

The Contribution of Jewish doctors at Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital, Soweto, South Africa.

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British Military origins 1942 - 1947

Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital was built during World War Two. It is the biggest hospital in the Southern Hemisphere and the largest academic teaching hospital affiliated to the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. During World War Two, the British Government asked the South African Government to provide health care facilities for military personnel under the Middle East Command, who were serving in North Africa. The site chosen was on the main road from Johannesburg to Potchefstroom, near Number 1 Air School, Baragwanath, which was utilized by the South African Air Force and Royal Air Force. The British government purchased the land from the mining company Crown Mines Ltd. The land which was on the farm Diepkloof was initially owned by a Cornish immigrant, John Baragwanath who had arrived in South Africa in 1886 and set up a refreshment post, trading store and hotel where the road to Kimberley joined the road from Vereeniging. The hospital was subsequently named after Baragwanath, whose Cornish name means bread (bara) and wheat (gwenith). Nearby was the African township of Orlando.

Due to increased hostilities in the Middle East, provision for 1,544 beds was made at the hospital. The layout of the hospital resembled a military camp with many barrack-like single

storey pavilions which contained the various wards. Each ward could accommodate 40 beds. The Johannesburg Municipality provided electricity, water and sewerage drainage. Construction commenced on the 3rd of November 1941 and the first patients were admitted on the 28th of May 1942. A section was reserved for the medical and surgical treatment of tuberculosis. There was also a workshop for occupational therapy.



Prime Minister Jan Smuts at the official opening, 23rd September 1942



Prime Minister Jan Smuts officially opened the hospital on the 23rd September 1942 and stated *“When the war is over there will remain a great need to look after the health of the native population gathered on the Rand. Then Baragwanath might turn out to be one of the most useful institutions in the country. We had planned along these lines, and I wish Baragwanath a most useful career, not only in this war but in the long period thereafter.”*

From the time the hospital was opened, numerous Jewish servicemen and civilian doctors worked at the hospital. The first Officer Commanding Baragwanath was Lieutenant Colonel D. L. Ferguson. He was succeeded by **Colonel Loswell Israel Braun O.B.E.** (1894 -1967) on 3rd June 1943. Braun was the son of a Jewish farmer from Ottosdal, in the Western Transvaal. During World War One Braun served in the Royal Army Medical Corps and in World War Two with the South African Medical Corps (S.A.M.C.) in East Africa and North Africa prior to being appointed Commanding Officer at Baragwanath. He received the O.B.E. and was Mentioned in Despatches. **Captain David Adler** MB ChB (UCT) who later served as Professor of Cardio-Thoracic Surgery, Rambam Medical Centre, Haifa, served in the S.A.M.C. from 1942 to 1946 and was initially based at the Baragwanath Military Hospital before serving in Italy at the 8th South Africa Clearing Station. Adler was also Mentioned in Despatches.



Colonel W.H. Du Plessis, Matron Fick, Colonel L.I. Braun, July 1943

As the war unfolded in the Middle East and the Far East, the number of soldiers who suffered from tuberculosis increased. By 1944 predominantly soldiers who suffered from tuberculosis and required treatment and convalescence were treated at Baragwanath. In 1945 the hospital was known as "130 Military Hospital and Convalescent Depot, Baragwanath". The servicemen who died at the hospital were buried in the West Park Cemetery, Johannesburg.

Non-European Hospital – Baragwanath Hospital 1947

On the 1st of September 1947 the Military left Baragwanath and the Transvaal Provincial Administration (T.P.A.) took over the hospital. They paid the British government £500 000 for the buildings, remaining equipment and stores. Dr J.D. Allen was the first civilian Superintendent of the hospital, and the first Matron was Joan MacLarty. The facilities at Baragwanath were converted to accommodate the Non-European section of the Johannesburg General Hospital and initially the hospital was called the Non-European Hospital (N.E.H.). Later the name Baragwanath was used, and the hospital was known to all as 'Bara'. The University of the Witwatersrand committed to use Baragwanath to train both black and white medical students. A hostel was erected for the black students on the southern boundary of the hospital grounds. In May 1948 the Non-European section of the Johannesburg General Hospital moved to Baragwanath. The first group of doctors to work at Bara was a mix of ex-army and civilian doctors from South Africa and the United Kingdom. The first generation of medical students included **Asher Dubb** (1928-2005) (Wits 1950), who later became Professor of Medicine at Bara, and worked at Bara until his retirement in early 1990, Thomas Bothwell (1926-2016) (Wits 1948), Emeritus Professor of Medicine and Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Wits (1992-1993) and Daniel Jacob 'Sonny' du Plessis (1918-1999) (Wits 1948), Professor of Surgery, Bara (1958-1977) and subsequent Vice Chancellor at Wits.



Jewish Doctors who served and taught at Bara

Throughout the years of Apartheid, there was a large contingent of Jewish doctors who served at Bara, and they were instrumental in providing teaching to the generations of students of Wits. They contributed immensely to research of diseases in the African patients.

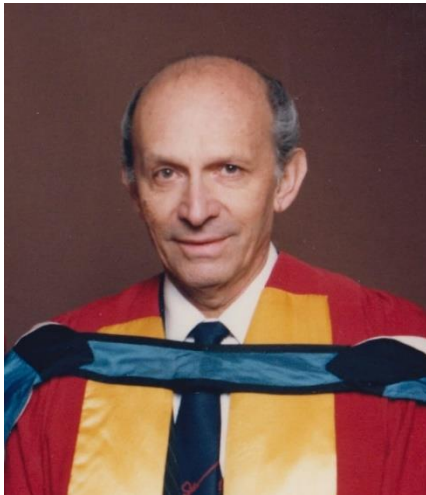
The second superintendent of Bara was **Dr Isidore Frack** (1900 -1975) (Wits 1926) who was appointed in 1957. Following the Sharpeville Massacre on the 21st of March 1960 in the black township of Sharpeville, near Vereeniging, many serious gunshot cases were sent to Bara. 'Operation Disaster' was put in place, wards were emptied of all patients who could be sent home, and emergency equipment was prepared. Frack stressed that 'everyone knew his or her job and I was a proud man that day'. Teamwork allowed the hospital to cope with 69 dead and 143 wounded and to perform 66 major operations in under twenty-four hours. Surgeons, anaesthetists and theatre nurses from various units acted in relays. In the aftermath of the shooting Frack was placed on compulsory leave. It was suggested that he had embarrassed the Government by stressing at a press conference that the victims were shot in the back. After threats that many of the hospital staff would leave the hospital with him, Frack was reinstated.



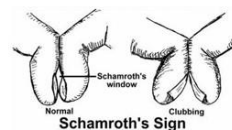
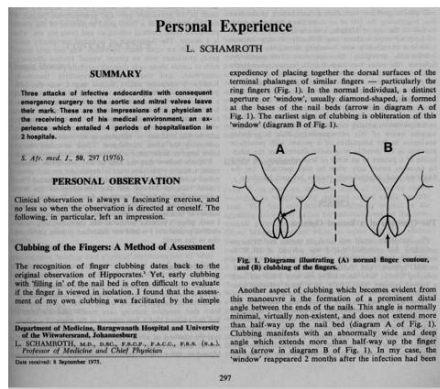
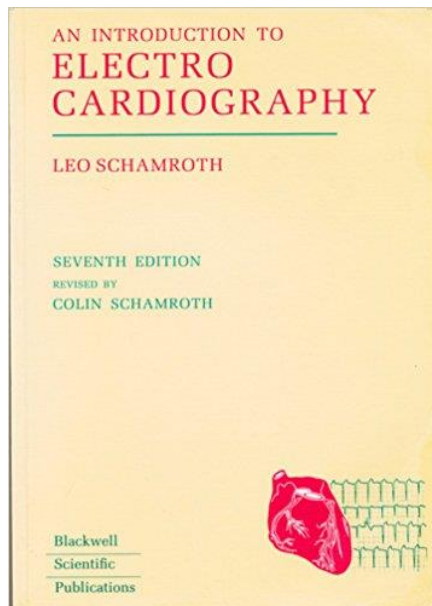
Sharpeville Massacre 21st March 1960

Department of Medicine

In the 1970s, the Department of Medicine was headed by **Leo Schamroth** (1924-1988) (Wits 1948), a world-renowned expert in electrocardiography. During his tenure from 1973 to 1987, he increased the medical units from 4 to 6. Five of the 6 medical units were headed by Jewish doctors – **Leo Schamroth**, **Morris “Maish” Perlman** (Wits 1961), **Asher Dubb** (Wits 1950), **Harold Louis ‘Leib’ Krut** (1928 -2022) (UCT 1952) and **Fay Segal** (1921-2017) (Wits 1944). Subspeciality divisions were established in the Department of Medicine and numerous were headed by Jewish doctors – **Issy Segal** (Wits 1962) gastroenterology, **Pinhas Sareli** (MD) cardiology and **Solly Hurwitz** (Wits 1964) pulmonology. In later years **David Blumsohn** (1932- 2021) (Wits 1954), referred to as ‘the conscience of Baragwanath’ by his colleagues took over Schamroth’s ward, **Dr Huntley Mendelsohn** (Wits 1972) headed a unit and **Professor Roy Shires** (Wits 1971) who established the Department of Endocrinology also headed a medical unit. Following the retirement of Leo Schamroth, Professor Ken Huddle (Wits 1974) was appointed head of the Department of Medicine. During Huddle’s tenure, the Division of Infectious Diseases was established and was headed by **Professor Alan Karstaedt** (Wits 1977) who was involved in research on HIV/AIDS.



Prof Leo Schamroth outside his office



Prof Asher Dubb



Prof David Blumsohn



Prof Fay Segal

The Department of Neurology was headed by **Professor Harry Reef** (1921-2004) (Wits 1945). In 1971 following his return from Harvard, Boston, USA, **Professor Seelig David Saffer** (Wits 1963) ran the Department. After qualifying in 1963 Saffer did his internship at Bara and spent numerous years there before going to the USA. Saffer worked as a consultant at the Forest Town School for children with cerebral palsy and specific learning disorders. He and **Dr Phillip Kushlick** (1905- 1991) a paediatrician, established the Phillip Kushlick School for Cerebral Palsy on the grounds of Bara. **Dr Max Rose** (1900-1967) was fulltime head of Dermatology from 1947

until his death in 1967. He built up a collection of transparencies of dermatological conditions which are housed in the Department of Medicine, Wits Medical School.

Department of Paediatrics

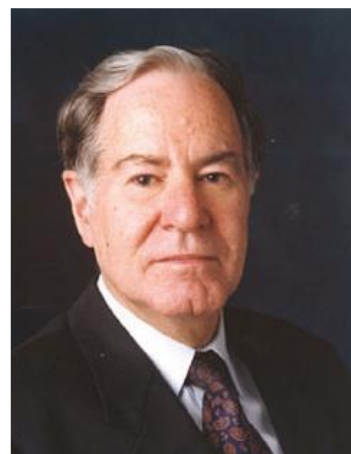
Similarly in the Department of Paediatrics, Jewish doctors played an important role. **Sam Wayburne** (1912-2007) (Wits 1936) was the Professor and Head of the Department of Paediatrics. In 1954 he and **Dr Erich J. Kahn** (1913-1990), a senior pediatrician, introduced the premature baby unit at Bara which resulted in lowered mortality amongst the prems. Kahn who had immigrated to South Africa from Nazi Germany, completed his medical education at Wits and specialized in Paediatrics. From 1950 to 1962 he headed the paediatric department at Bara. He emigrated to the USA in 1962 and was Professor Emeritus of Pediatrics at Columbia University College. **Harry Stein** (1925-2014) (Wits 1949) also served as Professor and Head of the Department. He started as a paediatric registrar at Bara in 1954 and remained there until his retirement in 1987. Numerous of the wards were headed by Jewish doctors such as **Les Rabinowitz**, **Eric U. Rosen** (1931-2020) and **Edith (Ida) Freiman** nee (Kalminowitz) (1925-2021) (Wits 1950). Freiman published the first article about an epidemic of severe bronchopneumonia associated with type-7 adenovirus in African children. Emeritus Professor **Lewis Spitz** (b.1939) served as consultant paediatric surgeon at Bara in 1972 and is world renowned for leading the surgical team at Great Ormond Street, London in its separation and treatment of conjoined twins.



Prof Sam Wayburne



Prof Harry Stein



Prof Lewis Spitz

Anaesthetics and Radiology

The first head of Anesthetics was **Hilde Ginsberg** (1911-2010) (Wits 1937), wife of Sam Wayburne, the Professor of Paediatrics. In 1953 Ginsberg was transferred to Baragwanath Hospital. She was responsible for a dramatic decrease in on-table deaths and postoperative mortality, which were attributed to improved training of junior staff and personal supervision of trainees. Ginsberg was instrumental in setting up the first Intensive Care unit. Professor **Albert Solomon** (Wits 1948) who became the Head of Radiology spent 13 years at Bara. In 1965 he was appointed Senior Consultant Radiologist at Bara and in 1970 he became Head of the Department. A year later he was appointed Chief Radiologist and in 1974 he was appointed to Chair of Radiology, attached to Baragwanath Hospital and the University of the Witwatersrand. His major radiological research interest and work was in the field of industrial lung disease, with special reference to the effects of asbestos inhalation.



Hilde Ginsberg (left) and Mollie Barlow (right) at the 25th South African Society of Anaesthetists Anniversary Congress 1969.

Department of Surgery

Following the transfer of Bara to the T.P.A, the Surgical Department consisted of four units and was headed by Mr L Fatti (1901-1981). Two units were headed by Jewish surgeons, one by **Sam Skapinker** (1918- 2005) (Wits 1941) who had served in the S.A.M.C. during the war and following his demobilization was appointed head. **Sholem Kay (1917-1992)** headed the second unit. He had also served in the S.A.M.C. during the war. Kay would subsequently create the specialized clinic of Head and Neck surgery at Wits. Two prominent vascular surgeons, **Len Stein (1918-2002)** (Wits 1944) and **Hymie Gaylis** (1921-2013) (Wits1946) were registrars at Bara hospital. **Sam Kleinot** (1904 -2000) (Wits) took over as head of Department from Mr Fatti. He had served as a Major in the S.A.M.C. during World War Two. At the time of the Sharpeville Massacre, he was the surgeon in charge of Bara, and it was reported that he was horrified to find that most of the dead and wounded had been shot in the back by the police. **Bernard 'Bokkie' Rabinowitz** (1930 -2012) (Wits 1955) joined the Department of Surgery in 1966 as the head of one of the five surgical units at Bara and spent over 30 years at Bara. In 1996 he became Superintendent of Bara. **Sam Berzin**, a Russian Jewish immigrant, headed up one of the surgical units in later years. The Neurosurgical Unit was headed by **Robert Lipschitz**, (1923-1996) (Wits 1946). He established a world class paraplegic care and rehabilitation centre for victims with spinal injuries. He made international news following the successful division of the Mathibela co-joint twins in 1988. His anesthetist was **Dr Bernice Peltz**.

Obstetrics and Gynaecology

The Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology was headed by Professor Emeritus **Cyril van Gelderen**, whose ancestors were Dutch Jews.

Department of Pathology

Dr Arthur Schmaman (1925-2009) (Wits 1948) worked in the Department of Pathology, Baragwanath Hospital and at the South African Institute for Medical Research (S.A.I.M.R.). He was co-author of numerous articles about diseases in the Africans. Dr **Robert (Bob) Cassel** (1912-1992) came to South Africa from Nazi. Germany. He had studied at the Universitat Berlin. During

World War Two he served in the S.A.M.C in the Middle East. He specialized in pathology and was a microbiologist. He joined the staff of the S.A.I.M.R. and headed many branch laboratories including Bara where he spent 25 years before being moved to Head Office.

Pharmacy

There were many other Jewish personnel attached to the hospital. **Saul Gordon** (1917-2006) ran the Pharmacy at Bara. Despite a limited budget and huge demands due to overcrowding at the hospital, he ran the pharmacy efficiently and tried to ensure that there was always sufficient medical supplies. Following the change of Government in 1994, he was promoted from Bara to Head Office by the Department of Health.

Reasons for working at Bara

Doctors worked at Bara for various reasons. It was known for its excellent teaching and doctors were exposed to a huge spectrum of diseases. The other was the camaraderie amongst the staff. It was stated that if one coped with the huge patient load due to overcrowding, one could cope with any scenario that was thrown at one.

Political Turmoil

The volatile political situations in South Africa during the years of Apartheid were experienced by the staff and included the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, the Soweto Riots of 1976 and the State of Emergency in the 1980s. Many staff members were vocal in their opposition to the Apartheid government's lack of care of the patients at Bara.

One major event was the crisis in 1987 when 101 doctors in the Department of Medicine cosigned a letter "Conditions at Baragwanath Hospital", which was published in the South African Medical Journal, 5th September 1987. This publication resulted in victimisation in particular of the junior staff members – interns and registrars who were threatened that they would be sacked and would never get any further training posts in the Department of Health. All the signatories were instructed to apologise for this publication as in the view of the Department of Health it constituted a contravention of their conditions of employment. Following initial

meetings with the hierarchy of the Department of Medicine at the University, they advised that all staff retract their statement and apologise. A number of junior staff and registrars refused to follow this advice. Forty-four junior staff members tendered an apology to the Director of Health. Five registrars who refused to retract their statement were eventually given a reprimand in April 1988, in the absence of the stipulated apology. They included **Naomi Rapeport** (Wits 1981) and **Allan Gordon** (Wits 1981), son of the pharmacist at Bara. During this time there was support from the medical doyens at the Universities of Cape Town and Kwa Zulu Natal – Professors S.R. Benatar, R.E. Kirsch and Y.K. Seedat. Only on the 14th of January 1988 did Wits Medical School hold a mass meeting to protest the disciplinary action against Baragwanath doctors. At the beginning of 1988 six junior doctors, **Beverley Traub** (Wits 1985), Linda Jivhuho (Wits 1986), Zolela Ngcwabe (Wits 1986), **Gideon Frame** (Wits 1986), Hubert Hon (Wits 1985) and **Mark Friedman** (Wits 1986) were refused jobs at Baragwanath Hospital following signing the letter published in October 1987, despite two of them having issued letters of apology. This matter then resulted in a Supreme Court case 4/88 between the Administrator of the Transvaal, Director of Hospital Service, Superintendent of Baragwanath Hospital and the six junior doctors. **Leo Schamroth** actively contributed to the outcome of judgement of the Supreme Court case, as he gave the senior counsel representing the junior doctors, copies of his correspondence with the Director of Hospital Services. The case was heard on 9 May 1989 and the Defendants were instructed to employ them. The ultimate outcome of this incident was the establishment of a commission of inquiry into the conditions at the hospital under Professor D.J. du Plessis, former vice-chancellor and head of the Department of Surgery at Wits. This resulted in private enterprise funding additional wards in the Department of Medicine with the addition of 325 beds. The hospital bed numbers increased to 3 400 beds, 850 of them in the Department of Medicine. Despite assurances by the then Department of Health that another hospital was in advanced planning stages and would be built to service the population of Soweto, Baragwanath remained the only hospital serving the population of Soweto until May 2014 when Zola Jabulani (Bheki Mlangeni) Hospital was opened with 300 beds. This hospital provides accident and emergency services, gynaecology, obstetrics, radiology, outpatient and pharmaceutical services

After Apartheid

In spite of the abolition of Apartheid in 1994 and the end of racial segregation in the country, many Jewish doctors chose to remain at Bara and continued to serve the impoverished community of Soweto. They included **David Blumsohn**, **Alan Karstaedt**, **Roy Shires**, **Pinhas Sareli** in the Department of Medicine, **Carlos Libhaber** Department of Nuclear Medicine, **Raymond Setzen** (Wits 1978) Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology and **Martin Smith** Head of the Department of Surgery to name a few.

Although two books have been written about Baragwanath Hospital, neither cover in detail the important contribution of Jewish as well as non-Jewish colleagues who devoted their lives to the hospital. The first book was in celebration of 50 years of Bara and was dedicated to the pathology that doctors encountered in the Black population. The second book published by Simmone Horwitz is an overview covering the socio-political situation at Bara during the Apartheid years and is based on interviews of numerous colleagues undertaken in 2004-2005.

Over the past seven decades, thousands of doctors have passed through the portals of Bara and have gone on to contribute to the advancement of medicine internationally. The clinical training that they received at Bara, both as under- and post-graduates, has contributed to the excellence of medicine worldwide.

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