



The Horner Story

The Horner Story as told by Ruth (Horner) Mibashan

I have written this piece from my memories and from stories told to me by my parents, including my mother's written notes of her past. I have also drawn from a book compiled by my sister Judy, called "Remember Judy....", conversations and stories told to her by my parents on their frequent visits to her in Durban, and which she recorded.

My parents, Alexander and Hannah Horner, came to South Africa from Palestine in 1930, and they moved to Brooklyn in 1939. We were four children, Judy, Ruth, Israel Jakob (Jack) and Joseph. Although we lived in Brooklyn, we all attended the junior school in Maitland, as well as cheder and Shul. In that sense, Maitland played a very central part in our early years.

Alexander Horner was born in 1901 in the Jewish Quarter of Krakow in Poland. His was a Chasidic family. Living in the house with him were his brother, Meyer, three sisters and a cousin. Their father, Markus, had a small shop selling cheeses, butter, eggs, milk, herrings and other delicatessen. He was also the cantor of the big Shul.

In 1914 Markus was drafted into the Polish Army, leaving his wife and the children to care for the cheese shop. During these war years there were local pogroms, and when my father was a teenager he joined the Jewish Defense Force. Using weapons acquired from demobilized soldiers, this group was sent to various small towns to protect Jewish lives against pogroms.

My father was not yet a Zionist, but it was then that he decided that Poland was not for the Jews. At the age of 18 he organized the Jewish youth and filled them with enthusiasm for going to Palestine, and he was soon appointed the leader of the group. They trained on a farm, learning how to grow vegetables, toughening up, and preparing for Palestine. Others joined the group when they heard about it, and in 1920 they left for Palestine as chalutzim.

They travelled via Czechoslovakia and then to Vienna to pay homage at Herzl's grave, where they were attacked by Viennese Nazi-type hooligans. They then continued by boat to Palestine. My father's extended family had remained in Poland. For many years, and after trying to search for family, my father thought that he was the only one of his family to survive the Holocaust, but subsequently some of his Frankfurt uncle's family were traced. In the late 1950s, his cousin's daughter, Mathilde, who was living in Belgium, tried to trace her missing father, Alexander Friedman. He had told her that he had a cousin in South Africa with whom he had stayed in Jerusalem. The two Alexanders had been raised since birth by the Horners in Krakow, and were very close. Mathilde, thinking that her father might have escaped from Europe and may have tried to reach his cousin (my father) in South Africa, searched for her father via the South African Jewish Chronicle.



Mistakenly she searched for Horner, not Friedman, and she found my father instead. She subsequently found that her father had perished in the Shoah. Another two cousins left Frankfurt just before the war, and quite fortuitously my mother learned about them in Tel Aviv many years later when a stranger asked if she was related to

the Horner brothers in London. Another of the Frankfurt sisters made it to the USA, and some years ago while on a trip to the States, I made contact with that family and met up with them.

On their arrival in Palestine, the group was sent to level the dunes for the expanding city of Tel Aviv. They were then sent to work in establishing the new kibbutz Kiryat Anavim near Jerusalem, moving rocks and building the road.

My father did not like the kibbutz approach, as they were paid weekly with cigarettes. He didn't smoke and requested chocolates instead, but he wasn't given these. Bypassers thought he was crazy, as he worked so much harder than anyone else.

My father eventually left his group and found work as a watchman or laborer in various places, from Petach Tikva to Metula in the far north. In swampy Hadera he worked putting up telegraph lines, and it was here that he contracted malaria and was hospitalized in Haifa. He was told that he should not do any physical work for two years, as his liver had been affected by the malaria.

My father was a keen violinist, and he had taken his violin with him when he left Poland, and it had remained with him constantly. He heard that an orchestra was being organized in Jerusalem, and so he went to Jerusalem, applied, and became a fully-fledged member of the Palestine Symphony Orchestra as leader of the second violins. Years later this became the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra.

My father heard that the British Police were also forming an orchestra and musicians were needed, and so he applied to the British Police Orchestra. They told him it was a brass band and they did not need a violinist, but they would accept him if he could play the clarinet. My father convinced them that he could play the clarinet, and he quickly borrowed an instrument, practiced, and was accepted into the police band, becoming the main clarinetist. He was given a good wage, and he was able to rent a room in the Montefiore Building near the Montefiore Windmill.

A small group of the police band was used to guard the Government House, and the Jazz Band played there to entertain the guests of Sir Herbert Samuel, the first High Commissioner in Palestine. It was there that my father met the Mufti of Jerusalem, Rabbi Kook, King Abdullah, and others.

Levelling the dunes around Tel Aviv.



My father is on the extreme left.



My father is standing on the extreme right.



The Police Band, near Jaffa Gate.

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Unfortunately my father broke his arm playing football, and his dreams of being a professional violinist ended. He continued playing the clarinet in both orchestras, and he also joined the Jazz Band which was part of the police band, becoming their saxophonist.

My father was an amazing athlete and won all the prizes, both cash and medals, in the annual Police Sports Day events. He was known as the fastest runner in the Middle East.



Guarding the High Commissioner's house in Jerusalem.



The Montefiore building in Yemin Moshe below the Windmill, where my father was given the last room on the right-hand side.

Today it has been converted to a hotel.



*Saxophonist in the Jazz Band.
My father is at the back on the left.*



*The Jazz Band.
My father is at the back on the right.*

The police really took a liking to him, and when he decided to get an education, having only gone to Standard 3 in school in Krakow, and on being accepted into a new high school in Jerusalem, he was given time off by the police to attend school in the afternoons. He obtained his matriculation after just three years. His education had thus started at the age of 26. His prizes from the Sports Day events were used to pay the school fees and for books.

After he matriculated, my father decided that he wanted to become a doctor. The police assisted him to apply for a scholarship abroad to study medicine, and he was accepted. The papers with funding were due to be sent to him in Jerusalem.

For many years my father remained in contact with his young classmates, and even attended their Barmitzvahs. One of them was Yehuda Golan, who was the first Israeli Consul in South

Africa, and in 1949 my father was invited to sing in Cape Town at the Havdalah ceremony on the first anniversary of the State of Israel.

At one stage, Zeev Vilnai, a geographer, who later became a military topographer in the Haganah and a professor at the Hebrew University, requested the British Police to give him a guard to travel around the Middle East. My father was chosen, and the two travelled all over the Middle East on horseback, from Egypt to Damascus and Beirut. Vilnai wrote the first travel book on Palestine, and my father became acquainted with every inch of the country.

Hannah Sofer, my mother, had two brothers and three sisters. Her father was a scribe. Her family came from Radomsko in Poland. At the age of 15, she organized her extended family and arranged things, and in 1924, during her matriculation year, they all left for Palestine. They came to live in Neve Tzedek in Tel Aviv, in a house with a courtyard and many rooms around it for the different families.



*The Sofer family from Radomsko
after arrival in Neve Tzedek.
My mother is at the back on the left.*

Esther, the oldest of the sisters, went back to Poland to get married. She stayed there, and perished with her husband and baby in the Holocaust.



*Aunt Sara and my mother
with Judy and me (1939).*

A younger sister, Sara, came to South Africa from Tel Aviv in 1939 and initially stayed with us in Brooklyn. She later married Jack Bobrov in Cape Town, and in the 1970s they returned to Israel, settling in Savyon.

The youngest sister, Yaffa, married a British soldier in Jerusalem, Brian Clarke, and lived in London with her family until her death in 1984.

One of her brothers, Mordechai, continued their father's occupation in Israel as a scribe, and the youngest, Arieh, joined the Palmach at the age of 16 years. He was injured, and six bullets remained lodged in his abdomen for the rest of his life.

My mother left the crowded house in Neve Tzedek and joined a class of Child Care studies in Jerusalem. In order to pay for the classes, she worked as a cashier in a café and she sewed for a dress shop. She was chosen from all the girls in the class to care for the children of Thelma Yellin-Bentwich in Jerusalem.

She was later employed to be the nanny of the children of the British High Commissioner. The High Commissioner would entertain overseas guests, and the Jazz Band would often provide the music, and this is where she had contact with my father, as she provided the musicians with the left-over sandwiches. She had already met him and had been attracted to him at the Sports Day events, where by her own admission, she initially fell in love with his legs.

In 1929 when the riots broke out in Jerusalem, my father was told that he was to be a regular policeman, and he was armed and sent together with another Jewish policeman and two Arab policemen to guard the small evacuated suburb of Bayit VeGan, which was being attacked by nearby Arabs. One of the Arab policemen stabbed the Jewish policeman to death, and he tried to kill my father.

My mother, his girlfriend at the time, reported that the next day there were leaflets nailed to the trees in downtown Jerusalem: “HORNER, ALIVE OR DEAD, 1,000 POUNDS”. It is assumed that my father must have “dealt with” the two Arab policemen, as he survived. The police advised him to leave the country as soon as he could, and they gave him travel papers with a different name, as he would not have gotten through Jaffa port, where there were many Arabs, if he were to have used his original name. My parents got married in Tel Aviv in October, before leaving for Europe.



27 October 1929
My parents' wedding photo.

My father never told us the exact details of that episode, even though I often asked him about the big scar on his arm, but many years later, I heard some of the rest of the 1929 event. My mother's young sister Sara, then aged 12, was sent by her father by bus from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem to buy ink and parchment for his scribing work. The shop was on Jaffa Street in Jerusalem. She was to do this and take the bus directly back to Tel Aviv. Unfortunately, this was in September 1929, and the riots had started, so there were no more buses back to Tel Aviv that day. My mother, who was still working and living in the High Commissioner's house, told her that she should go to my father's room in Mishkenot Sha'ananim to sleep, as he was on duty. She did this. However, my father turned up later, bleeding profusely from his arm, and carrying the corpse of his friend. Sara helped to tie his wound with a torn sheet and washed the front of his uniform. Carrying the corpse, he then continued down the hill to the Police Station, the Kishle, in the Old City. My aunt Sara told me this story many years later. She lived to a great age.

On leaving Palestine, my parents went to Krakow to await the papers for university which were to be sent on to them there, but they never arrived. My father was quite a sight to the Chasidim in Krakow, with his shaven head, no peyot, tanned, and wearing sandals and short trousers, but my mother was a hit. They all fussed over “what Sender brought back from Palestine”. They liked her very much, and they showed her off to all the neighbors.

My parents met a couple that my father knew from a trip to Egypt, who were planning to travel to Africa where they had an uncle in Cape Town, Reverend Rabinowitz. My father was told that the roads were paved with gold. Feeling they had no other option, and after visiting family in Frankfurt and Paris, my parents did odd jobs to earn money for the boat trip. My mother worked in a Chinese laundry, while my father did mainly manual labor. They borrowed money for the South African immigration fee, and set off separately for Cape Town, my father going ahead.

Upon arriving in Cape Town, he enrolled for Medicine at UCT, and he was accepted on condition that he re-did the English matric exam. He attended university during the day, and then in the afternoon he attended classes at the Technical College in order to pass the English

exam. In the evenings he earned a living as a musician. This was still the era of silent movies, and he would play in the cinemas. He also played in the Railways Band in the Cape Town City Gardens, and on the pier in the docks.

My father was contacted by Mr. Jacob Gitlin, who owned a large furniture firm. Mr. Gitlin kindly offered him a travelling job in his firm to collect payments and new orders from his customers. He did not satisfy Mr. Gitlin's expectations regarding the orders, and so rather than just collecting money, he resigned from Mr. Gitlin's firm.

After completing two years of studying medicine, he could no longer earn money, as the era of silent movies had come to an end. He suspended his studies, intending to continue at some time in the future. That never happened, but he would later see three of his children qualify as doctors. My father tried various kinds of work, working as a laborer.

Soon after arriving in Cape Town, my mother became the Matron of Hillel College, a Jewish boys boarding school in Muizenberg, run by Colonel and Mrs. Rebecca Levensohn.



My mother on Muizenberg beach with a boys class of Hillel College (left) and another class (right).

She resigned when she became pregnant, and they moved to a room in Mouille Point. They opened a cinema café in Sea Point, but this was not a success, so like most immigrants, my father started working as a travelling salesman, loading goods onto a bicycle and pushing it around. He started out buying things at sales and selling them, and gradually he increased his clientele. My mother helped with his efforts in many ways. She sewed jackets and other goods for his customers to buy. My father wasn't very good at this, as his customers became friends more than clients, and he would invite them to his home for tea, and to hear me playing on the piano.

My father was a small-time merchant and also a small-time builder of houses. He bought a few plots of land cheaply on auction in Brooklyn, just to the north of Maitland. This isolated land was situated between two large dairy farms. We lived at "Shalom" on Festival Road. This was a large square house that my father built. He started developing the garden with fruit trees and vegetables, dug a well for water, acquired two cows, chickens, ducks, and two goats, and so the children had fresh milk, eggs and cheese every day. Friends of his who had arrived in Cape Town around the same time that he had, and who had succeeded



Three children with the goat (1941).



This is me looking after the duck pond at the bottom of the garden (ca. 1947).

financially, would visit him every weekend, and they were quite entertained by this rather weird life style. My father was interested in health, education and music, and he was not prepared to take risks with money.

After World War II, the land of the dairy farms, which by then were closed, was used by the government to build many small attached houses for the soldiers returning from the war in North Africa. Encouraged by my mother, my father bought more land around their property and started building small family houses for sale or rent. In this way he managed to accumulate

enough money to improve the family's standard of living, and later to gradually send money to Israel, where my brother Jack had been living since 1962. Jack bought land in Ramat Motza, a developing area near Jerusalem, and had a house built for the family.

My father had a wonderful bass voice, and he complemented his income by singing in Cape Town Shul choirs, originally in Sea Point, then the Vredehoek Shul, then the Schoonder Street Shul, and then back to the Vredehoek Shul. Maitland Shul didn't have a choir, and they weren't keen on his Sephardi accent in Hebrew, where the Ashkenazi accent was used for all prayers.

My father also did solo singing in Shul at weddings in Cape Town and as far afield as Paarl and Worcester. To accompany his singing, he would use the organist who accompanied the chazzan, but later this became my duty. He used to sing opera too, and he once gave a solo performance with the Cape Town Orchestra in the City Hall.

During our school-going years, my mother was the homemaker. She looked after us, cared for our needs, and cooked and baked bread daily. When we were somewhat older, she completed her matriculation at the Technical College and then joined the team of Hebrew teachers in Cape Town.

I remember our cheder teacher, Rev Efron, and the other teacher, Mr. Smolensky, who was a teacher at the cheder during my junior years at Maitland Primary School, around 1944 to 1948.

Other Jewish families I remember from Brooklyn are the Waldman family, Arthur and Pearl. They had a small grocery store on the main street. There was a son, Ivan, who was at Maitland High School with me (I found him years later in Israel), and a daughter, Ada. There was also the Plotkin family whose two children were Cecil and Debbie.

My older sister Judy went to high school at Good Hope Seminary, and then trained as a radiographer. She married Mervyn Hackner from Durban, and they lived in Durban where they raised their three children, Mark, Allan and Elaine. Mark married Valerie and settled in New Zealand, and they have three children, Helena, Luc and Nico. Allan married Jenny. They have two daughters, Kahla and Jamie, and they are all living in Johannesburg. Elaine and her two sons Joshua and Mikyle are living in Cape Town. Judy and Mervyn moved to a nursing home in Johannesburg, where Mervyn died in 2020. Judy is still living in Johannesburg.

I stayed at Maitland High School through to matric and then completed medical studies at UCT

in 1960. I trained as a paediatrician at Groote Schuur Hospital and Red Cross Children's Hospital, becoming a Consultant Paediatrician. When the Six-Day War broke out in 1967, my mother and I left for Jerusalem, where I went as a volunteer. We arrived on the first flight from South Africa that was allowed after the start of the war. We arrived at the semi-completed house in Ramat Motza in Jerusalem that my brother Jack had arranged to be built for our parents. I was told I was not needed as a volunteer, as the war was over, so I started working as a paediatrician, initially at Shaarei Zedek Hospital, and very soon after that, in 1968, I was asked by the



Standard 10A (1953).

I was with the boys class in the academic stream.

BACK: Benny Boob, Harold Cohen, Ralph Bub, two teachers, Sammy Berger, Colin Greenwood (played rugby for South Africa), Leslie Gray

FRONT: Walter Lotz, Ruth Horner, Ursula Stemmett, Dawn Staude, Shirley Bradshaw, Audrey Dunstan, William Olsen

obstetricians at Hadassah Hospital to establish a Neonatal Unit at their hospital. This was an innovation at the time, as Neonatology was not yet a known entity, but I had had the unique experience of having worked with newborns in Cape Town. Despite my age (I was 30 at the time), I was drafted into the IDF as I was a doctor. I served as an officer in the Central Command in Tel Aviv, returning every afternoon to work in the Neonatal Unit and to complete some laboratory work which was needed to receive consultant status in Israel. I subsequently went to London, where I married ex-Capetonian Reuben Sougin Mibashan in 1973. Reuben was well known in Cape Town (and Maitland at the time). He was one of the wonderful tutors at UCT in those early days of medicine. His brilliant academic mind won him all the class gold medals in all the subjects in medical school, except for one. Most doctors who qualified in Cape Town in the 1950s and 1960s would have gone through training by Reuben at Groote Schuur Hospital. In London, Reuben worked as a Professor of Haematology, while I changed track from Neonatology to Paediatric Community Health and Audiology. We continued to live and work there. We had no children. Reuben died in 2001, and in 2009 I returned to Israel alone, since which time I have been living in a retirement establishment in Jerusalem.

My brother Jack went to high school at SACS, and then on to UCT where he qualified as an MBChB in 1961. Immediately after qualifying, he left Brooklyn and went to Israel, where he completed his internship and specialist training at Tel HaShomer Hospital in Tel Aviv, and he has remained in Israel. Jack was a doctor in the IDF at the time of the Six-Day War, and his unit fought in the north in the bloody battle of Tel Faher in the capture of the Golan Heights. He received an award for bravery after this battle. Jack returned to Cape Town twice many years later with his family, for additional specialist physician training. He married Nurit Bar-On in Israel and they had twins, Shlomit and Chai. Shlomit (now Eliyahu) married an Indian Jew on the kibbutz, who had come from Kochi (Cochin) with the Indian aliyah, and they had three children on the kibbutz, Aviv, Nitzan and Neta. Jack also brought up three other children from Nurit's previous marriage. Nurit died in 2014. Jack has now retired and is living with Shlomit on Kibbutz Givat Haim (Meuhad).

My brother Joseph, the youngest, went to high school at Herzlia, and then to UCT where he qualified as a doctor. He then went to Israel where he completed his internship at Tel HaShomer Hospital. During the Six-Day War he worked at Poriah Hospital in the north, where he received injured soldiers who were brought by helicopter from the Golan Heights battles, many of whom had his brother Jack's medical report attached to them. In 1969 he returned to Cape Town to continue his surgical training at Groote Schuur Hospital, and then to England where he became a Consultant Surgeon in the UK, and where he still is today. He married Pamela McEvoy in London and they have three children, Deborah, Michael and Daniel, all living in the UK. Deborah (now Rider) has two children, Emma and Tom. Daniel has three children, Cameron, Liam and Maxwell. Joseph has now retired.

In 1969, after completing a house he was building in Goodwood, and after undergoing surgery, my father sold up everything in Brooklyn and left for Jerusalem, to join my mother in Ramat Motza. He hadn't told my mom about his surgery as he didn't want her to worry. Joe was in Cape Town at the time, doing surgery training, and he took care of my father.



My father showing an aunt of mine a house he had just finished building in Goodwood (ca. 1969).

Because of my mother's asthma, my parents later moved to Arad, about 130 kilometers south of Ramat Motza. Every year they travelled to Durban to my sister Judy, then to London to be with Joe or myself, and then returned to Jerusalem. In 1991, at the age of 90, my father died from a pulmonary

venous thrombosis, resulting from an exceptionally prolonged flight from South Africa. He had been reading a book of Arab poetry before he died. In 1998, also at the age of 90, my mother died from a head injury. Just days before, she had been giving yoga lessons in the retirement home where she stayed. My parents are both buried in Arad.



July 1972



Ramat Motza 1974/75



My parents were visiting Judy in Durban on their 50th wedding anniversary (September 1979).



*1961, just before Jack left for Israel.
My parents (seated) with Judy's
first two children, Mark and Allan.
At the back, from left to right: Jack, Ruth, Judy, Joe.*



The house in Ramat Motza.



*My father doing a headstand as
part of his yoga, while visiting
South Africa (early 1980s).*



*Reuben at King's College
London (ca. 1990).*



*A recent picture of me
(2024).*