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Concession stores, **Basotho blankets** was there the Jewish connection?

We often hear of the Jewish diamond diggers, buyers and speculators in the early days of Kimberley. There were hoteliers and traders and professionals too. But there was also a different path in the early 20th century for new Jewish immigrants. This was the **concession store**. One of the key items sold in these stores were the colourful blankets so beloved of the African workers. Was there a Jewish connection I wondered between concession stores, Jews and these blankets?

There was no resident population to work underground as miners, and so Black miners were recruited from the neighbouring territories to work on contract for a fixed period usually six or nine months at a time. Kimberley developed a system for their black underground mine workers, of housing and feeding and 'protecting' them (particularly from alcohol sellers). This was the 'Compound' system copied by the gold mines along the Witwatersrand and in the Orange Free State.

The Concession Store

The miners were provided with accommodation, ablution blocks, eating places and entertainment spaces on the mine property. They also had shops where they could buy provisions, necessities and luxuries.

Concessions were sold by the mine owners to run these shops which were also situated on the mine property. Many Jewish immigrants eagerly bought these concessions and ran the stores and eateries on the various mines around the country.

This picture taken in 1966, shows concession store keepers, at the Rose Deep Goldmine, Germiston. (The picture was a gift by photographer David Goldblatt to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.)



The daughter of one concession store owner, Cecilia Muller, explained more about how it worked and what it entailed. She wrote: The concession store trading stands were bought at public auction, and the shops were then erected. The store had to be 160 ft x 100 ft and situated not less than 600 ft from the entrance to the Native Compound. The basic requirements for the purchasers were that they had to be white persons over 21 years of age, and had to have a clean personal record, certified by a police clearance. There is a provision in the *Trading on Mining Ground Regulation Act No. 13 of 1910* which dealt with the sale of trading stands. Shops could be bought and sold in the normal way.

Many Jewish immigrants either bought or worked in the concession stores owned by relatives or *landsleit* (people from the same locality). They were taken on a 3-months' trial basis at a low wage – and if satisfactory, received a small increase per month. They worked from 7 or 8 in the morning till 6 at night, and on Friday, pay day, till much later.

The Mining Commissioner had the right to grant extra sites if he thought fit. After trading had begun, rental was on the basis of taxation, and a return had to be submitted every three months to the Mining Commissioner who sent a copy to the Receiver who then assessed the tax payable, which was based on 5% of the gross turnover. (Information obtained by Cecilia Muller, from the Acting Mining Commissioner, Mr Steyn, and from one of the few remaining original Concession Store owners in 2001).

Cecilia said: 'The "green" youngsters who came over between the ages of 15 and 19, learned to speak a Native language within three months – they had to! Their mother tongue was Yiddish and/or Russian. They also learned to speak very good English and a smattering of Afrikaans!

'Concession stores were the shopping centres from before the First World War for the mining communities along the East and West Rand. It was referred to – not unkindly – as a 'Jewstore' by the mining families. They consisted of several departments under one roof. There was the butchery and the 'Eating House', the Native miners could try boiled tripe, whole sheep's head and cooked flank – the oily, flat odour pervaded the store at cooking times, when the meat was prepared in huge cauldrons by the black chef wearing an old sack for an apron! The customers brought their own tin or enamel plates and paid a small sum per portion. They sat at long, rough tables with benches alongside. They were noisy, laughing and at ease with their blankets hanging loosely over a shoulder, or discarded entirely from the heat.

'The general store, smelling of soap, sacking, damp straw and sweat, served the Native mineworkers who used to come in their dozens, **wearing their colourful blankets**. Trousers and shirts were only for returning to their homes. They earned an amount per shift and kept their money in a leather belt worn next to their body. The money was put into a slit pocket in the belt, the only bank for their precious golden sovereigns.

'They bought snuff, tobacco, 'tickey sugar', soap – Blue soap and Sunlight, Erasmic and Vinolia, (where has Erasmic soap gone to with its quaint coloured pictures of a family on the wrapping?) and candles, and at home-going time, they bought colourful blankets and gaudy tin trunks which were manufactured locally from paraffin tins and bound by iron strapping. Most goods for the stores were bought from the 'Market Street Merchants' – a breed that has almost disappeared together with the concession stores.

'At "iKlismis" time, how I remember my father (a concession store owner) nick-named *Mafuta Baas*

(Fat boss) serving the 'Natives' (not 'Africans' or 'Bantu' in those days) who came to buy a sheep. They paid for it with one golden sovereign and carried it away alive, bleating vigorously, draped round its new owner's shoulders, to be shared in a feast of food and drink with his friends – the owner richer by one sheepskin and several good meals! The concession proprietor richer by several hundred golden sovereigns! - where are those sovereigns now?'

The Jewish connection to the Basotho Blanket!?

We know that a significant item sold at the native concession stores, run predominantly by Jews, were the colourful blankets so beloved of the Basotho and other African tribes. (You can see them hanging up on the wall of the interior of the concession store in the picture by David Goldblatt.) A mountainous country, Basutoland could be very cold in winter. Wearing a 'blanket' is said to be very ancient in Lesotho culture. They were traditionally made only from animal skins and are a part of Sotho life from birth to death. A newborn receives their first blanket (a skin kaross) before they are even born, for many events throughout their lives, and eventually will be buried in one.



The transition from animal skins as a traditional kaross, to the textile blankets we see today is attributed to [King Moshoeshoe I](#). The king was apparently gifted a textile blanket by a British man known only as 'Mr Howell' that he began wearing on his shoulders in the late 19th century - and his people quickly wanted to follow suit. But where did the blankets come from? Who designed and supplied them. And what could be the Jewish connection?

The Gross Family Connection

This story below, was sent to me by Beulah Gross in Australia a few years ago. It is a story of the Gross family who came to Kimberley before the 20th Century. Richard Gross remembers his father saying that his grandfather Frank Gross was with Cecil Rhodes in Kimberley during the Siege (14 October 1899 -15 February 1900).

Frank Gross, instead of becoming a diamond miner or buyer like his brothers, opened a concession store, to service the mining workers. It was known as a 'native shop'.

Beulah wrote: 'His stock consisted of whatever the 'native' required for living in Kimberley and back home their native areas. This included hand-operated Singer sewing machines, thread, cheap fabric, tobacco, pots and pans, blankets and so on. Large trunks were also much in demand because the 'natives' filled them with merchandise and sent or took them home to their families who lived far away. The miners came from as far afield as Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe); East Africa (now comprising Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda); Tanganyika (now Tanzania); Basutoland (now

Lesotho); Bechuanaland (now Botswana) and elsewhere to earn money working in the diamond mines.'

Beulah told us that 'Frank traded extensively in Basutoland. He made friends with the Basotho Paramount Chief in the early 1900s. In 1905 he was invited to attend the coronation of King Moshesh's grandson, Letsie II, Lerotholi, paramount chief of the Basotho nation. Frank (on the right) is the shortest man in this picture.'

Beulah's story mentions the blankets

She says **Frank custom-designed blankets** and then, using family textile connections, had them made to order at the **Waverley Woollen Mills** [which Beulah was made to understand was in Leeds UK where they had previously stayed before they came to South Africa] and sent to his store in Kimberley. He became the chief supplier of these blankets, in his 'Native Shops' in Kimberley and later also in Bloemfontein and other places around the country.



'Frank Gross learned to speak the native languages, Sesotho (pronounced 'seh-soo-too) and perhaps even Zulu, and sold the blankets to the powerful tribal chiefs. Apparently, some of Frank's designs may still be used. Today, in the 21st century, these blankets are desirable fashion items and very expensive.'

In another family story - the Harrises of Kimberley – I found an answer

I discovered in a separate family saga that Woolf and Solomon Harris acquired an interest in the **Waverley Wool Manufacturing Company in Cape Town**, and Woolf Harris and his brother-in-law Jack Gesundheit moved out to the premises on the Ceres Road. Non-Jews had pioneered the textile industry in South Africa, but this immigrant Jewish family was to prove it could be profitable. In 1912 they erected **a modern addition to the very small blanket factory**. The set up a new company in 1912, which they called South African Woollen Mills (SAWM). The property was transferred to the Harrises in 1913, and Woolf Harris then returned to Cape Town, where he attended to the building of a new factory in Beach Road, Woodstock (a suburb close to the centre of Cape Town on Table Bay).

In 1914 the woollen mills began operating in Cape Town and, when war broke out in August of that year, the Harrises obtained good contracts for the supply of blankets to the army receiving large orders from the South African army for woollen blankets and material for overcoats at the beginning of World War 1.) But the reason for their success was not simply a good contract to start with – the Harrises knew their trade."

'A large part of the SAWM business was making colorful blankets, often with bright African-type designs, for the Black (African) trade. Black men and women used to (and some still do) wear blankets as their main clothing. This especially applied to the Xosa people in the Transkei and Ciskei areas of the Cape Province and the Basuto. The blankets were called Waverley blankets and most members of the Harris family, even David and Ruth Erlanger in Switzerland, still have them in the 1990s, as they were of a very good quality.'

Connecting the dots

Putting two and two together there seems a strong relationship here between these two families and the popularity and availability of the Basotho blankets. In working on the Roodepoort CHOL website with Geoff Boner in Israel, I came across the Josman family who had ran concession stores on the Durban Roodepoort Deep mine for 60 years. And learning about the products they sold, and seeing the blankets hanging on the walls in the picture, my interest in the blankets was piqued and I thought again about these two Kimberley stories. I sent my thoughts to Beulah Gross in Australia.

Beulah replied: Thanks for the email earlier today. I've read the attachment and was fascinated. The picture of a 'native' shop was wonderful. The information re the Basuto blankets and Richard's grandfather was a word-of-mouth recollection and it's more than likely that they came from Cape Town. The Gross family had settled in Leeds when they emigrated to the UK. I've just been on ChatGPT and discovered that the Leeds mill did not have any connection to Basuto blankets so the recollection about any connection to the Waverley mill there was definitely incorrect.

There is a family connection to the Harris family but I'm not too sure of the how. Perhaps later this week I'll tackle this.

So, by putting together information sent to me over the years from the Gross family and the Harris family, which are on the Kimberley website, it seems indeed that Kimberley's entrepreneurial Jewish immigrants (and the Jewish participation in owning concession stores on so many of the mines) may well have played a big part in creating, manufacturing, popularising, and making available throughout the concession stores, the iconic colourful Basotho Blankets!

Concession stores, Basotho blankets and the Jewish connection

Story compiled by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London, September 2024
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Further reading:

Read the Gross family story here [Gross family Kimberley](#) (Where they first thought the Waverley blankets were made in Leeds) There is also a fuller history of the Basotho blanket here. also read the Harris South African Wollen Mills Family story here: [Harris-family-history](#)

You can read the full article by Cecilia Muller on Concession stores here in the Southern Africa Jewish Genealogy SA-SIG https://www.jewishqen.org/safrica/concession_stores.htm
