, who was drowned when the Drummond Castle sank in 1896.

The Jewish Chronicle interviews Harris Isaacs, on Sabbatical, 1912

Rev Harris Isaacs gave an interview to the London Jewish Chronicle (JC) on 23 August 1912. This a two-page article explains why the community had 'held a leaving party on 17 April 1912', that was written about in the Diamond Fields Advertiser (DFA). I knew that Rev Harris Isaacs had not left the Kimberley community until 1927 so was confused). The reason for the leaving party was that he had taken a four



months' Sabbatical from his pulpit in Kimberley. In the JC article, Rev Harris Isaacs explained much about Jewish life in Kimberley, to Londoners after his absence from England for 22 years. (stained-glass windows photo, by Shawn Benjamin)

Jewish life in Kimberley

Harris Isaacs had lively memories to share of being in Kimberley **during the Boer War of 1899 – 1902**. He was the only Jewish minister in South Africa to suffer the hardships of a protracted siege. He said that out of consideration for the Jewish conscience, kosher meat, prepared in the orthodox manner and under the supervision of orthodox Jews, was supplied to co-religionists while the non-Jewish inhabitants were obliged to eat horse's flesh.

When asked 'Is there much to say of Kimberley as far as Jews are concerned?' his quick reply was 'indeed there is. Kimberley teems with active Jewish life, but there is no such thing as Jewish interests apart from general interests. We Jews are, as it were, part and parcel of the town, and our relations with other citizens I am happy to say, are of an extremely cordial nature. We have but one synagogue, but considering the size of the population, it has a considerable membership. (I wonder why he said that as the Grinne Shul had opened in 1911!) He went on to say that there was no 'Reform Judaism' in Kimberley.

Jewish Education

He explained that 'What is most gratifying is the enormous interest the parents evince in the religious welfare of their children. They will have none but the best qualified instructors for their young. There are not sufficiently large numbers of boys and girls to warrant the establishment of a Jewish schools such as in Manchester and Leeds (or indeed as he had helped to establish in Johannesburg). But Hebrew and Religion Classes are held daily, and attendance is all that can be desired.' Rev Harris Isaacs himself supervised these classes and said that the curriculum embraced a far wider field than was the case in England. By the time the boys and girls reach the age of 14, they have an excellent grounding in a knowledge of the faith of their ancestors. He said 'I have seen some of the children of our classes grow into sturdy adherents of our religion'

When asked 'What standing has a Jew, as a Jew, in Kimberley, Rev Harris Isaacs said, 'No discrimination is made, and race or nationality are not enquired into. The relations between Jew and non-Jew are most cordial. In public life. In fact, he said, some of the most prominent inhabitants of the city are Jews, and they spread lustre on public life. Their fairness and high principles are constantly being recognised. He mentioned that coreligionists are again and again recipients of the highest municipal honours. He said that 'There are not more honoured names perhaps in all South Africa than that of Col Sir David Harris, and William Sagar (who has been Mayor of Kimberley on three separate occasions.) At the present time several Jews serve on the Town Council.' He reported how the community was charitable not only to Jewish souls or institutions in need, but the town as well. He said that assistance in money and in kind was given unobtrusively with great care not to 'pauperise' the recipient. He mentions city councillors FE Lezard, B Cohen, W Sagar and E Oppenheimer.

CHRONICLE.

AUGUST 23, 1912.

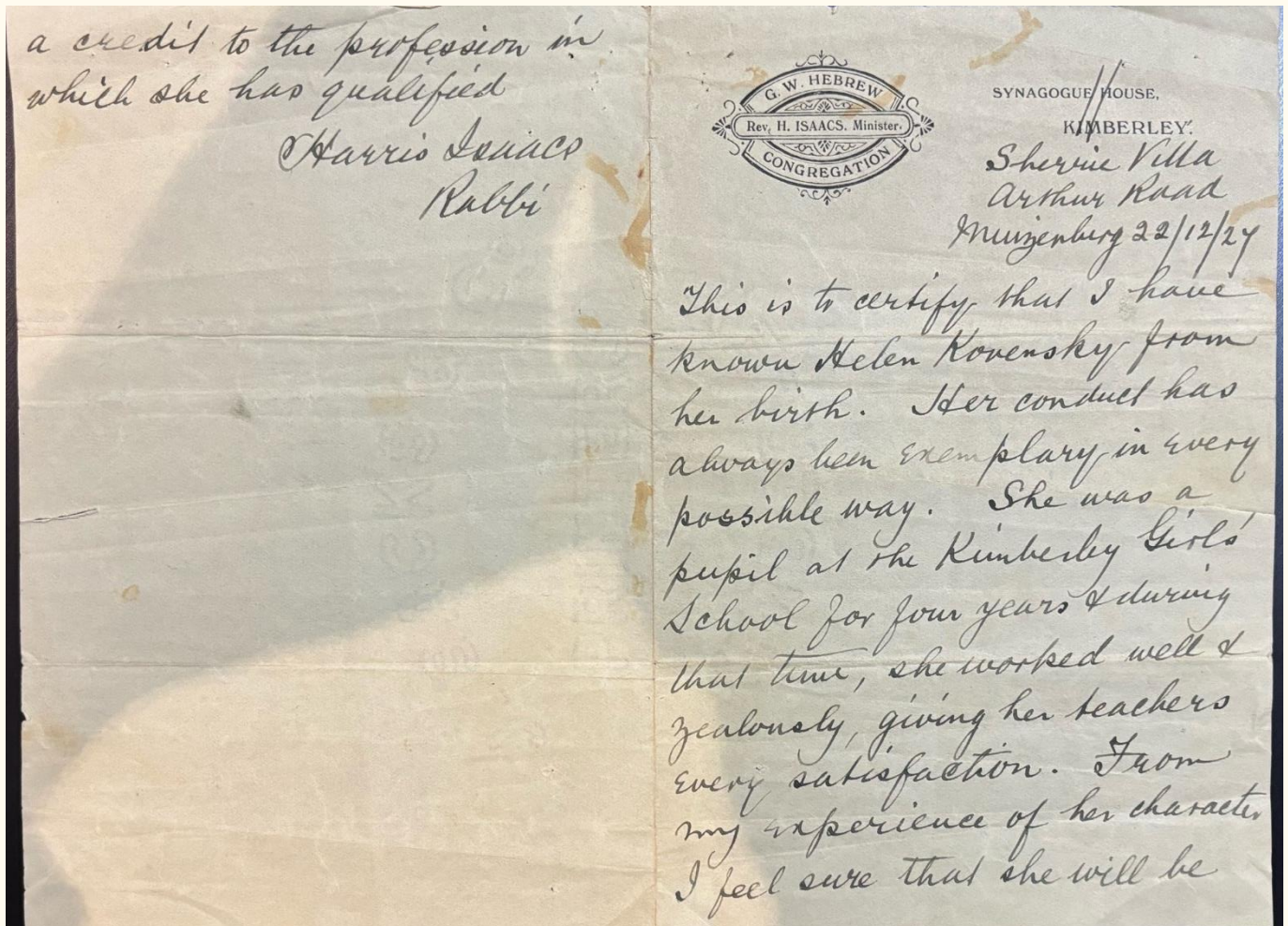
Africa. The community "possesses its own Zionist Hall, which is the absolute property of the community, the ground and building having been purchased outright. It is appropriate that we should hold our religion classes in this hall, and that it should furthermore, next to the synagogue, be the chief centre of communal activity. You will be interested to know that some time ago efforts were made to get our cemetery, which is almost in the centre of the town, removed to the outskirts. But Jewish and public opinion and sentiment prevailed, and our cemetery stands where it was first erected, untouched."

A Historic Synagogue.

Mr. Isaacs has very lively recollections of the Boer War, he having been the only Jewish Minister in South Africa to suffer the hardships of a protracted siege. Referring to the siege at Kimberley he said that out of consideration for the Jewish conscience kosher meat, prepared in the orthodox manner and under the supervision of orthodox Jews, was supplied to coreligionists while the non-Jewish inhabitants were obliged to eat horse's flesh. "Our synagogue," proceeded Mr. Isaacs, "is historical in the best sense of the term. The building operations were begun immediately after the relief of Kimberley, as a thank-offering to God who had spared the inhabitants. Every bit of timber and all other materials used in the erection bear the stamp of the military authorities. On several occasions building operations were obliged to cease owing to the difficulty experienced in getting the military to pass certain materials. Weeks, and sometimes months, elapsed on this account before work could be resumed. Our synagogue contains probably one of the finest brass memorial tablets to be seen in any synagogue, and was erected in memory of coreligionists who laid down their lives for their country in the memorable War. The tablet is a presentation from Mr. Sidney Mendelssohn, that great authority on the pioneers of South Africa, and is a marvellous piece of work."

Mr. Isaacs himself was several times mentioned in Despatches and received a special medal for the services he rendered during the siege. Mr. Isaacs was careful to inform our representative that the industry of Kimberley was greatly restricted, and he thought that, with all its attractions, Kimberley was a hard place for the man without means. In conclusion, Mr. Isaacs repeated the old complaint. "People," he said, "come here to make money, and when they succeed leave Africa and spend it elsewhere. Never a thought for the place where they thrived, and never a single contribution to the charity which in some cases came to their rescue."

Here is a testimonial Rev (now Rabbi) Harris Isaacs wrote, after his retirement, for a young school-teacher Helen Kovensky, who was going to be a schoolteacher in [Taung](#)



When Rev Harris Isaacs passed away in Muizenberg the DFA wrote an obituary on 10 June 1935 under the headlines

**TRIBUTE TO THE MEMORY OF LATE REV. HARRIS ISAACS
HIS SPLENDID WORK FOR CLOSE ON 40 YEARS IN CITY RECALLED
REPRESENTATIVE GATHERING ATTENDS SERVICE IN SYNAGOGUE**

Hard Worker, Conscientious Jew, Loving Husband and Father and Warm-Hearted Friend.

Tribute that was stirring, deep and sincere was paid to the memory of the late Rev Harris Isaacs, minister to the Hebrew Congregation of Kimberley for close on four decades, at a memorial service held at the synagogue yesterday afternoon.

The Rev Maurice Konviser, assisted by Cantor Kamionsky, conducted the service which was attended by a representative gathering including members of churches and various denominations. 'Thou shalt be missed, for thy place will be empty'. Taking this text, Rev

Konviser delivered a striking memorial address which found a responsive chord in the hearts of all present, all of whom had known and revered the late Rev Isaacs, during the many years of his association with Kimberley. Rev Konviser took the opportunity to make some valedictory remarks, as he is shortly to leave Kimberley for a new sphere of work. (Salisbury, Rhodesia).



Further reading:

You can read more descriptions of the beautiful synagogue, and see several galleries of pictures of it here [Kimberley Synagogues](#)

or click the individual photographer [Shawn Benjamin](#) [David Jawno](#) [Marvin Cohen](#) [Alon Berman](#) [Jono David](#)

You can read David Harris’s family story here: [Harris Col Sir David](#)

See David Harris’ story about the diamond syndicate ‘How the Christian (Rhodes) beat the Jews (the Syndicate) in [Newsletter #32 December 2020](#) which is about diamonds and Jews in Kimberley.

You can read more about the Mendelsohns, about the war memorial plaque in the foyer of the synagogue and about what happened to the Drummond castle here: [Mendelsohn, Rev Meyer & his son, Sidney](#)



***The early communities in Johannesburg**
This is the story of what happened to the two warring Anglo-German-Polish congregations in early Johannesburg

On 10 July 1887 – a mere year after the city’s founding - a meeting took place in Mr B Wainstein’s shop where a unanimous decision was passed that “the time is ripe for the present meeting to form itself into the Witwatersrand Goldfields Jewish Association”.

The initial responsibilities of the association included maintaining the Jewish burial grounds as well as holding religious services for the early Jewish pioneers of Johannesburg. On 19 September 1887 the first Rosh Hashanah service was held in the Rand Club to accommodate the over 500 worshipers who attended the services.

Witwatersrand Hebrew Congregation
President Street Synagogue 1890

It was only a few months later that the association decided to change its name to Witwatersrand

Hebrew Congregation, indicating its purpose as a religious organization. In January 1888, the congregation purchased two stands on President Steet. for the purpose of erecting a synagogue. On 7 November 1888 the foundation stone was laid by **Rev. Mark L Harris** (who had been the Minister in Kimberley) thus beginning the construction of the first Johannesburg synagogue.

In March 1890 daily services were instituted in the synagogue which had become known simply as the **President Street Synagogue**.

Johannesburg Hebrew Congregation

Park Street Synagogue 1892

Unfortunately, storm clouds gathered over the infant community and a rift formed over various communal issues. As a result, in December 1891, a number of the original members broke away and formed a new congregation called the Johannesburg Hebrew Congregation (JHC). The Witwatersrand Hebrew Congregation then changed its name to the Witwatersrand Old Hebrew Congregation (WOHC).

President Kruger granted the Johannesburg Hebrew congregation four stands on the corner of Joubert and De Villiers St. on which to build a synagogue. The site was near the original Park Railway Station and the Synagogue came to be known as the **Park Street Synagogue**. It was opened with great pomp and ceremony by President Kruger on 14 September two years later in 1892.

The Park Street Synagogue was in use for about twenty years. In 1912 the building was sold to the South African Railways and used as the military headquarters for the South African Railways and Harbours regiments until 1928 when it was demolished to make way for the new railway station.

Wolmarans Street Synagogue – and Merger at last

It was after the Park Street Synagogue was sold that the Johannesburg Hebrew Congregation began construction of what was to be the largest Jewish religious edifice in South Africa. During the years 1913 to 1914 the Great Synagogue was under construction on a whole city block bounded by Wolmarans, Claim, Quartz and Smit Streets. The new large site, chosen by architect Herman Kallenbach, was near to the area where the Jewish community then lived.

It was designed and built by Swiss architect Theophile Schaerer in 1914 on the border of Doornfontein, a suburb that was predominantly Jewish. The synagogue originally seated over 1 400 people – 880 men, and 550 women. Schaerer used as inspiration for the Great Synagogue the wondrous Byzantine Hagia Sophia mosque in Istanbul. The mosque was originally built as a Christian church in the 6th century, but when the Turks captured the city in 1453 it became a mosque.

The Great Synagogue has the distinction of being the first synagogue in Johannesburg with its Ark facing north, towards Israel. The earlier synagogues faced east, a custom from the first congregants who were immigrants from eastern Europe. Since the building of the Great Synagogue in 1914 all synagogues in the city face north.

[Wolmarans Street Synagogue - Google Maps.png](#)



The Wolmarans Street Synagogue from above (Google Maps)

Siegfried Raphaely laid the foundation stone of the synagogue on 3 September 1913. Sammy Marks had provided all the bricks and at the opening ceremony was honored by presenting Rabbi JL Landau with the keys to the building.

After a year of construction, on 23 August 1914 the brand-new Synagogue of the **Johannesburg Hebrew Congregation** was officially consecrated by Rabbi Dr JL Landau.

Independent congregations

For 24 years – from 1891 until 1915 – the two congregations functioned independently, each with its own distinguished Rabbi and community leaders. In 1898 the Witwatersrand Old Hebrew Congregation appointed Rabbi **Dr JH Hertz** – then only 26 years old – as its Rabbi. He remained its spiritual leader until 1911 when he returned to become the UK Chief Rabbi. In 1903 the Johannesburg Hebrew Congregation invited Rabbi **Dr J L Landau** to become its Rabbi. Landau remained the head of the congregation until his death in 1943.

For at least ten years there had been unfruitful negotiations between the **WOHC**. and the **JHC**. regarding the amalgamation of the two congregations. Rabbi Hertz's departure in 1911 and the bad state of the President St. Synagogue presented an opportunity for a rapprochement between the two congregations. Finally, after long negotiations an agreement was reached and on the

30th of May 1915 the **United Hebrew Congregation** was formed with the Wolmarans Street Synagogue becoming the congregation's principal place of worship.

Merger at last – The United Hebrew Congregation at the Great Synagogue on Wolmarans Street

From 1914, to the 1990s, The Great Synagogue on Wolmarans Street was loved and esteemed by the Jews of Johannesburg and stood as a symbol of the union of the two early Anglo-German Jewish congregations. During the ensuing years it has been regarded as the mother synagogue of Johannesburg and all major events of the Jewish community took place within its great hall. Since its inception it had been the seat of the country's Chief Rabbi's including Rabbi J.L. Landau, Rabbi L.I. Rabinowitz, Rabbi B.M. Casper and Rabbi C.K. Harris.

The Great Synagogue migrates to Houghton

However, when the community moved north and the central business district of Johannesburg became a no-go area for families and aging Jews – a radical decision was made. The synagogue itself joined its congregation's northward migration!



In 1994, a new edifice, built on the model of the Great Synagogue, now called the **Great Park Synagogue** was built on the corner of Fourth Street and Glenhove Road, Oaklands (Houghton Estate). It was consecrated in 2000, after 80 years in Wolmarans Street as the 'mother synagogue' of South Africa. The original architecture was inspired by the [Hagia Sophia](#) church in Istanbul.

The seats, chandeliers, carved wooden noticeboards, and the bimah (reading desk) and the ark of the earlier shul were removed and now serve the community in their new shul. It is a smaller-scale replica of the original, a handsome building with its tall dome. In 2000 the Great Park Synagogue was opened in Oaklands, a replacement of the Great Synagogue. The Magen David on the rooftop when with them.

It has new stained-glass windows designed by artist Judith Mason whose work can also be seen at the Constitutional Court.

Interestingly enough, in 2020 The Great Synagogue in Hillbrow lives again after being closed and shuttered for nine years. It's used now as a Rhema church, and every Sunday is filled with the inspired singing and hand clapping of 500 congregants of Pastor Thivha Lidzhade.

Lidzhade, head of the Bethesda Bible Church, says his challenge is to "clean Hillbrow and turn it to Jesus". He started the church in 1997 in Germiston with 12 people, and today 500 people,

mostly from surrounding Hillbrow, Doornfontein and Berea, and as far as Soweto, Pretoria and Tembisa, come every Sunday and offer their praises to God.

To read more about synagogues in early Johannesburg – go to the heritage portal

<http://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/great-synagogue-hillbrow>