

## **The Jewish Community of Calitzdorp – a history**

Calitzdorp is a town, situated in the Little (Klein) Karoo, Western Cape, in a fertile valley through which two rivers, the Nels and Gamka flow. The valley is surrounded by 3 mountain ranges, the Swartberg in the north, Rooiberge to the south and the mountains of the Huisrivier Pass to the west. It is 50 kilometers west of Oudtshoorn on the R 62 provincial road, known as Route 62 which extends between Montague and Humansdorp, and is a world-famous tourist route, being one of the longest wine routes in the world. Calitzdorp is the centre of the South African Port wine production.

The land on which Calitzdorp is located, known as *Buffelsvallei*, was originally part of a farm which was granted to the brothers, Jacobus Johannes and Matthys Christian Calitz in 1831. The Calitz brothers contributed a portion of their farmland for the construction of a church in 1853, and the town developed around the church. At one time Calitzdorp was the greatest ostrich producing district in the world and the centre of the feather industry. It was during this period that the Jewish community was established. The town's development progressed with the building of the Nel's River dam, the first gravity storage dam to be built in South Africa. It was built for irrigation purposes and facilitated the cultivation of fodder for ostrich flocks. It was completed in 1918. The town continued to develop with the opening of a railway line in 1924, followed by the completion of electrification and a new cement road to Oudtshoorn in 1937.

The first Jewish immigrants who arrived in Calitzdorp were brothers-in-law, Moses Landau (1855-1920) and Lazarus Rapeport (1856-1924), ostrich feather buyers. They arrived in 1888 with their wives, the Kabaker sisters and their infant daughters, Ada and Ida. Other immigrants followed and some worked as shopkeepers in the town or on the surrounding farms, such as Warmwater, Langverwacht and Welgerust at Gamka East. A number were speculators. Many men arrived on their own and were joined by their families once they had established themselves. Most applied to be naturalized shortly after their arrival in South Africa or before they got married. One of the new arrivals, Hena Mindel Solomon nee Landau and her family arrived in 1895 to join her brother, Moses Landau and his family who had been resident in the town since 1888. Two

younger sisters of Hena's husband, Louis Solomon, followed, arriving in Calitzdorp with their young families at the turn of the century – the Modlin family and Hyman family.

The Jewish population peaked during the Ostrich feather boom. Following the outbreak of World War One, coupled with a devastating drought which lasted from 1914 to 1916, the ostrich feather industry collapsed. On the Calitzdorp side of the Oudtshoorn District, 1,130 farmers were rendered destitute by 1916. Many Jewish families were affected and were left destitute resulting in many leaving the area. In the 1930s 37 Jews were recorded in the town and by the early 1990s there was only one Jew living in Calitzdorp.

The Calitzdorp museum, which is based in the town has documented the contribution of families in the town and surrounding areas. There is some information about the Jewish contribution to the town and environs. Being a descendant of the Rapeport family, the first Jewish pioneers to settle in the village, I embarked on a project to commemorate the history of the Jewish families who settled in the town and surrounding areas.

Additional information was obtained from Paul Boshoff, a retired architect, who runs the Calitzdorp Museum, as well as from the Beit Hatefutsoth publication, Jewish Life in the South African Country Communities Volume II.

I urge any descendants of the Calitzdorp community to contribute to preserving their ancestor's heritage.

Contributions can be posted on the CHOL website, CHOL Facebook page or sent directly to my email [nrapepor@global.co.za](mailto:nrapepor@global.co.za).

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