

The African Silberts

Transcription of an interview of Minnie Kahn née Silbert, conducted by her cousin, Morris Silbert (1912-2008), son of Menachem Mendel Silbert (1869-1933) from Canada, during a visit to South Africa. Courtesy of Nadine Peimer née Silbert and Norman Silbert, niece and nephew, Israel.

THE AFRICAN SILBERTS

When I was a child, I remembered my father talking about his brother Aryeh who was an ostrich farmer in South Africa. I wondered what it was like far across the sea in that strange distant place. How romantic and exciting it must be! My father also told us how the ostrich market had collapsed and Uncle had lost his two farms and was not living in Oudtshoorn. What a strange name! But I never thought then or even since then that I would some day go to South Africa and meet my Uncle's family. While I was there last winter I tape recorded an interview with Minnie, the oldest of my uncle's children. In edited form here is what she told me:

I remember being on board ship, the Gyka, along with hundreds of other Jewish immigrants. Since we could eat only kosher food, our diet consisted of salt herring, cheese and biscuits. Even the cheese was foreign to us but because it was kosher we ate it. My mother brought along jars of cherry jam and cherries in brandy. When we arrived in Cape Town Father had arranged for countrymen from our hometown to meet us and take us off the ship. They took us to a private hotel where we stayed for a few days until our departure could be arranged. The trip took us to Mossel Bay by train, this was the end of the railway line at that time. From there we travelled by horses and cart, over the big pass, the Outeniqua Pass. It was a long journey, hour after hour. We had to stop to give our horses a rest and to replace them with another team of horses, which took us all the way to Oudtshoorn. From there we were again taken by ~~car~~^{cart} and horses to a farm 30 odd miles away. We arrived at a little place almost like a mud hut. Father had already started to build a house for us and we were to live here, temporarily. He had bought a small farm. Before that he used to walk on foot, like many other Jews in the Oudtshoorn area, buying up ostrich feathers and selling them to a wholesaler at a profit. From week to week they used to walk until Friday when they would come home for the Sabbath. On Sunday they would start out again, trudging down the road; 30 miles, 40 miles was nothing to them.

We moved into the new house. It was not a very big house but it was comfortable. Father began to raise ostriches. Ostrich feathers were booming in those days. They were in fashion and used to fetch terrific prices. So much so, that whoever had ostrich feathers to sell, became quite affluent. We went in for better birds. The better the bird, the better the feathers were. Things were going well and father bought another farm. It was a little bigger and was located on the other

side of the river.

We lived near the village of Calitzdorp which at that time had a small Jewish community. They wanted to be associated with Judaism and acquired a shochet (a ritual slaughterer of animals) to provide us with kosher meat. Kosher meat maintained a proper standard of health. There was a doctor in the village, a Scotchman, not Jewish, who contributed towards the salary of the shochet. Because of the lack of abbatoirs and the low standards of the local farmers, he felt that the Jewish meat was the only safe meat to eat.

When the High Holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, came we would rent a house in Calitzdorp. We would go in by horse and cart, taking along some of our belongings, food and utensils and spend the week in Calitzdorp. Since there was no synagogue the services used to be held in the home of one of the members of the community. The Jews used to get together but often something happened which resulted in a dispute. Once it was held at our house and the faction of the community which broke away stole the Shofer Torah from our house. They used it themselves. I don't know where Father went but he got another one. We children could never understand how people could stoop to do things like that.

Father was not very affectionate but we knew that he was fond of us. He was not really able to show his affection. He always wanted us to learn about Judaism and made every effort to help us. When we were on the farm he got an old Jewish gentleman from Calitzdorp to come out to teach us to read Hebrew and to be able to pray. But we were naughty! This old gentleman used to sit and wait for us to come home from the farm school. When we did get home mother would give us coffee, slices of bread with butter and jam. And we would take ever so long to finish our food in order to shorten the lessons. We were really not keen to learn. He was such a dear old gentleman!

Mother was a sweet affectionate woman. She found it very difficult to adapt to the farm life. She would weep often and she longed for her family back home. She worked very hard although we did not realise it at the time. She wanted everything for us; she was very self sacrificing. She used to relate stories about Russia, sing Russian songs to us, tell us about her family in Russia, her brothers, her sisters about weddings back home. She would tell us how wedding ceremonies were performed in the synagogue yard and the celebrations that used to go on, sometimes for three days. She was a thin woman. Later, when

we lived in Oudtshoorn, she had a few sincere friends to whom she was devoted.

The first motor cars were touring open models and hats with feathers became impractical and obsolete. A slump set in in the Ostrich feather market. Consequently many ostrich farmers lost their farms. Most had been bought with mortgage bonds secure in the belief that they would redeem the bonds with the price of feathers, prevailing. Then the slump came! Father, too, lost both his farms and we moved to Oudtshoorn. He would go to the country with a horse and cart, buying produce, butter, eggs, milk and other products. He had customers for these in Oudtshoorn and that is how he earned a living.

Oudtshoorn had a Jewish community of about 600. The community, small as it was, was divided. There were two synagogues. One consisted of the wealthier and the English speaking Jews. There was another made up of the 'greeners' (newcomers), to which we belonged. It became a form of snobbery as to which synagogue people belonged to. The two did not mix. They considered themselves different. Years later when things became bad and the rich Jews lost their money they started mixing with the others.

While we were still on the farm Reuben was sent to school in Oudtshoorn so that he could attend Hebrew School. Now Becky and I, too, were able to go to the Girls High School in town. When I passed my exams I went to Teachers Training College in Oudtshoorn. We had a very fine principal who came from the U.S. A. and had been trained at Columbia University. With his capable staff he gave us excellent training. He was well grounded in modern methods and we were given a good start. I was in my second year at training college, Becky was at high school, when a terrible catastrophe occurred. It happened on a Saturday morning when Father had gone to the Synagogue. Mother used to keep chickens in our back yard. The chickens used to lay their eggs in the outhouse, where the cart was stored. That day I went down town. I was having a winter dress made and went to the dressmaker for a fitting. When I came back I saw a crowd around our house and wondered what could have happened. As I came nearer I saw a cab standing there. At that time motors were not yet used and carriages were used for cabs. They were just lifting mother into the cab to take her to the hospital. What I heard was that she had gone to the backyard to collect the eggs as she did every day. A sudden gust of wind blew up at that very moment and pulled the roof off the outhouse. As a result of this, the wall

collapsed on her. When she was dug out she was still alive and even conscious. Since there was no room for us in the cab, father alone went with her. Becky and I stood in front of the cab, with father supporting her - she said to us "Look after the children". Neville was about two and only a toddler. I did not realise she was going to die. We went over to the hospital and the doctor told us that there was no hope for her. She had internal injuries. In those days there were no blood transfusions as they now have. At 4 o'clock that afternoon Mother breathed her last!

We were left with father and the little children. Philip was a youngster and Neville was walking already. I was in my second year at college. I could not give it up so I continued. Becky left school, two years before matriculation. She took a secretarial course and got a job. An Afrikaans woman from the farm helped us keep house. She was with us for a time and when she left we got a coloured maid. She was very good. Father was left a lonely man. He would do his work, go out to the farms, come back, and sell his goods. He spent a lot of his time in the synagogue.

Reuben was at the Boys High School and did very well. At times he was at the top of his class. When he matriculated there was no money for him to study further. He got a job with a Jewish firm. They were merchants in groceries and produce. It was quite a big business and he went to work in the office. After a couple of years he got another job in an out of the way village called Vosberg. Then a new job in Durban was offered to him.

Years before when we still lived on the farm a young man lived with us. He came from Lodz and had nowhere to live. Father was very good to him. He did the same kind of work father did before he bought the farm. It was known as 'trying' and that word was adopted into common usage. It meant walking in the country and trying to buy feathers along the way, wherever they could be found. After he came to stay with us he decided to bring his girl friend out from Russia. She came out and also stayed with us as one of the family for six months. When the feather slump came he was left with nothing. Father had lent him some money and he could not pay it back. He left the district and ended up in Durban with his girl friend. They got married there. They opened a fish and chips shop and his wife looked after it. He used to take a bag on his shoulders and buy up old bottles and bags. World War I came and in no time he was able to amass quite a bit of

money. His business expanded very rapidly and he became a wholesaler. He was a bright fellow but, believe it or not, he was illiterate even in Yiddish. He needed someone in his business whom he could trust. He found out where Reuben was and offered him a job. It took a little time but they finally agreed and Reuben went to work for H. I will now tell you how I got to know Isaac. Becky had left High School and started to do a clerical course. Isaac gave her lessons in bookkeeping and accountancy. It was in the evening and I always had to go along with her so that she would not have to come home alone. Isaac's mother had been a friend of my mother's but I did not know Isaac at all. Through Becky going to him for lessons I got to know him and he learned to know me. I was still in college at the time. After passing the examinations and when I was preparing to leave to assume my teaching post, he came to see me. He proposed and we were privately engaged. No one knew of our intentions apart from Father and Becky. Oudtshoorn is a small town and I did not want people to start asking questions. I didn't want to get married right away; I wanted to teach for a while first. Isaac, too, was busy trying to establish himself.

I left for my teaching post and Isaac used to write to me every other day. I used to write to him less often. The post came from a village 40 miles away. I lodged with a Jewish family who ran a store in that farm district. Occasionally Isaac used to take a train to Rosedale where we would arrange for a car to come and fetch him. He spent a few days with us. When he used to come to visit me at the school the children used to think he was the school inspector. As soon as he walked in they would stand up and politely greet him. We always had a good laugh about this.

I taught school with all eight grades in one classroom. We had been taught how to group the classes. Distances were so great that we had a lot of single teacher schools. I enjoyed teaching very much. With a bilingual certificate I was qualified to teach in both languages. Since the farmers in the area were all Afrikaans I taught in their language. When they started they could not speak a word of English and I had to bring them up to the required standard. We had conversation classes and some of the things they came out with sounded very funny. The pronunciation of English was very difficult for them. In the upper classes they were reading Hamlet and understanding what they were reading. I taught for two and a half years in all. Since

then I have occasionally supply taught. When Isaac and I got married I became a housewife, doing a lot of cooking and baking. I became quite good at it even if I do say so myself. At the time Isaac shared an office with another person. He continued to work as a bookkeeper during the day and to study at night. He continued his studies until he was qualified as a chartered accountant. He set up an office of his own which he occupied for over forty years.

When Reuben got settled in Durban he bought a house, a very nice house. He brought Father, Becky, Philip and Neville to live with him. Becky got a job with H. Philip and Neville were at school. I was already married and remained in Oudtshoorn. But Father felt uprooted in Durban. He missed his friends and cronies and all that was familiar to him in Oudtshoorn. These people used to get together in the synagogue and enjoy each other. In Durban he was very lonely and in 1929 or 1930 he went back to Oudtshoorn.

Reuben did an excellent job for H. He took over a lot of responsibility and the business prospered. H was very conscious of being illiterate and Reuben even used to have dealings with the bank manager for him. H. made a lot of money and he was assessed thousands of pounds in extra income tax. Reuben appeared before the Receiver of Revenue to act on his behalf. One year alone Reuben saved H. 11 thousand pounds in taxes. Reuben ran the business so to speak and yet never got what was due to him. When he had agreed to work for H it was on the express understanding that he would receive a share in the business in addition to the salary. One day Reuben decided that whatever the outcome he would leave. I think he had one hundred pounds when he started his business. the business prospered. When Philip got back from the war he joined Reuben in the business and it grew into a big operation.

When father returned to Oudtshoorn he was happy to be back with all his old friends. He no longer did any work. He had a little bit of money saved up. It wasn't very much but his needs were small. We didn't have very much either but things were inexpensive and we managed nicely. Father used to enjoy coming to my house and playing with my little girls.

Father suffered a stroke in 1933. Isaac's cousin, a doctor came and brought the news to us. He told us that he had taken father to the hospital. It was a terrible shock to us. He was in hospital for 12 days. We tried to teach him to speak ^{again} /and to learn to walk again,

47

using a chair. When he recovered I brought him home with me. But the doctor warned me that he was liable to have another stroke. I am sorry to say that he did. A couple of months later he had another stroke and could not speak any more. One day he wrote on a piece of paper (he could still use one hand) that Neville should go to the land of Israel. He did not die in our house because he required more nursing than I could do. He lived in a private nursing home for a number of weeks. I used to go and see him every day. He could not speak. He used to look at me with his big blue eyes. Somehow his eyes seemed bluer than ever. On Friday morning he passed away and he was buried the same afternoon. That was my father! He was a good father. He was good and kind and very honest. He was liked by Jews and Gentiles alike. He spoke Afrikaans and had a very good relationship with all the Afrikaaners and had a very good relationship with all the Afrikaaners with whom he came in contact. They all loved him.

Conclusion:

A sequel to this story is the mystical way in which my Uncle Aryeh's last wish was fulfilled. After his second stroke when he could no longer talk, he wrote on a piece of paper with his still good hand "Tell Neville he should go to the land of Israel". Neville at the time was 16 years old and lived with the family in Durban 600 or 700 miles away. He was never told what his father had said. In 1940 Neville enlisted in the South African Army. He fought with the British Army in North Africa and was captured at Tobruk. He was a prisoner of war in Italy for 15 months, the last three of which he was a fugitive. He suffered great hardships and finally escaped to Switzerland. When he was demobilized from the South African Army in 1945, after all that he had gone through, he had difficulty in settling down. A British certificate for admission to Palestine was offered to him, a rare thing in those days, and he grabbed it. Since 1945 he has been a farmer in Israel. When he returned to South Africa on a visit in the early 60's his sister told him for the first time that he had fulfilled his father's last wish for him. Having met all of Uncle Aryeh's children I was able to identify a common characteristic in them. The quiet gentleness, warmth and courage is present in all of them. My uncle was devoted to his people and to Judaism. Two of his five children have devoted five years of their lives and suffered to fight the hated enemy of Judaism. One of

his children and five out of eight grandchildren have joined their compatriots in building and living in Israel. One grandchild participated in the heroic rescue of the Jews doomed at Entebbe. Uncle Aryeh lives on through his descendants.