

Oudtshoorn Max Rose

Max Rose, known for nearly fifty years as the 'ostrich feather king of South Africa', not only had a greater knowledge of the ostrich feather market than any man alive, but also knew vastly more about the breeding of birds and the growth of the right sort of feathers than most other farmers in the Oudtshoorn and surrounding districts. He took a scientific interest in the life of the ostrich and there were few points on which he had to yield to the knowledge of those who had been handling ostriches in captivity *van toeka se dae*. He knew the historical background of the ostrich as a creature of the desert, he knew the bird's idiosyncrasies from the day it was hatched until old age. He knew especially the great difficulties in rearing the young chicks until they had reached the stage when they were ripe for their first plucking.

His knowledge of the world markets for ostrich feathers was limitless, and the local farmers drew heavily upon this at all stages of the industry's mercurial career. He was always consulted by the government on matters affecting the industry. He had an ability to analyse and anticipate changing social habits and fashions of the world's great cities— London, Paris, New York, Vienna, Berlin— and link these with the fashions of the day. He seemed to know in advance of all others what particular type of feather would be in favour in six months' or even a year's time. This was naturally of great advantage to the farmers; and it was inevitable, in spite of the heavy blow he sustained during the slump following World War I, that he should grow in stature and popularity with the passing of every year. It was small wonder that on his death in 1951 farmers came from far and wide to pay their last respects to the man who for half a century was so vital a figure in the industry.

Max Rose arrived in Oudtshoorn from Shavel in 1890, at the age of just under seventeen. He was one of five brothers and three sisters who migrated to the New World. A year later he went to Ladismith, with which town Oudtshoorn Jewry always had close links, especially with the Hoffland, Mann, Broido, Nurick, Gordon, and Rose families. Ladismith was the home town of Selina Gordon, later Selina Hirsch, who was said to be the first Jewess to graduate at the old South African College, and who later became a Transvaal M.P.C.

Max Rose started life at the Cape in the traditional way by *smousing*, but soon gave that up, and in partnership with Isaac Nurick opened a shop at Zoar near the mission station of Amalienstein in the Ladismith district. Before they dissolved partnership, Max had already begun running ostriches on hired land. In 1906, he bought the farm Weltevreden in the Ladismith district for £18,000, spent £54,000 on improvements, mostly in constructing canals for irrigation, and in 1913 sold the farm to a company for £200,000. He received in cash £100,000 and the other half in shares in the company. Then came the collapse of the ostrich feather market, and years later the farm changed hands at £15,000.

It was at Ladismith that Max Rose amassed his first big fortune from ostrich feathers only to see it all crumble before his eyes as the slump set in on the eve of the outbreak of World War I. He returned in 1914 to Oudtshoorn to throw all his energies, financial resources, and marketing skill into an attempt to keep the market from collapsing altogether. He came back to find ostriches selling at 7s. 6d. each, birds whose proud plumes had once touched £40, £50, and £60 a pound. The long succeeding years of depression, however, did not break Max Rose's spirit, and he lived to write a fresh chapter both in the history of the ostrich feather industry and his own financial rehabilitation.

In 1917, Max Rose was appointed by the Union Government to the Ostrich Feather Commission, which was asked to inquire into 'the present depressed condition of the ostrich industry' and to

suggest measures for placing the industry on a better basis. Rose disagreed with the findings of his fellow-commissioners and put in a minority report. Even in those dark days for the industry, Rose foresaw the revival one day of the ostrich feather's popularity. When it came, it might last for twenty-five years, he then said.

His brothers, Barney, Albert and Wulf, were closely associated with him in his feather- and produce-dealing enterprises though they were not always resident at Oudtshoorn. In fact, Albert and Barney made a great reputation in England during World War II, by running at Hounslow the largest single vegetable farm, seventy morgen in extent, in Britain's 'Dig for Victory' campaign. But far distant as were their later enterprises, the roots of their success lay in the Oudtshoorn and Ladismith districts which regard them very much as their own. Barney Rose, who followed Max to the Cape in 1897, later married Miss Golda Broido of Ladismith. He and his wife left for London in 1909 to look after the marketing side of his brother's vast ostrich feather business, and they remained in London for forty years.