

BLOEMFONTEIN, History of the JEWISH COMMUNITY

Address at the **opening of the Archives**; 25th March 2001
taken from her doctoral thesis by **Dr Sheila Aronstam**

The Early German Jewish Settlers

The Jewish Community of Bloemfontein started with the arrival of one man - **Isaac Baumann** - born in Germany in 1813. He migrated to South Africa to join his school friend, **Mosenthal**, in Graaff Reinet. Isaac first saw the Free State in 1845, when he went up on a shooting trip. The grass veld and the abundance of game impressed him.

In 1848 after the battle of Boomplaats and the establishment of the Orange River Sovereignty, Isaac crossed the Orange River and pitched his tent at a spot known as Bloemfontein. Karel Schoemann, in his book, says the town owes its name to a man, Jan Bloem, a farmer who settled by the strong and never-failing fountain and stream. This was to be part of town's water supply.

In 1849 the town was divided into erven and at the first sale of land, **Baumann** bought all the ground between Church and Charles Streets, Westburger and Maitland Streets.

In 1852, aged 39 he went back to Germany to marry his 18-year-old bride, **Caroline Allenberg** and returned the same year to establish the first Jewish family in Bloemfontein. Baumann established himself as the first civilian trader and brought out his brothers, **Jacob and Louis**, and together they formed Baumann Bros.

The **Baumanns had 10 children**; some of them played a notable role in Bloemfontein's development. **Gustav Baumann** became a land surveyor - he laid out President Brand Street. Alfred became the first eye specialist in the Free State. **Herbert and Otto Baumann** fought at Magersfontein for the Boers.

On the death of his infant son, **Louis**, in 1871, Baumann purchased a plot of ground next to the Christian Cemetery surrounded it by a railing and it was to serve as the first Jewish Cemetery for the whole of the Free State for years to come. It was also in 1871 that the first Yom Kippur service was held in the Baumann home, but there were still not sufficient Jews to establish a Jewish Community.

In 1874, Bertha, their eldest daughter, married **Henry Adlar** of Winburg. Because she was the first girl to get married, a half-holiday was proclaimed. The town was decorated with flags, and all members of the Raad attended. **Rev. Samuel Rapoport of Port Elizabeth** officiated at the ceremony.

It was in 1877 that Rev. Rapoport again officiated at the marriage of **Sophie Baumann to Moritz Levisieur** and three years later officiated at the marriage of **Helen Baumann to Wolff Ehrlich**. Rev Rapoport travelled up six times to circumcise the four Levisieur and two sons of the Ehrlichs.

Moritz Levisieur was a remarkable man and his two great projects were the first hospital in Bloemfontein and the National Museum. He and Sophie were highly respected members of the larger community.

After 1870 a number of Jews were attracted to the town. We read of Mr. **M L Pincus** who settled here and was the first chairman of the Bloemfontein Club. The first dentist to arrive in Bloemfontein

– **Ernest Moses**, followed him. Mr. Moses was to become the first President of the Hebrew Congregation.

In the first census of 1880, there were only 28 Jews in Bloemfontein out of a total of 1600 Europeans. One of the outstanding public figures of Bloemfontein Jewry was Mr. **Wolf Ehrlich**. Born in Germany, he settled in Bloemfontein in 1897. He founded the chamber of commerce; he was a Member of Parliament in the Orange River Colony, and in 1921, elected as Senator. He was a life-long friend of General Herzog; he was mayor of Bloemfontein for two terms. He helped establish the South African Jewish Board of Deputies at the National Conference held in Bloemfontein in 1912 where he succeeded in amalgamating the Cape Town and Johannesburg Jewish Board of Deputies. He was President of the Bloemfontein Congregation from 1902 until his death in 1924.

Yet another member of the **Baumann / Leviser / Ehrlich** families who added his name to the annals of Bloemfontein Jewry was **Ivan Haarburger**, a nephew of Moritz Leviser. He arrived at the age of 17 years and worked for Messrs. Deale and Borckenhagen in the music store and purchased the business on their demise. He was a talented violinist, pianist and conductor. He was consul for the Belgian Government, and mayor from 1912-1914, President of the Chamber of Commerce and President of the Hebrew Congregation.

These early German-Jewish settlers laid the foundation for a Jewish Community in Bloemfontein, but it is doubtful whether this small congregation would have continued because of the general assimilation of these Jews with the non-Jewish population, largely due to the scarcity of Jewish girls, whom they could marry.

The East European Migration

What then prevented the congregation from disappearing? The answer came with the arrival in the 1880's of a new stream of immigrants from Eastern Europe, fleeing the pogroms and persecution. The majority came from the province of Kovno, Grodno and Vilna in Lithuania. It is estimated that between 1881 and 1914, three million Jews fled from Eastern Europe. In Bloemfontein leadership of the community was to remain in the hands of the German-Jewish settlers from 1900 - 1933, but the community would not have prospered if not for the arrival of these Eastern European immigrants.

It is not possible to make mention of all the settlers who arrived and made their mark in the town, but there were some interesting characters, namely, **Barnett Levy**, who built the Masonic Hotel and served on the City Council; **Wolf Lewis and Joseph Friedman**, who were produce merchants; **Fred Shtein** who established the firm F. Shtein and Co., **G. Hailparn** who opened a jewellery business. In 1900, **Louis Shapiro** founded Shapiro's, a tobacconist firm. **JH Levy** owned the only mineral water works in the town. Another gentleman who left his mark on the town was **Lionel Nathan**, who was proprietor in turn, of the Masonic, Royal, Queens and Cecil Hotels. By 1890, the census showed that there were 41 Jews living in Bloemfontein.

Up to now, there had not been an organised religious community and services were held in private homes. In 1893, the Bloemfontein Congregation was established as a recognised Jewish Community. **Ernest Moses** was the first President and the **Rev. Urdang** was the first minister of the newly-founded congregation, to be followed by **Rev. M L Cohen** in 1896. The following year, New Year Services were held in the Town Hall and **Mr B Levy** became the 2nd President of the Congregation.

In 1899, **Rabbi Dr J H Hertz, Chief Rabbi of the Transvaal**, visited Bloemfontein and the erection of a synagogue was mooted. The Town Council was approached and a plot of land for a synagogue was granted on the corner of Zastron and East Burger Streets but the Anglo-Boer war broke out and the building was deferred. At the time of the Boer War, the Jewish population in the town rose to 150 people - largely due to the contingent of British soldiers stationed in Bloemfontein.

With the war almost at the end, the thoughts of the young Jewish Community turned once again to the building of the synagogue. On 2nd February 1902, **Chief Rabbi Hertz** visited the community again and two important decisions were taken. Firstly, to appoint a minister to act as preacher, teacher and mohel. Secondly, to appoint a building committee to collect funds and starts building as soon as possible. On 7th May 1903 the foundation stone was laid in the presence of a large gathering of Jewish and non-Jewish members of the town, including the Chief Justice, Maasdorp. In the same year, **Rev Cohen** was appointed, as the shochet and Kosher meat was available for the first time. He was also instructed to start Hebrew classes for the children, and the local press announced the opening of a school to be known as the Talmud Torah.

The synagogue, the first in the OFS was officially on 20th April 1904, amidst much pomp and ceremony by the President of the Community, **Wolff Ehrlich**. **Mrs Elsa Levisieur** sang a solo; Mr **Haarburger** gave a violin solo and **Rabbi Dr Hertz** addressed the gathering.

Creating Communal Institutions 1900s

At the turn of the century, congregants looked to establishing various communal institutions. One must remember that most of the immigrants had come to South Africa from countries with deeply rooted communal organisations. In 1902 the first institution to be established was the **Jewish Helping Hand and Burial Society** - a truly unique organisation combining its burial duties with charitable services. As early as May 1900, the **Zionist Society** was established and by 1904 had a membership of 164 people. A year later, the **Ladies' Zionist Society was formed**. The next important Jewish organisation to be established was the **Jewish Women's Benevolent Society** in 1903. Its first President was **Mrs Sophie Levisieur**. It was also in the same year that the **Sick Benefit and Loan Society - the Gemilus Chesed** - came into being.

In 1904 the census figures showed a total of 1616 Jews in the Orange River Colony, of whom 716 resided in Bloemfontein, 519 males and 197 females.

The community was now ready to appoint a Spiritual Leader. An advert was placed in the London Jewish Chronicle and the successful candidate was the **Rev. Zachariah Lawrence**. He arrived in Bloemfontein on 24th November 1904 and over 300 members of the community met him at the railway station and took him to the home of Councillor **B. Levy** for a welcoming party. It was due to the efforts of Rev. Lawrence that a sub-committee was established for Hebrew Education. A schoolroom was hired in Elizabeth Street and in 1905, for the first time in front of a large crowd of parents and members, children were awarded prizes for the Hebrew examinations. It was also at the stage, that permission was granted by the Dept. of Education for classes in Hebrew to be held at Grey College and Eunice High School. This association with both schools lasted 40 years until 1945, when it was discontinued.

The distinguished Hebrew teaching staff over the years included **Rev. Z Lawrence** (1943); Mr **Yechiel Blesowsky**; Mr **E (Topsy) Levitt**; Mr **Morris Wolozinsky**; Mr **M Sifman**; Mr and Mrs **Yehuda and Adele Trakman**; Mr and Mrs **David and Chagit Gorodetsky**; Mr and Mrs **Gabi and**

Sara Bitton; Rabbi and Mrs D Maizels and Mrs Henia Bryer who taught for 42 years until her retirement in 2000. **Mrs Rina Paz** is the current Hebrew teacher for 8 pupils (2001).

Communal centre opened next to the shul in 1918

As the community continued to grow, the necessity for a communal centres becoming more pressing. The City Council was approached to buy the erven next to the synagogue for a hall and Cheder. In 1918 there were 111 paid-up members, and in that year the foundation stone was laid and in the same year **Councillor Sol Harris**, a leading member of the community and Mayor of the City opened the hall. In the decade 1920-1930, the community entered into a period of growth and communal activity. On the 7th January 1923 the congregation called a combined meeting of all local Jewish bodies. Represented were the Jewish Helping Society, Sick Benefit and Loan Society, Jewish Guild, Hebrew School, Young Israel Society, Financial Aid Society and Russian Pogrom Orphan Fund. They met to discuss enlarging the synagogue as membership was increasing rapidly.

1926 saw a very vibrant branch of the **Hebrew Order of David** being established. Membership of the community stood at 200. Also **Rev. I Goldberg**, who had been the Cantor of the community, resigned and his position was filled by **Rev. S Hadassin**. By this time there were 100 children attending the Talmud Torah and the 2 rooms at the hall were not adequate. It was due to the generosity of **Mr. Louis Shapiro** that the **new Talmud Torah** became a reality. He laid the foundation stone in August 1927 and in December of that year the building was completed.

Jewish Year Book in 1929

Activities of Jewish communities all over continued to expand and it became essential to establish official **Archives and the S A Jewish Historical Society** was founded. They produced the first **SA Jewish Year Book in 1929**. Their chapter on Bloemfontein made very interesting reading - to mention a few statistics - The Hebrew Congregation had 228 members; HOD had 71 members and the Jewish Women's Society had 190 members while the Jewish Helping Hand had 250 members.

The decade 1930-1940 was a very difficult one for the Jewish community of Bloemfontein. The town as elsewhere, was hit by an economic depression and members could not meet their financial commitments. The rise of Nazi power affected many families who had left relatives in Europe. The **Rev. Reichenberg** was appointed in 1930 as an additional cantor and shochet. **Rev. Lawrence** died after 20 years of faithful service and because of the financial situation of the community it was decided not to fill his position with a new minister. In 1932 two new branches of national organisations were established, namely the **Union of Jewish Women** and the **Habonim Youth Movement**.

With the death of the President, **Ivan Haarburger**, in 1933, **Mr J Phillips**, an outstanding communal leader, became the next president of the congregation. At this early stage, he tried to amalgamate all local institutions under the aegis of one body, but due to strong opposition from many of the societies, who feared losing their autonomy, this would take many years to become a reality.

The community now felt the need for a spiritual leader and **Rabbi Dr. M. Romm** of Palestine was appointed the new minister, a highly erudite and academic personality.

With the advent of the second World War, many of the young Jewish men in the country joined the armed forces and went up north. After the war in 1951, they formed the SA Jewish Ex-Service

League. In 1946, **Rabbi Romm** resigned and two years later, the position was filled by **Rabbi Shalom Coleman**. The synagogue, built 38 years previously, was showing signs of deterioration and under the able leadership of **Mr Henry Bradlow**, who became president in 1945, plans were made to build a new synagogue and communal centre. After many years of planning and raising funds, the foundation stone was laid in 1953 and in May 1954, the communal centre was officially opened in Fairview Street.

Amalgamation of Organisations and a New Synagogue Complex 1950s and 60s

A landmark decision was taken at a Special General Meeting on the 27th March 1955 to amalgamate the four main traditional societies viz- **Hebrew Congregation, Jewish Helping Hand and Burial Society, Hebrew School and Gemilus Chesodim Society**. In 1958 **Mr Bradlow** was elected President of the United Hebrew Institutions, as it would now be called.

The consecration of the new synagogue on the 4th April 1965 marked a new milestone in the life of the community. **Rabbi Coleman** resigned in 1960 and two years later, **Rabbi Ben Isaacson** was appointed. He became the Principal of the Hebrew School and helped to stimulate membership of the Habonim Movement. During this time **Rabbi and Mrs Kabalkin** served as Shochet and Hebrew Teacher respectively. Three years later **Rabbi Isaacson** left with his family to live in Israel and his post was filled by **Rabbi Haim Cohen** on the 1st January 1966.

For some years there had been discussion on the establishment of a **Hebrew Nursery School**. In 1967 it opened with 32 pupils in the Communal Centre. As a result of a generous donation by the Davidson family in memory of their late father, **David Davidson**, a well-known and respected communal worker, **a school was built in the Synagogue grounds** and the David Davidson Nursery School was officially opened on the 27th August 1967, by **Dr. Maurice Block**, the doyen of the Jewish Community for the past three decades and **Mrs Shirley Kroll** became the first Principal of the school, and enjoyed that position for 28 years until 1995.

The following religious officials served the community for a period of time. Amongst the Cantors were **Rev. Kuperberg, Cantor Paul Kowarsky and Cantor Jungerlevi**. The Rabbis who succeeded Rabbi Cohen were **Rabbi D Maizels, Rabbi S Steinhaus, Rabbi P Fishman and Rabbi D. Albert**.

From the 1980's the numbers in the community started to decrease and the running of the Shul Complex became a financial burden for the diminishing community. A decision was taken to sell the complex and after many years of negotiations this was finally realised. The local **Reform Temple** was purchased; extensive alterations were made, including the building of a Mikveh. The new complex was officially opened on the 28th April 1996 by **Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris**.

The "**Joseph and Fanny Hodes**" Bloemfontein archive was established and officially opened on 25th March 2001, by the benefactor, **Mr Harold Hodes** of London, in honour of his parents. **Dr Sheila Aronstam and Mr Ronnie Rosen** worked tirelessly collating material and photographs for this wonderful project. Tribute is paid to those outstanding men and women who served this community with loyalty and dedication. We take pride that our small community has remained faithful to its Jewish Traditions and Institutions and has revealed its indelible imprint of its long and proud history.

See these links for photographs of the archives

1. **New Bloemfontein United Institutions Synagogue** – by Jono David 2014. This was the Former Reform Temple complex. There are fine pictures in this collection of the Bloemfontein archives as originally displayed in the building. [The former Reform Temple New Synagogue Dickie Clark Street complex](#)
2. **The Bloemfontein Archives** were moved in the 2020s to the South African Jewish Museum (SAJM) in Cape Town when this complex was also sold. Documents and photos can be viewed here: [Bloemfontein Hebrew Congregation Archive Collection](#)