

Roodepoort: The Josman Family

60 years of running the Durban Roodepoort Deep Goldmine concession stores

With information supplied to Geoff Boner in Israel
by Lionel Josman, retired and also living in Israel
September 2024

The Josman family was one of the founding and significant Jewish families of Roodepoort. Everyone who has written their family story, mentions one or other of the large Josman family who settled in the town. This is their story:

The family came from Dvinsk (now Daugavpils) a substantial city in Latvia, which always had a large Jewish population. The founding family had five sons and three daughters. In about 1920, members of the family emigrated to South Africa.

The Josman family settled in Roodepoort and opened concession stores:

Four of the Josman brothers, **John** (known as Jack) **Alec**, **Zelik** and **Harry**, and one sister **Bertha** (Traub) settled in Roodepoort and opened concession stores on the Durban Roodepoort Deep mine. (One brother, **Louis Josman**, settled in Namaqualand and had his own trading store there. Louis had 2 sons and 2 daughters and after retiring, settled in Cape Town.)



Durban Roodepoort Deep No 8 Kimberley Shaft – 1970 painting by Kenneth Birch

The oldest brother, **John**/Jack, who was born in the latter half of the nineteenth century, took a 99 year lease, for these stores with his brother **Zelik** and they became the owners and the developers of **Concession Stores on the Durban Roodepoort Deep** gold mine. Many family members worked with them in these stores over the years.

Durban Deep Gold Mine

The Durban Deep Roodepoort mine, situated south of the town centre of Roodepoort, was established in 1887, and production of gold from underground diggings was started in 1898. It was one of the most profitable gold mines in the world and at one stage employed 18,000 workers. Most of the underground miners were black men signed up in the surrounding countries to work on contract for a fixed period of time usually several months. They were provided with accommodation on the mine property. The concession stores were also situated on the mine property and provided all the requirements of the workers in the mine including clothing, blankets, pillows and other necessities. Many Jewish immigrants ran concession stores on the various mines around the country.

Most of the above ground workers and supervisors of the underground work were white employees of the mine and either lived in Roodepoort or in properties developed by the mine for them. A large proportion of the inhabitants of Roodepoort were workers on the mine.

The brothers **Jack and Zelik Josman** originally signed a 99-year lease in about 1934 with the commissioner of mines to develop a designated area on the mine property for commercial purposes. The store was a general dealer selling all the produce required by the miners. Next to the store there was a restaurant, known as 'eating house' where they would provide meals for the black mine workers at low cost and sell food and grocery products.

This picture taken in 1966, shows concession store keepers, at the Rose Deep Goldmine, Germiston. It is probably very similar to the Josman brothers' stores (The picture was a gift by photographer David Goldblatt to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.)



Over the years, John and Zelik's other brothers and their children joined him in running the mine concession stores. John had a son, Cecil, from his first wife, Esme, who died and then twins Geoffrey and Sheba from a second wife, Freda.

The next brother was **Alec**, who was married to Eva. Alec also started his career working in the concession store on the mine, but then set up a cinema in Roodepoort, the **Century Cinema**. This became the central site of entertainment in Roodepoort and most of the children of the town would frequent shows at the cinema. Alec had two sons, Solly and Hymie, who became doctors and settled in Israel.

Then there was brother **Zelik** who was active in the concession store from the outset. Zelik and his wife Hilda had three sons, Lennie, a commercial traveller, Gerald, who studied law and eventually became a Judge in the high Court of the Cape Province and Julian who worked for some time in the concession store.

A sister, called **Bertha** married **Jack Traub**. They also settled in Roodepoort. He joined the family in the concession store business. They had two sons and a daughter. There were two other sisters in the family, one settling in Cape Town, and one who stayed behind in Latvia. She and her family were sadly wiped out in the Holocaust.

Harry, the youngest son, was married to Tilly. They had two sons, **Lionel** and **Eli**. Lionel married Tegty and had two daughters, Lesley, who settled in Israel and Wendy, who settled in Australia. Lionel settled in Israel in 2006 and following the death of his wife in 1999, he married Evelyn in 2006 and she died in 2015.

John left the original store and opened an additional concession store on the mine. In fact, there were four or five concession stores on the mine property. Brothers **Zelik and Harry** ran the stores for 60 years.

After Zelik's death, the cousins, **Lionel and Julian**, ran the stores for another 18 months, until **Lionel** took it over with the help of his father **Harry** and they then continued to run the store until production in mine decreased in 1994, when they abandoned the stores. The mine was finally closed down in 2001.

Pictured is a share certificate from 1898.



The Josman family of Roodepoort:

information Provided to Geoffrey Boner by Lionel Josman, Israel, August 2024

Edited, illustrated and formatted with further reading compiled by Geraldine Auerbach MBE,
London, September 2024

Further reading: Concession stores and Basotho blankets is there a Jewish connection?

'Concession Stores' by Cecilia Muller (née Colley)

This is an extract from an article first published in the *Supplement to the Jewish Herald* for 14 September, 1976 - Rosh Hashanah 5737. It was written by Cecilia Muller © 2001.

The Concession Store trading stands were bought at public auction, and the shops were then erected, usually with a house adjoining. The store had to be 160 ft. x 100 ft. and situated not less than 600 ft. from the entrance to the Native Compound.

Apart from peddling, many Jewish immigrants either bought or worked in the concession stores owned by relatives or 'landsleit'. They were taken on a 3-months' trial basis at a low wage – and if satisfactory, received a small increase per month. They worked from 7 or 8 in the morning till 6 at night, and on Friday, pay day, till much later.

The basic requirements for the purchasers were that they had to be white persons over 21 years of age, and had to have a clean personal record, certified by a police clearance. There is a provision in the *Trading on Mining Ground Regulation Act No. 13 of 1910* which dealt with the sale of trading stands. Shops could be bought and sold in the normal way.

The Mining Commissioner had the right to grant extra sites if he thought fitting. After trading had begun, rental was on the basis of taxation, and a return had to be submitted every three months to the Mining Commissioner who sent a copy to the Receiver who then assessed the tax payable, which was based on 5% of the gross turnover. (Information courtesy of the Acting Mining Commissioner, Mr Steyn, and from one of the few remaining original Concession Store owners).

The 'green' youngsters who came over between the ages of 15 and 19 learned to speak a Native language within three months – they had to! Their mother tongue was Yiddish and/or Russian. They also learned to speak very good English and a smattering of Afrikaans!

Concession stores were the shopping centres from before the First World War for the mining communities along the East and West Rand. It was referred to – not unkindly – as a 'Jewstore' by the mining families. They consisted of several departments under one roof. There was the butchery and the 'Eating House', the Native miners could try boiled tripe, whole sheep's head and cooked flank – the oily, flat odour pervaded the store at cooking times, when the meat was prepared in huge cauldrons by the black chef wearing an old sack for an apron! The customers brought their own tin or enamel plates and paid a small sum per portion. They sat at long, rough tables with benches alongside, noisy, laughing and at ease with their blankets hanging loosely over a shoulder, or discarded entirely from the heat.

The general store, smelling of soap, sacking, damp straw and sweat, served the Native mineworkers who used to come in their dozens, **wearing their colourful blankets**. Trousers and shirts were only for returning to their homes. They earned an amount per shift and kept their money in a leather belt worn next to their body. The money was put into a slit pocket in the belt, the only bank for their precious golden sovereigns.

They bought snuff, tobacco, 'tickey sugar', soap – Blue soap and Sunlight, Erasmic and Vinolia, (where has Erasmic soap gone to with its quaint coloured pictures of a family on the wrapping?) and candies, and at home-going time, they bought colourful blankets and gaudy tin trunks which were manufactured locally from paraffin tins and bound by iron strapping. Most goods were bought from the 'Market Street Merchants' – a breed that has almost disappeared together with the concession stores.

At 'iKlismis' time, how I remember my father (a concession store owner) nick-named 'Mafuta Baas' (Fat boss) serving the 'Natives' (not 'Africans' or 'Bantu' in those days) who came to buy a sheep. They paid for it with one golden sovereign and carried it away alive, bleating vigorously, draped round its new owner's shoulders, to be shared in a feast of food and drink with his friends – the owner richer by one sheepskin and several good meals! The concession proprietor richer by several hundred golden sovereigns! - where are those sovereigns now?

You can read the full article here in the Southern Africa Jewish Genealogy SA-SIG https://www.jewishgen.org/safrica/concession_stores.htm

Was there a Jewish History of the Basotho Blanket!?

We know that a significant item sold at the native concession stores, run predominantly by Jews, were the colourful blankets so beloved of the Basotho. (You can see them hanging up on the wall of the interior of the concession store in the picture by David Goldblatt.) A mountainous country Basutoland, it could be very cold in winter. Wearing a 'blanket' is said to be very ancient in Lesotho. They were traditionally made only from animal skins and are a part of Sotho life from birth to death. A newborn receives their first blanket before they are even born, for many events throughout their lives, and eventually will be buried in one.

The transition from animal skins as a traditional kaross to the textile blankets we see today is attributed to [King Moshoeshe I](#). The king was gifted a textile blanket by a British man known only as "Mr Howell" that he began wearing on his shoulders in the late 19th century and his kinsmen quickly followed suit. But where did the blankets come from? And was there a Jewish connection?

The Gross Family

This below is a story sent to me by Beulah Gross in Australia of the Gross family who came to Kimberley in the early days. Richard Gross remembers his father saying that his grandfather Frank was with Cecil Rhodes during the Siege of Kimberley (14 October 1899-15 February 1900).

Frank Gross, instead of becoming a diamond miner or buyer like his brothers, opened a



concession store, to service the mining communities. It was known as a 'native shop'.

Beulah wrote: 'His stock consisted of whatever the "native" required for living in Kimberley and back home their native areas. This included hand-operated Singer sewing machines, thread, cheap fabric, tobacco, pots and pans, blankets and so on. Large trunks were also much in demand because the 'natives' filled them with merchandise and sent or took them home to their families who lived far away. The miners came from as far afield as Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe); East Africa (now comprising Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda); Tanganyika (now Tanzania); Basutoland (now Lesotho); Bechuanaland (now Botswana) and elsewhere to earn money working in the diamond mines.

'Frank traded extensively in Basutoland. He made friends with the Basotho Paramount Chief in the early 1900s. In 1905 he was invited to attend the coronation of King Moshesh's grandson, Letsie II, Lerotholi, paramount chief of the Basotho nation. Frank (on the right) is the shortest man in this picture.

'Frank custom-designed blankets and then, using textile family connections had them made to order at the now defunct **Waverley Woollen Mills** [which Beulah was told was in Leeds UK where the family had settled before coming to South Africa] and shipped to his store in Kimberley. He became the chief supplier of these blankets, in his 'Native Shops' in Kimberley and later in Bloemfontein and around the country.

Frank Gross learned to speak the native languages, Sesotho (pronounced 'seh-soo-too) and perhaps even Zulu, and sold the blankets to the powerful tribal chiefs. Apparently, some of the designs may still be used. Today, these blankets are desirable fashion items and very expensive.

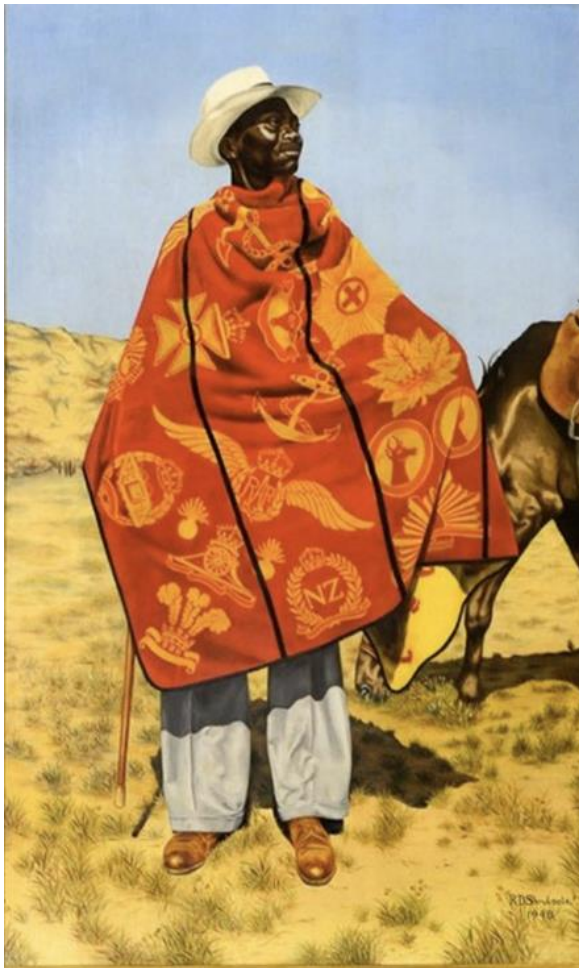
Read this family story here [Gross family Kimberley](#) (Where they first thought the blankets were made in Leeds)

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**In another family story - of the Harris family - [Harris-family-history](#)**

Here is another piece of the story: we learn in this family, who spent some time in Kimberley, that Woolf and Solomon Harris acquired an interest in the **Waverley Wool Manufacturing Company in Cape Town**, in about 1912 and Woolf Harris and his brother-in-law Jack Gesundheit moved out to the premises in Ceres Road. Non-Jews had pioneered the textile industry in South Africa, but this immigrant Jewish family was to prove it could be profitable. In 1912 they erected a modern addition to the **very small blanket factory**.

Woolf and Solomon Harris started their own company called the South African Woollen Mills (SAWM) in 1912. The property of the blanket factory was transferred to the Harrises in 1913 and Woolf Harris then returned to Cape Town, where he attended to the building of a new factory in Beach Road, Woodstock (a suburb close to the center of Cape Town on Table Bay). The Harrises solved what must have been a labour problem by setting up the factory in the city, using the machinery from Ceres Road and keeping the Ceres Road property as a wool washery. It remained as such for many years, its machinery operated by a water mill. In 1914 the woollen mills began operating in Cape Town and, when war broke out in August of that year, the Harrises obtained good contracts for the supply of blankets to the army receiving large orders

from the South African army for woollen blankets and material for overcoats at the beginning of World War 1) But the reason for their success was not simply a good contract to start with - the Harrises knew their trade



**A large part of the SAWM business was making colorful blankets**, often with bright African-type designs, for the black (African) trade. Black men and women used to (and some still do) wear blankets as their main clothing. This especially applied to the Xosa people in the Transkei and Ciskei areas of the Cape Province and the Basuto. The blankets were called **Waverley blankets** and most members of the Harris family, even David and Ruth Erlanger in Switzerland, still have them in the 1990s, as they were of a very good quality.

### Connecting the dots ....

Putting two and two together there seems a strong relationship here between these two families and the popularity and availability of the Basotho blankets.

In working on the Roodepoort CHOL website with Geoff Boner in Israel, developing the Josman family who had run concession stores on the Durban Roodepoort Deep mine for 60 years, my interest in the blankets was piqued.

Most mine concession stores were run by Jews and there was a network. And learning about the products they sold and seeing the blankets hanging on the walls in the picture I thought about these two Kimberley stories. I sent my thoughts to Beulah Gross.

Beulah replied: Thanks for the email earlier today. I've read the attachment and was fascinated. The picture of a 'native' shop was wonderful. The information re the Basuto blankets and Richard's grandfather was a word-of-mouth recollection and it's more than likely that the blankets were made in Cape Town. There is a family connection to the Harris family but I'm not too sure of the how. Perhaps later this week I'll tackle this. I've just been on ChatGPT and discovered that the Leeds mill did not have any connection to Basuto blankets so the recollection about any connection to the Waverley mill in Leeds was definitely incorrect.

To end this story Geoffrey Boner, who compiled the Josman family story, says I completely agree with you Geraldine, regarding the place of the concession stores and the history of the Basuto blankets. He continued:

'I have spoken to Lionel Josman (retired in Israel today, 2024). He does not have much additional information. He would purchase the blankets from distributors, such as Frasers, in Johannesburg, Grand Distributors also in Johannesburg, and Natal Cotton in Durban. Natal

Cotton also produced blankets. There was a firm, Aranda Textiles in Randfontein, which produced blankets but only sold them through the various distributors. He says that he had no role in the design of the blankets and would select from the distributors' catalogues. Lionel does not know whether Jewish families were involved in the design and production.'

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PS Notice from **The Aranda Factory Shop in 2018**. This is now open to the Public. Come to the Aranda Factory Shop no1 Wol Street Randfontein tel 011 6933721 for all your blanket requirements like wedding blankets, Basotho blankets, shawls, throws, wearing blankets as well as bed blankets. Keep out the cold this winter with a warm Aranda blanket from the Aranda Factory Shop. The Young Basotho Designers Collection of 2024 is now available to you online at aranda.co.za

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