

The Blumsohn Family

(Background by David and Maurice Blumsohn, Johannesburg 2018)



Our father **Aaron Blumsohn** (left) came from the shtetl of Linkuva in northern Lithuania. He arrived in South Africa in 1924 two weeks before his 18th birthday. He first went to Balfour and then to Nigel as a minister and shochet, before marrying **Leiba (née Tannenbaum)** (right) who was born in Roodepoort, and settling as a businessman in Roodepoort. Leiba and Aaron had three children, **David**, born 1932, **Maurice**, born 1934 and



Cecilia, born, 1942.

Grandparents: The Tannenbaum / Boner family

Our maternal grandfather, **Charles Tannenbaum** (born in Pinsk, present-day Belarus) married **Tilly Boner** (born in Kelme, Lithuania) in 1898. They had seven children, one of whom was Leiba who married Aaron Blumsohn. Interestingly, Charles's brother **Samuel Henry Tannenbaum**, married Tilly Boner's sister, **Shaina Boner**, so the two brothers married the two sisters. They all lived in Roodepoort, as did many of their descendants. For example, Dave Tannenbaum who was Samuel and Shaina's son, and thus Leiba's first cousin. His wife was Rene and they had two children, Brian and Eleanor.

There were also many related Boners in Roodepoort. Tilly and Shaina's cousin **Minnie Boner (Mina)** She four children, Beatrice, Louis, Gerty and Sarah. There was also **Louis Boner** whose children, were Geoffrey, Zelia and Beulah. **Harry Benjas** was also part of the Boner family. His mother, Riva, was also a sister of Tilly and Shaina.

Aaron and Leiba Blumsohn – our parents

Aaron Blumsohn, our father, was a Reverend and a shochet for the Balfour Jewish community and thereafter for the Nigel community. When he married our mother **Leiba Tannenbaum**, whose family had settled in Roodepoort, he earned a living, working at the Tannenbaum Brothers Hardware store owned by our mother's parents. He also became a property developer and money lender.

Leiba was a qualified piano teacher and had a few pupils, but she gave this up after a while and was a housewife. Later, when we were all 'grown-up' she took a job as a book-keeper at **Harry Benjas's** furniture shop in Van Wyk Street.



Aaron and Leiba Blumsohn in Roodepoort, in 1946 with their children: David (1932 - 2021), Maurice (b 1934) and Cecilia (b 1942)

Roodeport Families

The Blumsohn children were all born in Roodepoort and we think there were about 45 to 50 Jewish families there. Many names come to mind: **Tannenbaum, Benjas, Traub, Lieberman, Josman –four families, Herson –three families, Hockman, Zimblar, Klein, Abramson, Samuel, Schutz, Naim, Boner, Joss (Josselowitz), Simon, Super, Kitay, Ackerman, Spiro, Schwartz, Rossowsky, Beron, Akres, Levin, Bricker, Schnaier, Schlapo** , who was mayor for

a few years. They were there ever since we can remember. Some who came later were, **Kraines, Kupernick, Seliger, Stoppelman** and **Meyerson**. Other names from the past included **Morris Sewitz** who owned Morrie's, a clothing store and his wife was Sonia, there was **Greenberg's Outfitters**, owned by Barney where we bought most of our clothes.

The Shul

Morris Hockman was a very prominent member of the Jewish community and was the chairman of the shul committee for many years. The communal hall was named for him. We recall that **Morris Klein** was a prominent member of the community, and he was on the shul committee for many years.



The Roodeport Hebrew Congregation committee of 1948

Back standing: L Kraines, E Seliger, H Benjas, A Blumsohn, J Traub, S Josman

Front seated : J Josman, S Tannenbaum (Vice Chair) M Hockman (President) M Klein (treasurer)
L Zimblar (Secretary)

It's hard to describe the shul. It was quite small and we recall the women's section being upstairs. Reverend Orenstein was the 'Rabbi'. Although we called him Reverend, we believe he got smicha at a later stage.

Our father, **Aaron Bumsohn** was the Ba'al Shacharit and blew the Shofar. He was on the shul committee and also carried out other tasks such as checking up on the cheder. He performed these services without pay and from time to time was given recognition in the form of gifts such as a book-case, a display cabinet which had inscribed plates from the Committee. Also, he was given a framed illuminated address.

There was no regular morning or evening minyan on weekdays. If we had a Yahrtzeit, we would have to arrange for one. When our father passed away, we used to arrange an evening service daily. It was not easy but there were sufficient people who were willing to come. In the mornings, Maurice joined the regular morning minyan in Krugersdorp to say Kaddish, while David went to the Lion Shul in Johannesburg in the mornings.

We both had our Bar Mitzvah ceremonies in the Roodepoort shul with the party afterwards at our house in Liebenberg Street.

We think it was relatively easy to keep kosher. Our parents (especially mother) handled this. There was a kosher butcher, and we recall that Reverend Orenstein, who was also a qualified shochet used to shlach chickens for congregants.



Members of our family buried in the **Roodepoort Jewish Cemetery** include **Samuel and Shaina Tannenbaum, Aaron and Leiba Blumsohn, Harry Benjas, Mina Boner, Aron Boner** (Mina's brother), **Abraham Boner**, (the husband of Mina Boner and also her cousin).

Jewish Life in Roodepoort

We recall being quite happy in Roodepoort. It was quite a close community. We participated in many of the shul events and functions, and remember particularly loving Simchat Torah. **Reverend Orenstein** prepared us for this event, we learned songs and dances and generally had a great time. Maurice enjoyed being part of the **children's choir** which sang on the Jewish holidays and enjoyed attending Habonim meetings on Sunday mornings. Of course there were personal sad times, such as when Maurice's friend **Joe Samuel's** brother, **Hessy** died after a fight he had at school. Maurice thinks he was 14 years old. Also, of course when our father passed away in 1957 at the age of only 51.

As for anti-Semitism we don't recall that there were incidents of any attacks on Jews, but there was the Afrikaans kid who lived a couple of doors away from us (probably about eight years old) who used to shout at us 'Bloody Jood!' when we passed by. The Jewish children were allowed to go out of the class when 'religious studies' took place, but I don't recall anyone picking us out or abusing us because of this. It just seemed to be accepted. We were aware of the National Party,

during the Second World War, siding with the Nazis and thus against the Jews and we were aware of possible danger, but cannot recall that it ever affected us in any practical way. We were afraid when they got into power in 1948, but in practical terms, nothing much happened. They were too busy dealing with the danger of the “black majority”.

We have the impression that far fewer Jews were very religious until the 1980s, and that far more became observant after that. However this does not apply to either Roodepoort or Krugersdorp - we had very few observant Jews there. But I believe that this applied to the Johannesburg Jewish community. We cannot say with any degree of certainty how much shul fees were. However, we did find some old journals that I kept which show that In Krugersdorp in 1969, we paid R100 for the year’s family membership.

We were a closely-knit family at 10 Liebenberg Street, and spent a happy childhood with devoted parents and siblings. We lived with our parents and mother’s parents, Charles and Tilly Tannenbaum, until they passed away in 1939 and 1943. Shul and Habonim played a prominent part in our lives. We were very close and had nachas from each other and each other’s friends.

School

We went to Roodepoort Town School until Standard 5 and then to Krugersdorp High School until matric. David was in the first class which could take Hebrew as one of the six subjects for matric. Previously it could only be taken as an extra subject. Interestingly enough when David started High School two years before Maurice there was no English High School in the Roodepoort / Florida / Maraisburg area. But just before Maurice was due to go into Standard 6, an English High School was opened in Florida. Maurice was supposed to go there but was given permission to go to Krugersdorp on the grounds that he wanted to take Hebrew as a subject and the Krugersdorp School offered that as a Matric subject, whereas Florida did not.

After finishing at School

David Blumsohn:

After matric at Krugersdorp High School, **David Blumsohn** went to Witwatersrand University (Wits) Medical School and got a MBChB degree in 1954. In 1959 he earned a specialist physician degree in Medicine. After qualifying David spent most of his professional life at **Baragwanath Hospital and at Wits University** as a specialist physician and Honorary Professor of Medicine. He also worked for a period at the Tembisa Hospital including during the 1976 Soweto uprising. He was at the forefront of a campaign at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in 1987 when doctors from the Department of Medicine protested at the appalling conditions the patients had to endure.

Dr Robert Friedland said of David – ‘He was an absolute doyen of the medical profession and an absolute gentleman, humble and kind and someone who devoted his whole life to teaching others.’ But it is what he taught others that mattered! The most important thing as a physician is ‘To cure sometimes, to relieve often, and to comfort always.’



David Blumsohn receiving one of his degrees at Wits.

After establishing himself as a doctor, David returned to his studies part-time through the University of South Africa (UNISA) completing bachelor, masters, and doctoral degrees in Literature and Philosophy in Semitic Languages in 1995.

Maurice Blumsohn:

Maurice went to the Witwatersrand Technical College in Eloff Street, Johannesburg and studied Pharmacy. There was no University course for Pharmacy in those days. It was a College Diploma. Maurice did his pharmacy apprenticeship at EJ Adcock Pharmacy in Dumas Street, Roodepoort for three years from 1952 to 1954. Maurice said. After my final year at college, I received my qualification as a pharmacist and went to

work at EJ Adcock, Wholesale Branch in Krugersdorp and spent most of my working life there and progressed to become Director of Physical Distribution.' EJ Adcock Limited was a public company and the 4 Tannenbaum brothers, sons of Charles and Tilly Tannenbaum, were the main directors.

Marriage and family

Maurice Blumsohn married **Joy Stanger**. He said: 'I had a good friend in Roodepoort - **Joe Samuel** and I used to spend many Sunday afternoons at his house. His mother, **Fanny** had a brother Morris Joffe, whose wife, Ray was Joy's aunt, her father's sister. One Sunday afternoon Morris and Ray brought their children, Jane and Trevor, to visit his sister and family and they also brought their niece Joy with them. I was there and that is how we met. I think it was some two-and-a-half years later that we got married.'

Maurice worked at EJ Adcock Wholesale in Krugersdorp starting in 1956. He used to travel daily to work while still living in Roodepoort with his parents (Aaron Blumsohn passed away in 1957), David and sister, Cissy (Tzilla) who lives in Israel. He says: 'When Joy and I got married in 1960, we set up home in Krugersdorp because of my work location. We were there until 1998 by which time I had retired, and we decided to leave as the Jewish community was rapidly dwindling. We have been in Johannesburg ever since then.'



Maurice and Joy with David in the middle in 2008

Maurice said. 'Nowadays, Joy and I watch quite a lot of TV series, go to movies and theatre, surf the internet. I also play scrabble on the computer and read novels. I also read lots of articles in the Jerusalem Post and other such publications. Walking for exercise too. In those long-gone days I also read a lot and went to movies. There was no TV. We used to go to watch cricket test matches at Ellis Park many times in the school holidays. I played tennis and table tennis at clubs. Played cricket in our backyard'

David Blumsohn met his late wife, June Surtees, a radiographer at Discoverer's Hospital, near Roodepoort. She had treated and visited Dad, Aaron Blumsohn during his several admissions to that hospital. David and June did not live in Roodepoort and did not have any children.

David said, 'Now, I am a 'bookworm'. I enjoy meeting with my friends, colleagues and ex-students. In Roodepoort as a child, I played sport mainly table-tennis and cricket with Roodepoort friends and at school.'



David and Maurice Blumsohn's sister, Cecilia, (Cissy) made Aliyah in the early 1960s. She now lives in Jerusalem where she married Yehuda Meroz an Iraqi Jew.

David and Cissy in 2008.

Family Trip to Lithuania 1996 – and dedicated website

In 1996, Cissy and David went together to Lithuania and visited the shtetl of Linkuva from where their father, Aaron Blumsohn, came. They met a few people there who had known the family, and they found our paternal grandfather's grave.



The story of their trip, which was written by David can be found on a dedicated website

<http://www.linkuva.com/backg.htm>.

This is an absolutely fascinating story and detailed website, filled with a great deal of interesting pictures and stories. Especially amazing is the almost miraculous finding of their paternal grandfather (Betzael ben Velvel)'s grave and tombstone in the Linkuva Jewish cemetery. He died in 1937.

A family wooden house in Linkuva, Lithuania 1924

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The Blumsohn family story, written by **Maurice and David Blumsohn 2018**, (Johannesburg) at the request of Brian Josselowitz, Cape Town, updated in 2024.

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