

They Helped to Build South Africa: Grahamstown

The Story of South African Jewry: OUR NATION-WIDE SURVEY OF JEWISH COMMUNITIES

By ARTHUR MARKOWITZ

The City of Grahamstown holds a notable place among the older towns of South Africa. Here the second Hebrew Congregation in the sub-continent was established, and it is about this community that Mr. Markowitz writes this week. The article is another in the series he is contributing to the "S.A. Jewish Times" exclusive survey of the Union's Jewish communities. A further article on Grahamstown Jewry will appear next week.

Jewish Pioneers of Grahamstown

GRAHAMSTOWN, in the Eastern Province, is often referred to as "The City of Saints," because of the large number of churches it contains. Several other explanations are, however, also forthcoming. One of the most amusing ones I heard was the following: A firm Cape Town contractors sent a party of men to Grahamstown to extend the city's water system. They struck technical difficulties and required a large vise, so a wire was sent to headquarters in Cape Town. The reply came back: "Buy a vise in Grahamstown." Apparently this was impossible, so the men on the job wired back: "Grahamstown has no vice." Hence Grahamstown's title!

I am quoting this story to show how difficult it is sometimes to make sure of one's facts concerning past events and incidents in the life of South African communities. Fortunately there is nothing vague or nebulous about the early days of Jewish settlement in "The City of Saints." On the contrary, there is more precise information available on its first Jewish inhabitants than there is about the subsequent history of the congregation.

Grahamstown was founded as a military outpost in 1912 by Col. John Graham, but it did not rank as a town until 1820, when a number of 1820 settlers took up their residence there. Among them were several Jews, including John Norton and three of the Norden brothers.

Norton first farmed in the district but a few years later carried on business in Grahamstown itself in partnership with a Mr. Forbes Bull. In 1838 he traded as Norton & Co., in association with fellow-Jew, H. B. Kisch. Thanks to the painstaking research of Dr. Louis Herrman, we also know that "in 1844 Norton owned a house to High Street, Grahamstown, of an annual rental of £80 and had 20 shares in the Cape of Good Hope Steam Navigation Company." Norton was one of the founders of the local Hebrew Congregation in 1846—which makes in the second-oldest in South Africa. He died two years later whilst on a visit to England

THE NORDENS

Marcus Norden settled in Grahamstown in 1839 where his brother, Benjamin, had taken up his abode ten years earlier as an auctioneer and merchant. According to Sir George Cory's "The Rise of Sou Africa," Benjamin Norden became a well-known citizen interested in the

public affairs of the district. He was one of the "shareholders in the Settlers' Church at Bathurst erected in 1834 by subscriptions from members of all religious denominations. Subsequently he was one of these who formed the first Hebrew Congregation in Cape Town.

Joshua Davis Norden farmed in the vicinity of Grahamstown in the early 1830's. It is recorded that he suffered from the depredations of savage tribes "thirty-three head of his cattle were stolen by the Kaffirs, eleven of which were recovered."

A few years later Joshua Davis Norden, described by a contemporary as "a dashing, enterprising man always ready to lead," settled in Grahamstown, where he became a Commissioner for the Municipality, a member of the Emigration Committee, and a sworn appraiser to the High Court. He does not seem to have taken much interest in Jewish affairs in Grahamstown, but was one of those who pioneered the establishment of the Tikvath Israel in Cape Town.

In Grahamstown he was instrumental in forming a burgher force for the defence of the town and became its commanding officer. Norden's Yeomanry, as the force was called, distinguished itself in the War of the Awe started by the Kaffir chief Gaika. Norden himself was killed on the 20th April 1846, in an engagement with the savages at Buffalo Kloof in the hills about ten miles from Grahamstown. His body was dragged away by the enemy, stripped, horribly mutilated and set up in a conspicuous position. It was recaptured by the Yeomanry the following day and buried with military honours. A tablet erected in the Grahamstown Cathedral to his memory, reads: "To the memory of Joshua Davis Norden, Captain of the Grahams Town Yeomanry in a vigorous attempt to repel the inroads of a barbarous enemy, he fell gloriously on the 25th day of April, 1846, at the head of his troops. Deeply lamented by his friends and comrades by whom this tribute of respect is raised as a memorial of his intrepidity and bravery."

OTHER EARLY SETTLERS

Another Jew who fought in the Kaffir Wars around Grahamstown was Elias de Pass, a member of the well-known family of Jewish pioneers at the Cape. Learning at the first meeting of the Tikvath Israel, which he attended in Cape Town that Joshua Davis Norden had been killed, he was moved to volunteer for military service on the Eastern frontier against the Kaffirs, but his family would not let him go on account of his youth. Two years later, however, Elias joined up in Port Elisabeth where he was on a visit. In Grahamstown he was attached to a troop of Boers under Field-Cornet Mueller, which was part of the force commanded by General Berkeley. He went through the campaign unscathed except for a slight assegai wound, and received the rank of Lieutenant. He returned to the Cape in 1849 and became Honorary Secretary of the Cape Town Jewish Community.

In the early 1840's, more than a dozen Jewish families were established in Grahamstown, among them—apart from those already mentioned—Joseph Charles Hess, Nathan Birkenruth and H. Oppenheim, who hailed from Germany, Isaac Weinberg from Kurland, S. Marcus, N. Moss and L. Goldman.

FIRST MINYAN

The first Minyan is known to have been held in Grahamstown as long ago as 1843, and a congregation was formed in August, 1846, with Mr. Nathan Birkenruth as its first Chairman. And talking of "first" events, it is interesting to note that the first Jewish marriage in South Africa to be performed outside of Cape Town, was solemnised in Grahamstown in 1855 between Joseph Charles Hess and Lina Schottenfels. The marriage took place at the house of N. Birkenruth, who was at that time a Justice of the Peace.

The community grew, both by Immigration and through natural Increase, and in 1865 the Rev. Mr. Rabinowitz, of Cape Town, visited Grahamstown to perform a number of circumcisions!

Clambering over the graves of the 100-year-old first Jewish cemetery at Grahamstown, I found that the oldest tomb-stone, the inscription of which can be deciphered, reads: "To the memory of Isaac Weinberg, of Kurland, who died on the 6th November, 1848." Other names on ancient matzevoth are: Schnyder, Norden, Jacobs, Gabriel, Wallach and Solomon.

In the 1870's-1880's, with the discovery of diamonds and gold in the northern parts of South Africa, the flourishing Jewish communities in the south became depleted and some, temporarily, went out of existence. Amongst them was the Grahamstown Congregation. It ceased to be a lively place of business in the late 1860's, and the more enterprising Jews left it for centres of brisker commercial activity. Those who remained behind gradually became absorbed into the general population. In 1872 remnants of the community still lingered in Grahamstown and were visited by the Rev. Samuel Rappoport of Port Elizabeth, but thereafter there was a hiatus in Jewish communal life until the influx of Jews from Eastern Europe which started in the early 1880's. At the turn of the century a new Jewish community had assembled in Grahamstown and in 1910 the congregation was re-established with a membership that consisted chiefly of recent immigrants.

SIMEON JACOBS

Before concluding this brief survey of the history of Grahamstown Jews, mention must be made of one of the ablest and most esteemed lawyers in the country, who was associated with the community for many years. He was the Honourable Simeon Jacobs, C.M.G., whose important public position did not interfere with his full profession of Judaism and his attachment to the synagogue during a time when many of his co-religionists were becoming absorbed into the Christian population.

Reviewing his career, Dr. L. Herrman, the historian, says, that he arrived in South Africa in 1860 and was admitted as an advocate of the Supreme Court. The following year he was appointed Attorney-General for British Kaffraria, an office which he held during the next six years. In 1868, he was appointed Solicitor-General for the Eastern Province. He was a member of the Cape House of Assembly and during the Molteno Ministry, held the office of Attorney-General of the Cape Colony. In 1882 he became a judge of the Supreme Court, and a member of the Executive Council. He was responsible for introducing and carrying two

very important measures, the Cape Colony Responsible Government Bill and the Voluntary Bill. The latter abolished State aid to the Church, thereby putting all religious denominations on an equal footing. Simeon Jacobs was created C.M.G. in 1882. He retired and died the following year. Throughout his life he was a member of the Hebrew Congregation. (To be continued next week)