

# The Finkelstein family

Beaufort West

By Nathan (Natie) Finkelstein

Constantia, Cape Town, South Africa

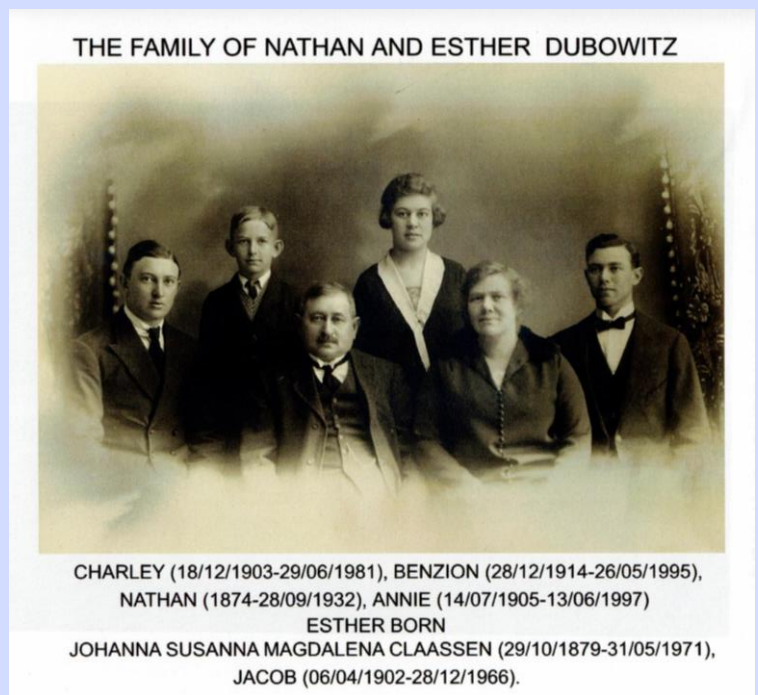
August 2023, updated August 2024



My grandparents Nathan and Esther Dubowitz had settled in Beaufort West. Nathan Dubowitz was one of the wool brokers and dealers in the area, second from the left in the picture below.



My father **Jack Finkelstein** and **Annie (née Dubowitz)** were married in in the Beaufort West Synagogue on 25 March 1934. Rev Isaac Gulis, officiated. He was the minister from 1929 to 1935.



Wedding of Jacob Lazarus Finkelstein (Jack) and Annie Dubowitz March 1934, Beaufort West.

My father owned 'Jack's Store' a General Dealers, in Church Street. My mother Annie was an ardent Zionist and worked tirelessly for WIZO and other Jewish charities.



I grew up in this Karoo town where I was delivered in 1939 by Dr Harold Lee, a Jewish doctor practising also as the doctor for the SA Railways & Harbours in the town. I was schooled there and matriculated in 1956 from the Beaufort West Central High School. My mother, Annie (née Dubowitz) also matriculated from the precursor to that school, Beaufort West Boys High School, and was the Matric Dux in 1922. She had to get special permission to do her matric at a boys' school, as the girls' school only offered tuition to Junior Certificate level (Standard 8).

Here I am pictured with Granny Esther in about 1945.

### The Beaufort West Synagogue

We had a little synagogue in the town. The cornerstone was laid in March 1922 by **Mr I Bakst**, a great friend of my grandfather, Nathan Dubowitz.



### Reverend Aaron Myburg

Rev Myburg became the minister in our congregation in 1946 and remained with us until 1960.

My father had been instrumental in convincing Rev Myburg to leave the smaller town of Middelburg, Cape, and come to the bigger town of Beaufort West, where he would conduct services in the *shul*, teach the children in *cheder*, and do the ritual

slaughtering for kosher meat for the community.



My parents were great friends of the Myburgs and on Sunday evenings would play cards with them and others such as **Moishe Horowitz** and the **Goldenbaums**.

Rev Myburg was a wonderful Hebrew teacher with amazing patience. He was my mentor. I attribute my thorough Hebrew education to his tutelage. I had my *barmitzvah* in the Beaufort West Synagogue in 1952. Rev Myburg also taught me to blow the *shofar* and when he became too frail in his older years, I blew the *shofar* for him. That experience stood me in good stead, as I did the same ritual in the Grahamstown synagogue when I was a Senior Lecturer in pharmacy at Rhodes University.

Rev and Mrs Myburg had three grown up daughters, who sometimes spent the High Holydays with their parents. Hettie was the eldest and had married a fellow from Johannesburg, a Mr Hurwitz. The middle daughter, Golda, was an academic, who obtained her BA degree at Pretoria University. To the best of my knowledge, during my sojourn in Beaufort West, she never married. The youngest daughter, Zelda, the prettiest of the daughters, married a brilliant young academic, Yaacov Newman, who later was known as Rabbi Dr Jacob Newman. Rev Myburg was so proud of his son-in-law and used to tell us with much enthusiasm of his many achievements. When I first heard of him from my dear teacher, I think he was the resident Rabbi at the Oxford Synagogue in Johannesburg.

### **The Zenith of the Jewish Community**

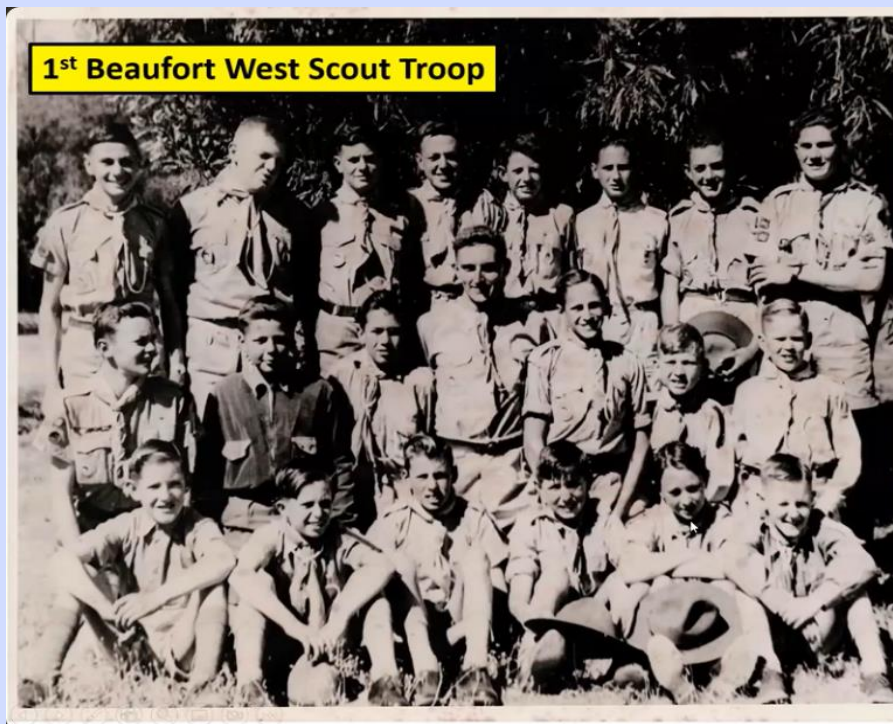
The heyday of the community was in the late 1930s with about 120 members. When Rev Aaron Myburg left Beaufort West in 1960 this seemed to mark the demise of the Jewish presence in the town (or maybe it was indicative of it). From the 1960s onwards the community dwindled. In 1964 there were only 42 families. The *shul* and ministers house were sold in 1979. The *shul* building is a storeroom these days, but Rev Myburg's house next door is now occupied by the sister of the owner, Mr Botha (a son of the original purchaser, Mr Gert Botha). The square pit in the back yard is still there where Rev Myburg slaughtered the chickens, and we watched the ritual in awe as children. We also climbed and ate the apricots from the tree just outside the *shul*. (2022 was the centenary year of the Beaufort West *shul*, however this milestone was largely ignored).



In this picture I am smiling at the feet of our headmaster in standard 2-4E ('E' was for the English Medium Class) at the Beaufort West Primary School.

## Growing up in Beaufort West

As there were no Jewish youth movements like Habonim in the town we all joined the Scouts which I greatly enjoyed. You can see my certificate as a Queens Scout.



This is the Finkelstein residence at 144 Bird Street. Beaufort West



I left Beaufort West in 1957 to pursue my pharmacy studies in Cape Town, but when I was visiting the old Transvaal in 1963, I went to see my former Hebrew teacher, who was living his retirement in an aged home in Johannesburg. Suffice it to say it was a moving reunion. Thereafter I lost touch with Rev Myburg and his family. Without a spiritual head, Beaufort West's Jewish community dwindled and by the 1990s there was not a single Jew left in the town.

### **A familiar *Bimah***

When my wife and I recently attended a *barmitzvah* at the Milnerton synagogue, I looked at the *bimah* and remarked to my wife that I recognised the *bimah*. She scoffed and thought I was losing it.

Why would I remember a *bimah*? Let me explain. Each pillar of the *bimah* had a large wooden ball which was attached to the supporting pillar with a wooden dowel. As mischievous kids, we pulled out the dowels and balanced the ball on their pillars. When the *gabbaim* leaned against the pillar, the ball would come tumbling down with a thunderous bang on the wooden floor, startling everyone at *shul*. Perhaps it even woke up a few congregants who had nodded off.

What a childhood memory!! When I told my wife how I had remembered, she remained unconvinced, but a fellow pharmacist and member at that *shul* confirmed my identification and my wife, like Queen Victoria, was not amused by the pranks practised in our capricious youth.

### **My Second Barmitzvah**

On 7 May 2022, I celebrated my second *bar mitzvah* in the Gardens *shul*. I read the same portion in the *Torah* and did the Haftorah *Kedoshim* in the same trop as I was taught, including the old-fashioned Ashkenazi pronunciation. That was a moving experience, but also quite intimidating, as the Gardens *shul* is massive compared to the tiny *shul* of my youth.

The congregation was 181 years old at the time. This was rather a far cry from the original *barmitzvah* celebrated in 1952 in the small *shul* of Beaufort West. It was a memorable occasion being surrounded by family, friends, and the Gardens community at a *brocha* after the service. The picture was taken by Rabbi Osher Feldman when I did a 'dress rehearsal' at the Gardens Synagogue in Cape Town three days before the actual Shabbat 'performance' on 7 May 2022.



## Honorary Citizen of Beaufort West

When I turned 70, I was made an **Honorary Citizen of Beaufort West**. I visit the town regularly, as I still possess some property in the town (my inheritance). During my youth we had a thriving community, and I am hoping to write an account of those unforgettable characters who made such a great contribution to the town.

## Reconstructing the Jewish Community of Beaufort West

I am now communicating with and writing about the Jewish characters of Beaufort West and my own family to make a CHOL – Community History On-Line place for our once thriving community. The **Finkelstein** (my late Dad and I) and **Dubowitz** families (three uncles and six male cousins) could muster a minyan without the participation of any other congregants.

My grandparents, and two uncles are buried in the Jewish cemetery in Beaufort West.  
Grandparents [Nathan Dubowitz](#) 1932 aged 58 and [Esther Dubowitz](#) 1971 aged 91

Uncles: [Harry Dubowitz aged 17](#) in 1924 and [Jack Dubowitz aged 64](#) in 1966

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Please join Natie by sending him your family story to add to our community pages.

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