

Oudtshoorn, Ostriches and the Jewish Community

The ostrich industry transformed Oudtshoorn from a small village into a prosperous town, with 'Feather Palaces' and other grand buildings springing up. The Jewish Community was part of every facet of that industry.

Ostriches – wild from time immemorial

Ostriches are indigenous to Southern and Northern Africa. They have been used for hundreds of years by the San people for their meat and eggs. The eggs were first used as a source of food then the empty shell was used for storing water, by burying water-filled eggs.



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But as Europeans settled in the countries of Southern Africa, they saw the wild animals as 'game'. The ostrich's beautiful fluffy feathers became a popular fashion item in the early 1800s for hats and boas – and fans. In 1821 the Cape of Good Hope exported 1,230 kg of ostrich feathers. Once plentiful, ostriches were relentlessly hunted and retreated to the harsh deserts of the Karoo and the price of feathers rose.

Ostriches managed from the 1850s



Apart from Afrikaners who farmed in the area, Britain sent out people to settle the area in the 1850s. These were mainly British and Germans – though there might have been Jews in the mix. Seeing the potential, entrepreneurial farmers of the Oudtshoorn district pioneered the domestication of ostriches in the 1850's. The ostriches were farmed in large fenced off areas and began breeding. It was a hit and miss affair

until 1869 with the invention of the incubator for ostrich eggs, by Arthur Douglass. This reduced many of the hazards and increased production. The farmers introduced lucerne to feed their flocks.

Most farmers gathered five plumages over about five years after which the quality of the feathers deteriorated significantly. A boom started in 1875. In the 1880s the ostrich feather industry became a significant factor in the South African economy. It was the country's fourth largest and most valuable export, after gold, diamonds and wool.

The Jewish Community arrives in numbers

The boom of Ostrich Feathers around Oudtshoorn in the early 1880s attracted many Jews who were emigrating to escape hardships and restrictions in Lithuania. They came to the area particularly from the town of Shavel and the nearby village of Kelme. They were ideally suited to set up as feather buyers, going around to the Afrikaner farms where they bought the feathers, selling them to the dealers who exported them to the fashion industry in Europe and America. They established good relations with the Afrikaans speaking farmers, trading with them also for other goods. Their Afrikaner neighbours in 1886, helped them to acquire land and build a synagogue which opened in Queen Street in 1888 which came to be known (by the opposition) as Der Englishe shul. The Kelme Jews, more pious and requiring facilities for daily prayer and study, broke away in 1892 to start their own synagogue nearby in St John's Street – know by the 'originals as **The Griener Synagogue**. (See more details of the synagogues on the synagogue page)



The first Hebrew School in Oudtshoorn was conducted by the Minister, Rev. M. Woolfson, who wore his top hat when this photograph was taken at the turn of the century.

The first Jewish government school in South Africa opened in Oudtshoorn in 1904. Rev M Woolfson, the minister at Queen Street until 1947, is wearing his top hat in this picture.

The community was so prominent in the last decade of the 19th and first decade of the 20th century that the town was

dubbed *Der Kleine Yerusahalayim b'dorem afrika* (the little Jerusalem of Southern Africa).

Between 1883 and 1890, 37 of the 50 Jews in Oudtshoorn who were naturalized as citizens of the Cape Province, gave their occupation as 'feather buyer' and two others were feather sorters. Many of the buyers walked from farm to farm, carrying their feathers in a bag slung over their backs. By 1910 there were 277 licensed feather buyers in the area, almost all of them Jews. As the Jewish population increased, so did the scope of their activities. Many newcomers became general traders or *smouse*, (as they had done in the old country) traveling between the farms with donkeys and a cart, selling all kinds of household wares to the farmers. They also became shopkeepers and hoteliers in the town as well as diversifying into all aspects of the feather trade.

From just buying ostrich feathers they went on to sorting, brokering, trading, auctioneering and ultimately also farming ostriches and were innovative and entrepreneurial in producing ostrich feathers themselves. They prospered. Amongst the early entrepreneurs was **Max Rose**, who arrived in 1890 and after ten years became the unrivalled 'feather baron' in the whole of South Africa.

The Feather Barons, both Jewish and not, built sumptuous sandstone houses in the early 20th century known as 'Feather Palaces' such as Welgeluk below.



Oudtshoorn's Jews steadily integrated into the white mainly British community, becoming deeply involved in civic life. At one stage, the mayor and two of the councillors were Jewish, as was the district surgeon, the medical officer of health and a member of the municipal school board. In 1899 **Moritz Aschman** was elected to the municipal council, serving on the School and Hospital Boards and for several years was he was the president of the Jewish Philanthropic Society. **Arthur Jacobson** opened a law office in the town in 1893. In 1903 he was appointed Justice of the Peace for Oudtshoorn and in 1914 he was the first Jew to become Mayor of Oudtshoorn.

Language and Politics

Politically the town became polarised between the exclusively anti-British, rural Afrikaners who supported the National Party and pro-British Afrikaners, the English and most Jews who aligned themselves with Louis Botha and Jan Smuts's (United Party) a pattern strengthened through Smuts' affinity with Zionism.

Would English or Afrikaans become the language of choice for communication, education and as the spoken tongue at home? Yiddish was usually spoken in the home. English was a symbol of middle-class status and was considered to be the 'proper' language for the 'town' Jews who wished to be associated with the English businessmen who lived in the town. The community's pro-British attitudes led many to side with Britain during the Anglo Boer War of 1899-1902, even though many Afrikaners viewed the British as occupiers and fought with the Boers. Those Jews who lived outside the town in the surrounding villages and did business with the farmers, usually spoke Afrikaans.

The Boom Times and the Bad

The industry thrived through the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and the decade that followed. The first indication of problems came in 1911 with signs of overproduction and increasing competition, especially from California.



The Reconstructed shopwindow of Isaac Nurick who was a successful Ostrich Feather Dealer established in 1887.

With so many ostrich farmers, the supply of feathers grew – and so the price dropped. The best quality feathers were still commanding high prices. The South African ostrich breeders realised that the only way they could continue to dominate the world market was to produce the best feathers in the world. This led to the fascinating clandestine expedition in 1911 by the South African government to North Africa to seek out and capture the Barbary Ostrich. The expedition returned with 141 birds which became the nucleus of South Africa's feather industry and cross-breeding with the Barbary Ostrich produced the double-fluff quality feathers. (see the 'Articles' page for stories of this clandestine expedition).

1913 brought a bumper crop of high-quality feathers with the price of the finest double-fluff feathers reaching very high prices – such as the ostrich feather industry would never reach again.

At the beginning of the First World War in 1914, the feather industry suddenly crashed. The feather and the millinery trade came to an abrupt end. Reasons were probably the war in Europe, and the economy, the emergence of the motor car that limited large hats and the emergence in the USA of the Audubon Society and the Suffragettes who were campaigning against slaughtering animals to beautify humans.

80% of the ostrich farmers were bankrupted, and the ostriches were set loose or slaughtered for biltong. Domesticated ostriches numbered 314,000 in 1918 but had plummeted to 32,000 by 1930. In 1940, there were only 2,000 ostriches left the Oudtshoorn district.

After the Second World War (1939-1945), the ostrich trade slowly recovered. In the 1930s the Jews experienced antisemitism and arson of their business and buildings. But some were resilient and stayed on. Today, ostriches are still farmed in the Oudtshoorn area, and the industry expanded

from feathers to include skins popular as leather fashion items and their meat, which is prized for its low-cholesterol content. And there is a brand-new source of income – tourism.

Many Jewish families left Oudtshoorn after losing their livelihood. Farmers who had been millionaires one day found themselves poverty stricken the next. Some held on. At one time, before the bust, there were said to be 600 Jewish families in the area of Oudtshoorn and surrounding villages. That was halved by the bust and has continued to decline. In 1955 there were only 150 Jewish families. In 1973 the St John's Street synagogue closed and its Ark is now resplendent in the CP Nel Museum in the Jewish section.

The history of Oudtshoorn and the ostrich as well as the Jewish Community will be forever interwoven.

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Compiled by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London 2025

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Read about the clandestine expedition by the South African government across the Sahara to secure Barbary Ostriches for cross breeding in South Africa so that they would continue to have the best quality plumes. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/great-ostrich-heist>

And also here

<https://flank.wordpress.com/2017/09/27/the-trans-saharan-ostrich-expedition/#:~:text=And%20so%20in%201911%2C%20the%20South%20African,sailed%20from%20Cape%20Town%20in%20August%201911.>