

The Karoo: Drought or Deluge by Natie Finkelstein



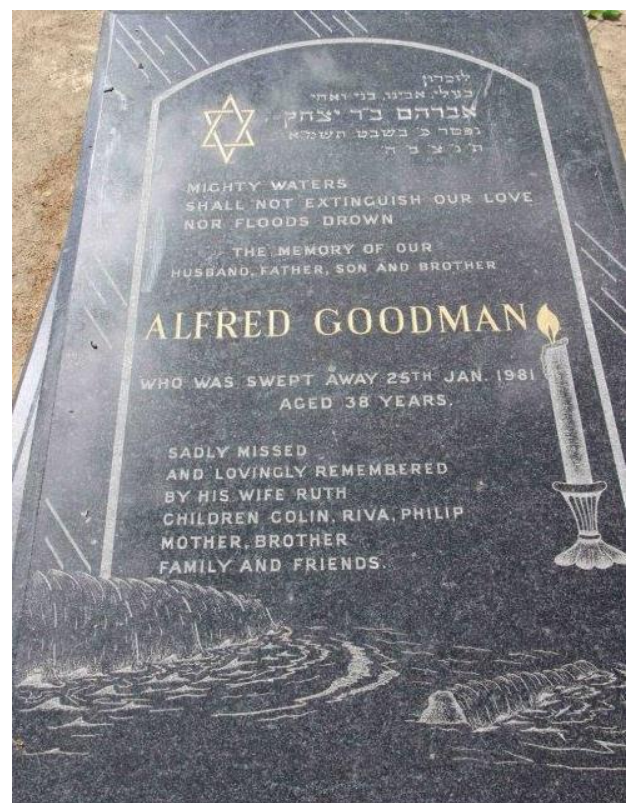
Laingsburg flood: 25 January 1981

Droughts are a feature of the Karoo. At the opposite extreme, sudden downpours of heavy rain or cloudbursts, often end in devastating floods. In January 1981 such a deluge and resultant flood virtually wiped out two-thirds of Laingsburg, a Karoo town some 200 km south of Beaufort West. In that disaster (pictured above) 185 houses and 23 businesses were destroyed. 104 people died.

One of them was a Jewish man, Alfred Goodman, who was washed away and drowned. His tombstone (right, in the Laingsburg Jewish cemetery) is appropriately engraved to commemorate that destructive event.

Beaufort West flood: 13 April 1941

I was merely two years old when a similar catastrophe hit Beaufort West, 40 years earlier, therefore, I am unable to recall the event. However, as I grew older, I was able to comprehend the consequences when the Gamka River (Gamka is the San word for 'lion') swept through the town on 13 April 1941. That day the 'lion' river truly roared!





These days, water draining from the Nuweveld mountain range north of Beaufort West into the Gamka and Dwyka rivers is fed into the Gamka dam that was completed in 1955. This is a catchment area established to store water and to solve the town's water woes during prolonged droughts.

Since there was no dam in the area in 1941, the full volume and force of the water caused the Gamka river to burst its banks and flood the town. The bridge that connected Hillside (a village housing

predominantly South African Railways (SAR) personnel and their families from the rest of the town was swept away. The water also swept through our home and my father's General Dealer's business at 2 Church Street. We were forced to flee as a family and seek refuge at my grandmother, Esther Dubowitz's house on higher ground at the other end of the town. (She lived in Plantation Street, later renamed Danie Theron Street in 1948).

I was delighted when in about 2021, Professor Eugene Weinberg called me to say that he had come across some old black and white photographs taken by his late father, Max Weinberg, who practised as an attorney in the town. He sent me the pictures of this once in a generation event, on the back of which he had handwritten the captions that we have written below. (See page 6 for the originals)



This view is looking up New Street from the Church Street intersection.

Indicated in ink at #1 is the residence and shop of Charley Dubowitz

#2 is the fish shop of Mrs Golda Soskin

#3 further down the road, is the Levy's residence.

Mr Levy had to be rescued from the stoep by several men who were roped together.

My father's shop was virtually destroyed



My father's shop was flooded.

Water filled the cellars where he used to store the skins and hides that he had acquired as a produce buyer. The water exposure caused the skins to decompose, and the resultant stench was unbearable.



This is the corner of Church and Donkin Streets. The Masonic Hotel is on the corner.



In this picture, above, looking down New Street from Church Street intersection, one can see how ferociously the water was rushing down the road. Hermann Baumgarten's general dealer's store is behind the photographer.



Left, looking up Church Street towards the railway station, we see the Queen's Hotel on the left and Baumgarten's corner is on the right. Jack's Store (my late father's business) is directly across the road from the Queen's Hotel.

Although my father lost everything that day, he stoically restored the premises to its former condition and continued to trade there until the end of 1956.

There was one wall in the store that he never painted. He took childish delight in showing those interested the residual mud-line that clearly demarcated the height of the water during the flood.

As a young boy, I clearly recall my mother showing me her photographic albums where the muddy water had damaged some of her precious photographs.

After the flood, my father purchased an empty erf (plot) from the Dutch Reformed Church on which he had Berend Wright build a new house for us, at 144 Bird Street. Clearly, the flood had affected my father's psyche, as he ordered Mr Wright to raise the level of the house considerably. Any floodwater had to reach the height of a motor car's roof before it could enter our new home.



My father delighted in explaining his 'brainchild' and 'architectural prowess' to anyone who was keen enough to listen to his tale of the flood. We lived in Bird Street until 1957, when we moved as a family to Cape Town where I pursued my pharmaceutical studies.

Eugene Weinberg's mother, Molly, and my mother were great friends. They had been pregnant at about the same time in 1939. Eugene often reminds me how we, as toddlers, played on the dry riverbed of the Gamka river. Eugene and I are still the best of friends, and we even wrote a collaborative paper in the 2009 issue of the *South African Paediatric Review* (2009,6(2), 6-10). Our mothers also remained friends until they both passed away.

Below are the annotated photographs, with the handwritten descriptions on the back by his father Max, as sent to me by Eugene, and a picture of the Gamka Dam – this time empty!!

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## **The Karoo: Drought or Deluge**

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The Beaufort West flood photographs - with Max Weinberg's handwritten descriptions

1



Beaufort West Floods
 13/4/41
 looking up New Street
 ① Duke Bullock's shop & house
 ② Mrs. Seabrook's shop
 ③ The Long's house (where he stops
 but to be named for the shop
 by several men
 together)

2



Beaufort West Floods
 13/4/41
 looking down Donkin Street
 from Nassau Hotel corner

3



Beaufort West Floods
 13/4/41
 Looking down New Street

4



Beaufort West Floods
 13/4/41
 Looking up Church Street towards
 Railway Station. Spring Quay Hotel
 on left. Bridge over river and
 Langston's corner on right.



Beaufort West's Gamka Dam in the drought of November 2017!

(Businesses said they never relied on municipal water – they use their own boreholes.)