

Kimberley Ex-Pats Newsletter #36 – The Zoom Room & The future of the Kimberley Synagogue

Compiled by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London, 16 February 2021

The Zoom Room

Before we talk about the Kimberley virtual reunion we already had, here is a reminder that I look forward to seeing anyone with memories of Kimberley to hear and share this coming Sunday 21 February at 6.00pm UK time. Here is the same login link.

We will ask you to introduce yourself and your family and tell us what you remember of your last visit to Kimberley or any special memories.

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87485961778?pwd=ZTBjODNiSW1sUWV6UkVOWmtGQ1RPdz09>
this long link should take you straight in – but in case you need them,
Meeting ID: 874 8596 1778 Passcode: 387275

On Sunday 14 February, 2021, 22 people had a chance to renew memories, and to talk to each other 'face to face' about their time in Kimberley. There was **Hirsh Jocum** from Pretoria; **David Diamond**, **Natalie Sussman** and her daughter **Laura** and **Daphne Toubé** and **Marion Schild** (Lewis now) from Cape Town. The **Kleins**, **Jenny**, **Malvin** and **Louis**, still raw from the loss of youngest brother Bentley, joined from Melbourne as did **Marvin Cohen** (who was a boarder at KHS), **Stanley Eberlin** was there from Johannesburg, **Sylvia Apter** from Israel, **Beverley Brenner** and our wonderful webmaster, **Eli Rabinowitz** from Perth Australia. **Joy and Linda Capon** joined and **Glenn Kirshner**, who is related to **Harry Nogid**. **Cherille Brown** was there from Boston and others. **Leon Chonin** joined from Toronto. If there is somebody I may have missed out – I'm so sorry. **Trevor Toubé** and I joined from London.

We were delighted to have **David and Shirley Allen** with us in the Zoom Room, as the connection with Kimberley and those that are still there looking after the sacred spaces is very important to the EX-Pats and to our whole enterprise of memorialising the families and Jewish institutions and history of Kimberley.

We recorded the Zoom session and I have made an attempt to upload it to the Kimberley shul Facebook page as invited to do by David Allen. In case it has not worked (and I welcome any technical help in uploading this from the cloud to here) here is the link to see the session in the cloud:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/yR70WDCWzNKL6RjSmr0ewNDfBfFoRhmuBxf5Q8njgaHL1nwckq2l4AWXnbAdHr5C.7zHvLKFSv-V3BWgr> Passcode: l+98X78Z

There were some very nice comments afterwards:

Hi Geraldine

I want to thank you most sincerely for the effort that you put into organising the meeting this morning. Also, big thank you to you and Eli for what you do for the website. These things are taken for granted by most of us but what is not realised is that if it were not for people like you and Eli there would be no written history of our Kimberley Jewish Community.

All the best

Hirsch (Jocum) Pretoria

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Dear Geraldine,

Firstly I must commend you for the zoom chat. I saw little squares above your smiling face when you welcomed me inside your AI doorway. Then I read names. And was overjoyed to find a cousin. I recognised Hirsh immediately! So much to see. How everyone has weathered. Some better than others. The same expressions of joy. Expressions, of their sadness going towards depression, was hard to watch with a smile. Thank you for bringing us together to see and hear everyone's accent and age-old inflections of voice. Timbre has changed, but the rhythm hasn't. It was joyful and illuminating, to fact imparting and comments....

**Sylvia (Apter) Israel**

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Geraldine.

That was wonderful! It was lovely to see people whom I vaguely remember but certainly haven't met for decades. Hearing what they had to say evoked many memories! You really are someone who MAKES THINGS HAPPEN!! I look forward to next week's 'meeting'

Trevor (Toube) London

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Hi Geraldine

So special. Thank you

**Natalie (Sussman) Cape Town**

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Good Morning Geraldine,

I would like to thank you and your team for yesterday's zoom meeting. It was very nice to once again see and listen to many of our friends that we haven't seen for a long time. It was wonderful to see old friends such as Stanley Eberlin who I haven't seen for many years, Leon Chonin , Cheryl (Brown), Sylvia Apter, Trevor Toube who I last saw in Cape Town when he came to see his sister, Daphne Gillis and Marion Lewis who I haven't seen for a year because of Covid. I haven't seen you for a long time.

I recalled my wonderful youth in Kimberley. My school years, going to Shul Friday nights and Saturday mornings and all the Yomtavim, walking to shul. I recalled how we walked freely in the daytime and also at night. We walked home on Saturday nights from parties, socials and just visiting with friends. Once again a big thank you. Kind Regards,

David Diamond Cape Town

The future of the Kimberley shul

Inevitably, the question arose, as to what would happen to the Kimberley Synagogue – looking to the future in say 15 or 20 years' time, when there may be no viable community or responsible persons to care for it. We wanted to know what the plan was, or what conversations were taking place. David Allen was not aware of any – but agreed that it was time that there should be.

First of all, we must emphasise that the group gathered were in great admiration and appreciation for the sterling work that David Allen, Shirley and particularly Barney and their dwindling team undertake. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the responsibility, both physical and financial, taken on and discharged with such dignity and efficiency to care for the community and its buildings and cemeteries is awesome. And for this we give much thanks.

However, it seems clear that Ex-Pats who have settled in all parts of the world still have Kimberley very much at their hearts. They remember their Friday night and Saturday services their bar and bar mitzvahs going the cheder and community events and people. Indeed, a small group of Ex-Pats are keen to reach out to those in Kimberley and help to look to the future.

We want you, Barney and David to know that you are not alone. There are Kimberley ex-pats around the world who have experience in such matters and who have connections that may be of great help to you and are willing to join a small group that would meet with you by zoom to open the discussing and seek the best way how you might go forward.

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Here are some snippets of what they said – and some basic questions I think we should all address before we sit down together (virtually) to talk about this.

**Eli Rabinowitz, Perth Australia** webmaster of the Kimberley website, who is a member of the Board of Jewish Genealogy who creates many websites for lost communities in Europe and dwindling communities in South Africa says

Hi Geraldine and Leon

This is part of the larger issue that current Jewish residents of South Africa face – far worse than for us, as ex-pats!

I obviously speak as an outsider, as far as the Kimberley is concerned. As a person who has a high level of emotion and passion, I need to take a more passive role, and perhaps focus with any contacts I can suggest and engage.

I was most impressed with the first meeting earlier this week, and I agree that it should be a topic at the next meeting. Calmness is a good strategy, but we also need passion and commitment!

Perhaps our ongoing discussions with the SA Jewish Museum and the Kaplan Centre will help, especially if we can bring in expats who have financial clout.

Happy to input further! Cheers, Eli

**Daphne Toubé Cape Town**

Hi Geraldine

What a brilliant idea to have a Zoom meeting. Although some of the stories are what we have heard through your regular bulletins, it was great seeing the faces.

Perhaps someone somewhere will realise how important it is to preserve the Kimberley Shul...there must be some wealthy families who feel the need, although it is a bit unfortunate to place the burden on the very few remaining members there who are doing a sterling job of keeping the doors open.

I have just watched a repeat episode of a programme called "Simcha" which is broadcast on TV every Sunday. This one was about Barney Horwitz's daughter's wedding a year or so ago for which they had a whole weekend of events. It really made me realise what a beautiful old building the Kimberley Shul is.

Keep up the good work...much appreciated. Keep well and safe and warm.



Love , Daphne.

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Leon Chonin says

Thanks for hosting this Kimberley get together. It was really thrilling to see the former members of our community and hear their individual stories. More importantly it was also rewarding to hear from David Allen on the future plans of the community which at this stage would appear to be undecided and unplanned.

As I explained it is my own personal opinion that as expats we need to help in the development of a plan whereby this beautiful shul is preserved for the Jewish community as a whole. ... It would be a betrayal of our heritage if we allowed this majestic shul to slowly disintegrate into dust.

My concern is the Jewish Board has abandoned the smaller communities focusing their attention on the living and not the departed. Financial resources in South Africa are very scarce and the government agencies are no longer interested in the former privileged class. It is going to need an international effort to try and find the financial support to retain this symbol of South African Judaism. South African Jewish philanthropist are fading as the local population of Jews declines in number. We have an uphill struggle to find the means and the strategy that will preserve our shul for future generations.

Eli has the knowledge and experience from Europe on how to tackle this project but we need the few members left in Kimberley to recognize the urgency of this dilemma and join us in formulating an action plan.

I took forward to participating in this project in whatever role I can play to preserve our heritage. Keep well,

Leon

Geraldine's view

My own view is that, because we are far away, does not mean we have turned our back on Kimberley. Indeed, some of the Ex-pats would be happy to join hands with those in charge in Kimberley to deliberate together on the best outcomes for the future. David Allen agreed that thoughts should be turned to this issue and that he would speak to Barney.

We have to tread very carefully and sensitively regarding the future of the Kimberley shul. We don't want to barge in. Those looking after it at present are naturally very protective of their valiant efforts (with hardly any help whatsoever from Ex-Pats) We, the Ex-Pats recognise and appreciate the great responsibility that they carry out with dignity and courage.

Nevertheless, it was agreed by David Allen that it would be timely to start thinking about the possibilities for the future when nobody is left in situ so that they can hopefully prepare for the best possible outcome. There may be some amongst us Ex-pats that have had experience in this kind of matter and can offer constructive suggestions and contacts.

We all know that civilisations, empires, cities and towns, organisations and buildings have their heyday and then when things move on and they are no longer needed, they become something else, churches and shuls become mosques and museums, or apartments, or they decay or are demolished. When the time comes that no Jewish presence is left in Kimberley capable of taking charge of the buildings and cemeteries what will become of them?

Let's just consider the shul at the moment. Looking at the future governance of the city of Kimberley, the government of the country and the future shrinking of resources in the Jewish community, here are some of the questions we should start asking.

- a. Who thinks the shul should be preserved?
- b. Who or what will it be preserved for?
- c. What are the possible future uses?
- d. Who are the possible future buyers, or guardians?
- e. Who and where are the people to have conversations with?
- f. What are the financial implications?

Perhaps you would like to give me your thoughts in answering those questions and maybe adding more questions.

I believe it would be good to gather a small group of people from the Ex-Pats Kimberley Jewish community willing to help – who can reach out meet on Zoom with the 'Awesome' Kimberley stalwarts to start the conversation. We hope that Barney and David Allen, and those there in Kimberley will welcome this opportunity.

But as I say we can't just barge in – we have gently hold out our hand to be of help.

Leon Chonin Responded

Hi Geraldine,

Thanks for a very compelling dissection of the dilemma the expats and the resident Jewish community face in finding a solution to the future of the Kimberley shul. You seemed to have covered the ground very clinically and unemotionally.

I am afraid that I feel very emotionally attached to this symbol of Kimberley Judaism because my family saw it as their spiritual home. My grandfather prayed in this shul every day of his life giving thanks to Hashem for saving his family and helping him find a home in South Africa where he and his family could find physical, economic and religious freedom.

Thus, for me I do not see it as a building or a place of worship but as the soul of those Jews from Europe who arrived in Kimberley with nothing but were able to establish themselves once again in a new home. They were seeking refuge and Kimberley offered them that hope and in doing so committed themselves to this shul to give thanks to Hashem for saving them from hell on earth.

I understand that in time it will no longer be used as a shul but perhaps it may continue to be a place of worship, perhaps an interfaith centre, a human rights museum, a place of peace like the Bahai Temple in Haifa. As I have said we owe it to those who sacrificed so much to re-establish themselves in a strange land. If we allow this symbol of Jewish life to be imploded there will be no evidence, no footprint, that Jews inhabited this land.

The only physical structure will be the cemetery if the occupants of Kimberley allow those tombstones to remain in one piece. Perhaps I am the only one that feels so emotionally charged but someone needs to explain the importance of preserving our Jewish heritage. The Grinna shul that was my grandfather's anchor to his homeland in Warsaw, Poland has been demolished therefore I cannot without a struggle allow the same thing to happen to the last symbol of Judaism in Kimberley.

I have already put out feelers to a woman who was a very dear friend during my youth and who was an Anglican priest to seek her input on possible options we as a community may consider.

I understand that the present residents who constitute the Jewish community may not wish to engage in a conversation now because it means they need to focus on something that while inevitable could be delayed to a future date or delegated to those who will have to inherit the problem. It is therefore an emotionally charged subject for everyone.

You have posed several questions, but the problem remains who has a right to participate in deciding the answers to those issues. Should all the expats have a right to a vote or is it only the prerogative of the existing membership who have had the financial responsibility of maintaining and operating the shul for several years when most expats left for greener pastures. While I have in the past tried to assist in a small way, I have not shared the financial burden, but I feel I have a right to vote on the future of our shul.

I think I have made my views noticeably clear that I am not in favour of disposing the shul without knowing it will be preserved in some form. I think I am perhaps in the minority as I have just exchanged emails with Milton who no longer seems to have an emotional attachment to the shul and

would not be distressed to allow the shul to be deconsecrated which will inevitably lead to its demolition.

Perhaps it is my religious upbringing that has distorted my view as I feel very few expats if any will share my emotional attachment to this building. Although one can never equate the Kimberley dilemma to the Nazi concentration camps only for the purpose of illustrating my point that the preservation of these horrific structures serves as a place where Jews can gather to remember those who were so brutally slaughtered because they were Jews. If we do not preserve this shul there will be no symbol where future generations could gather to remember the pioneers of Judaism in Kimberley.

I recognize that we have a very rough ride ahead to find a solution that will in both the short and long term satisfy the needs of the existing community and the need to preserve our heritage for future generations. I do not pretend to have the answers but perhaps with a vigorous debate between the existing community and the ex pats a solution may be found that will satisfy the objectives of all those who are attached to our Kimberley shul.

Let's see if during the next Zoom meeting we have more participation from the Kimberley community and see if the participants from North America have any other ideas.

Keep well, Leon

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This is just the beginning.....

I hope this will lead to constructive discussion between residents and ex-pats, leading to the best outcome possible for the precious building of the Memorial Road Synagogue.

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