

The Simon Family Story – Isy and Tilly

from children Arthur, Ethne and Glenda

Where we come from

Isy Simon, our dad, was born in Standerton in 1905. His parents were **Aaron and Gute Riva**, and with their assumed last name 'Simon', they emigrated from Russia in the late 1800s. They established an inn on the banks of the Vaal River at a place called Robert's Drift near Standerton. After finishing high school, Isy bought a sheep farm and became a farmer for a few years.

'The Simon Timber and Hardware Company'

The great depression hit in the early '30's and he was forced to leave the farm. He found his way to Krugersdorp where he landed a job working for Hillman Brothers, a timber and hardware company. After a few years he established a relationship with **Sam Super** and his two brothers, **Louis and Eddie**, and they opened their own timber and hardware business in Roodepoort. This became a landmark establishment in the growing town and was named '**The Simon Timber and Hardware Company**'

Tilly Simon (née Gold) our mother, was born in Pretoria in 1909, daughter of Joseph and Clara Gold who had emigrated from Lithuania to London, England, where they lived for about a year. Their first son, Morry, was born in England. At the end of the 19th century or early 1900s, they left for South Africa and settled in Pretoria. Tilly was one of six children, two boys and four girls. After graduating from Pretoria Girls High School, she found herself in Johannesburg with a career as a shorthand typist in a law office.

Tilly and Isy were introduced through mutual friends in Krugersdorp and were married in Pretoria in February 1939. Their first home was 60, 6th Avenue Roodepoort North. Their son, **Arthur**, was born in Johannesburg in June 1942. Then followed **Glenda**, and then **Ethne**.

Isy remained an active working partner at Simon Timber for the rest of his life. He was a hard working businessman who gained a reputation for honesty, decency and compassion not only to the many and varied customers of the store, his workers and people of the local community as well. His dedication to the less privileged was channelled through his very many years of service with the Rotary Club.

Tilly devoted her married life to raising their three children.

Family life in Roodepoort

The family became well established in the small Jewish community of Roodepoort. Among their closest friends were the **Josselowitz family, Issie, Rica** and their two children **Brian** and **Jennifer**. The Simon family moved to 4 Minor Street, in the new suburb of Georginia in 1952. The house was two streets away from the Joss's, with whom they spent many pleasant hours, socialising and reflecting on the affairs of the day, and particularly how the Springbok rugby team could beat the New Zealand All Blacks.

The Simon home was a hive of activity. The children had many friends in the neighbourhood and spent most of their free time outside. Their parents had hobbies that kept them busy. Tilly was an accomplished knitter and a mean rummy player. Isy had a small property just outside the town where he kept a few milk cows and some horses. Every morning around dawn he would drive his bakkie to the farm where the resident employee would milk the cows. At least one gallon would land up at the home every day where Tilly would make sour milk or cream cheese. She made the most delicious cheesecakes that were the talk of their friends and everyone who landed for a meal in Minor Street.

At the back of the house there was enough land for Isy to grow his magnificent garden of fruit trees and vegetables. He was renowned for growing and preparing the famous “black radish”. This was a white vegetable with a black skin that resembled a large carrot in appearance. It had to be peeled and grated finely. It was best served chilled over a slice of brown bread that had a thick layer of “schmaltz”.

The Roodepoort Hebrew Congregation



From the beginning, the Simons were active members of the Roodepoort Hebrew Congregation. They attended services at the shul in Berlandina Street. The cornerstone dated the founding of the building as 1905. The congregation was Orthodox, as were most in the country. The building was built in the design of the many synagogues in Europe with a bimah in the middle and toward the rear wall facing the holy ark at the front. On either side were rows of wooden pews with the shelves in front to hold the prayer books.

Under the shelves were cubbyholes with little doors for storing the books and talleisim of the congregants. There were balconies on either side of the shul overlooking the ground level where the men sat and with a staircase in the lobby for the women attendees to go upstairs.



Isy Simon became a member of the board of directors and served for many years. He humbly declined any executive position. He played an important role by being their designated representative for very many years at the Jewish Board of Deputies headquartered in Johannesburg. This body was the active political body representing the South African Jewish community. He was also a member of the local Chevra Kadisha for many years.

The shul was the centre of activity of the Roodepoort Hebrew Congregation. One of the leaders of the community was Morris Hockman. He owned a local jewellery store 'Hockman's Jewellers' and seemed to be fairly affluent. He was one of the few people we knew who owned a Cadillac. He was president of the Congregation for many years and was known to be a very well-liked and a pleasant person who contributed generously to the shul. In the late 1940s, the community built a large and very modern community hall next to the shul. It was named 'The Morris Hockman Talmud Hall'. Cheder classes were held there and broches after services as well as Barmitzvah and wedding celebrations. As Isy Simon's business was only one block away from the shul, he was able in some ways to keep an eye over the property. In fact, he had one of his employees, 'Bob' as he was affectionately known, act as the caretaker of the premises after business hours.

The Rabbi during the years from the early 1950s until about the early 1960s was the Reverend Orenstein. He lived near the shul and had three very bright children. The two sons Meyer and Avriel, were older than the daughter, Nechama. Services at the shul were routinely Friday night and Saturday morning. There was only a need for daily minyan if someone needed *shiva* services or a *yahrzeit*. Of course, all the High Holidays and other holidays were commemorated with shul services. This included not only the first two days of Pesach, but also the last two days. |

remember Isy's business being close for those four days. There was a printed notice on the front door 'Closed on account of the Jewish Holidays'.



I had my *Barmitzvah* in 1955. The reception luncheon after the Saturday morning service was held in the still 'new' hall next door (completed in 1949). In those days for girls, there was a joint *Batmitzvah* service and ceremony once a year for all the girls together. There was also for many years a strong youth programme at the shul. *Habonim* (the builders) Zionist youth organisation had meetings every Sunday morning and many of the boys and girls over a certain age attended in the khaki uniforms and blue and white neck bands. The younger children could belong to *Hashtilim* (the saplings).

The older group the *Bonim* were led for many years by a young adult *madrich*, Lenny Josman. They were supportive of Israel and their activities involved learning and singing Hebrew songs, creative arts projects and field outings.

Other notable members of the Jewish community in the 50s:

The **Blumsohns**, the **Meyersons**, the **Osrins**, the **Tannenbaums**, the **Spiros**, the **Josmans**, the **Jacobsons**, the **Hersons**, the **Schlapo's**, the **Levin's**, the **Stoppelmans**, the **Supers**, **Kraines**, **Rootenberg**, **Ackerman**, **Berman**, **Benjas**, **Beron**, **Morris Klein** was a prominent member of the Congregation, who apparently contributed significant financial support. There were a number of prominent Jewish owned businesses and professional offices in Roodepoort and Florida. Some of those that come to mind are **The Simon Timber and Hardware Company**, **Boner's Pharmacy** that became **Herson's Pharmacy**, **Roodepoort Motors (Chevrolet dealership)**, **Schlapo's Garage**, **Gus Ackerman – Attorney**, **Henry Rootenberg – Attorney**, **Greenberg's Outfitters**, **Sewitz Outfitting Store**, **Kraines' Confectionary Store**, **Florida Veterinary Hospital**, **Benjas' Furniture Store**, **Osrin's Pharmacy**, **Wolpe Accounting**

Service, Roodepoort-Florida Physicians Group (Drs Spiro and Jacobson) Dr Eric Phillips - Dentist, Gillis Haberdashery, Savoy Cinema (Alec Josman) Josman Clothing Store, Mark Herson, pharmacist, his brother Jack Herson, an architect, Durban Deep Mining Concession Store (Zelig Josman) Durban Deep Butchery (Walter Stoppelman), Director of Durban Deep Mine Hospital - Dr Charles Berman, Leon Levy, Barry Geffen–Optometrists, Central Garage (Dave Tannenbaum).

At the peak of times in the 1940s and 50s, there were perhaps as many as 90 families belonging to the congregation. Then a level of attrition developed, when and young adults started leaving especially for Johannesburg. The children, many after excelling at school, left to go to universities in Johannesburg or elsewhere – and did not return.

When the membership dwindled significantly in the 1960s, an effort was made to recruit from the Florida and Maraisburg areas. These neighbouring towns were also experiencing this attrition. After resistance, this was inevitable and successful enough. The name was changed to The Florida-Roodepoort Hebrew Congregation. The congregation survived for a long time after that. In 1975 it celebrated 70 years of existence. (After 1975 when he emigrated to the United States, Arthur has very little knowledge of the affairs of the congregation.) The shul was eventually disbanded and sold in the early 2000s.

The cemetery (see cemetery page)

There is a small Jewish cemetery in Roodepoort. Isy Simon was buried there in September of 1993. After the congregation was disbanded, Dave Meyerson devoted his time for many years to the care of the cemetery. Since his passing however, it has fallen into a state of disrepair. Rabbi Moshe Silberhaft restored the cemetery and Glenda visited it on a recent trip to South Africa and her home town of Roodepoort.

School

I attended **Roodepoort Town School**. Primary school was disappointing for me because I was not permitted to play sport after school like most of the other young boys. Instead, I was obliged to attend cheder at the shul under the tutelage of Reverend Orenstein, three afternoons a week and services on Saturday mornings. This was in preparation for my barmitzvah

At that time, once a week, the school held a class in bible studies. The Jewish children were allowed to meet separately during that class period so they were not compelled to study the New Testament and the principles of Christianity. I suspect that this was very much the work of the headmaster 'Jock' Beron looking out for his people. After that, I attended the nearest English high school at the time, **Krugerdsorp High School**. I spent my first year travelling every school day by train from the stop in Georginia to the stop in Luipaardsvlei. This involved much walking to and from the stations. From standard seven onwards, I lived at the school hostel until I graduated matric.

High school was more interesting, especially living in the school hostel, I was able to spend every afternoon playing sports and became involved in cricket, tennis and rugby. I also participated in high school athletics. In the evenings after we had dinner, the residents had to attend study time in the dining hall. The juniors studied from 7pm until 8.30 pm. and the seniors until 9.30 pm. The boys went straight to their dorms and the girls to their wing of the building. The teachers in residence occupied quarters strategically located in the middle between the two wings. Teacher patrol

continued until 'lights out' at 10pm. The co-ed situation was a good thing since it allowed the sexes to develop mutual respect for each other. This served us well for their future lives as adults in an egalitarian society.

Bacher's Farm

Sundays were a lot more fun. During the summer months, the family often went to Bacher's farm, a few miles out of town. There was a very nice recreation area with a large swimming pool and tennis courts. It was a Sunday and holiday gathering place for Jewish families in and around the Roodepoort- Florida area.

This was in reality a large commercial dairy farm with cows producing milk. There were also stables with riding horses. The farm belonged to Koppel Bacher, father of Ali Bacher, the well-known South African cricketer. The older son, Issie Bacher, became a veterinarian and had a practice in Northcliff. Bacher had a number of friends who kept horses of their own at his stables. On Sunday mornings they would assemble there and a group of usually eight or ten of them would go out for a long ride. After two or three hours they would return and after the horses were cooled down and returned to their stables, the men would sit in a group, chew the fat, and enjoy their favourite Sunday libation, ice cold sour milk with salt and pepper.

I attended first year at the University of Pretoria and was then accepted into the veterinary programme at Onderstepoort. I graduated in November of 1964.

I worked as a 'locums tenens' for a number of practices throughout the country until June 1965 when I and a classmate went to Europe to travel around. In November of that year, I returned to Florida to join Brian Shaw, starting our own veterinary practice. I met and married Beverly Hertzberg from Germiston in September of 1969. She also happened to be a cousin of the Tannenbaums of Roodepoort. our daughter, Della was born in Johannesburg. We later decided to seek a new life and emigrated to the United States in September of 1975.

Brian Shaw had also emigrated to America, and together they set up a veterinary practice in the city of Tampa, in the State of Florida. Beverly and I divorced and later I married Janet Kleban. She has two children from her previous marriage, Pamela and Nicole. We have a child together, Ashley. Janet and I are still living in Tampa, Florida, where I am still working (2019). We devote much of our time to enjoying our six grandchildren who are spread out between Miami, Tampa and North Carolina.

Ethne and Glenda's story

Ethne attended Roodepoort Town School, Florida Park High and Damelin. She first worked for a firm of accountants and then as a house model for a company making fashion garments. She married **Greg Silbert** of Johannesburg and moved to California where they own a property management company. They have two daughters.

Glenda lives in Los Angeles and has never married. She currently works with Ethne and Greg in their property management company. Her early years mirrored Arthur's schooling going to **Roodepoort Primary School** where Dr Jock Baron was the principal. Her only Jewish friends were Sharon Marcus and Lynette Kaplan and they both lived in Florida. Sharon's father Joe Marcus was Isy's best friend. She then went to Florida Park High School as the first standard 6 student as it had just been built. She left in standard 9 and finished high school at Damelin College in

Johannesburg. After high school she worked at Greatermans for many years and lived in Johannesburg. She left SA for a year in Europe and when she returned she worked in the entertainment industry. She immigrated to the US in 1979 where she has had a varied and interesting career.