

Kroll family of Oudtshoorn

My Great Grandparents were Ya'akov (Jacob) Gershon Kroll ben Shneur Zalman and Nachama Kroll bat Asher Leib Kissen. They settled in Oudtshoorn with their family soon after migrating to South Africa in 1897. Jacob was from Krugloye in Belarus. Jacob and Nachama lived in Panevezys, Lithuania, before migration and their younger children were born there.



Jacob and Nachama portrait. Artwork by their granddaughter, Rhoda Hodes

Pogroms and persecution of Jews was an ever-present danger for Jewish citizens of Lithuania in the late 19th Century. I wonder what experiences of persecution, or fear of such, motivated Jacob and Nachama to make the difficult migration to South Africa with infant, Mendel (Max), and seven other children, ranging in age from 3 to about 17 years old. Sadly, neither Pesa, who had passed away 2 years previously, aged 3, nor Shmuel (born 1887), who died in infancy, were to join them. The lack of South African records of their first born, Leiser (aged about 19 in 1897), give the impression that he didn't join them either.

The children who migrated with Jacob and Nachama were Solomon, Freda, Nachum, Samuel / Shmuel (named after the baby who died), Barney (my grandfather), David, Moses and baby Max.

On arriving in Oudtshoorn, the Kroll family must have been struck by the contrast between the dry, dusty, hot Karoo environment of Oudtshoorn and the verdant, cool climes of Panevezys, on the banks of the Nevezis River.

Another difference would have been the challenges that Jacob's observant Jewish practice presented in securing steady employment, because it meant he couldn't work on Saturday and had community responsibilities to teach Hebrew. Jacob's death certificate states his occupation as "speculator" and

the SA Jewish Rootsbank record of naturalisation has his occupation as “feather buyer”. My mother’s cousin, Frances, records that he worked sometimes as an accountant for ostrich farmers.

In Oudtshoorn, Jacob would have been isolated from likeminded Panevezys Torah scholars who established the highly regarded and famous [Panevezys Yeshiva](#), which is now located in Bnei Brak. And few in Oudtshoorn would have understood the respect afforded to him for the knowledge, learning and devout practice that earned him status as a Torah scholar.

Frances recorded that Nachama ran a small convenience store in Oudtshoorn to help make a living and her sons, David and Moses, helped her. She was also active in managing the St Johns Rd Shule in Oudtshoorn.

Jacob passed away on 15 June 1933 at age 77, in Oudtshoorn and is buried there.

After Jacob died, Nachama lived with her son, Moses, in Malmsbury. She passed away on 17 November 1937 in Malmsbury, aged about 78, on the same day that her son, Samuel (Shmuel), died.

Max, Solomon and Freda remained in Oudtshoorn and raised their families there.

Freda married Nathan Boerbaitz, also of Oudtshoorn, and she died at only 31 years old in Oudtshoorn. Their children were Pauline (Polly), who married Charles Pasvolsky, and Barney Boerbaitz who married Annie Antonis.



Boerbaitz wedding in Oudtshoorn, about 1910.

Max married Rebecca (Becky) Kerbel also of Oudtshoorn, in 1931. They were both active in the Oudtshoorn Jewish community. My cousin remembers Max as “the most beautiful gentleman always with a pipe in his mouth”. He was a top bowler, and worked with Becky’s family in the Oudtshoorn business of Odn Footwear.

Max and Becky had two daughters – Rhoda and Joan. Rhoda was the oldest. She married Aubrey Hodes, a journalist. Their daughter, Tamar, recently published “[The water and the wine](#)” which is a fictionalised account of Rhoda and Aubrey’s bohemian 1960s lifestyle on the Island of Hydra, Greece. Rhoda settled in London after divorcing Aubrey and lived a more conventional life in North London, whilst still achieving acclaim as an artist. She painted a portrait of Jacob and Nachama, included with this article.

Joan was the younger daughter, married to Lieb Friedman. They initially lived outside of Oudtshoorn and then moved back there. They had two children - Bryna & Roy. After Lieb died Joan moved to Cape Town and sadly developed dementia and passed away recently.

Solomon married Sonia Ackerman and settled in Oudtshoorn. He died in 1919 (presumably during the flu pandemic) and later Sonia married Joseph Gorshel of Johannesburg. Solomon and Sonia’s children were Alec, Alexander and Dora. They took their new step father’s surname, Gorshel, when Sonia re-married. Alec Gorshel was well known as prominent in Johannesburg cultural life, serving as Johannesburg Mayor 1959-60. His great friend Herman Wald sculptured a life size bust of Alec, which can be viewed on the “[Life and art of Herman Wald](#)” website.

Max, Solomon and Freda are all buried in Oudtshoorn.

David settled in Bloemfontein, Moses in Malmesbury, Barney (my grandfather) in Kimberley, Samuel in Johannesburg.



Barney Kroll with his wife Joey

Despite what would have been a difficult start to life in South Africa, Jacob and Nachama’s offspring achieved a good education, established careers or businesses and raised families. Moses was the only one to uphold Jewish Orthodox practice.

Most importantly, the Kroll's migration to South Africa meant that they avoided the pogroms of the early 20th Century and the Holocaust – but not entirely. Nachum had returned to Europe before WWII and I found a Yad Vashem testimony that he perished in the Holocaust with his last place of residence being Warsaw, Poland. I haven't been able to find any records of what became of Leiser.

As with so many Jewish families from South Africa, their descendants are spread around the world today.

Written by Barbara Swartz, daughter of Estella Clingman (nee Kroll). Barney and Joey Kroll were my grandparents.