

Roodepoort: The Josselowitz family

Memories: by Brian Josselowitz, 2019

It was Brian Josselowitz who had the idea to memorialise the families that had lived in Roodepoort. He contacted as many as he could and compiled much information on families that had lived in the West Rand town. Sadly, Brian passed away in Cape Town in January 2021 before he had completed the task. Geoffrey Boner, in Israel who lived there as a child and had extensive family in Roodepoort is, with the family's blessing, putting this material together for the CHOL website feature on the community of Roodepoort. www.chol.website.

The Josselowitz family of Roodepoort

Brian's parents were Israel (Issie) and Rica Josselowitz, (who unofficially shortened their name to Joss). They lived in Roodepoort from 1939 to 1994.

Issie came from Krugersdorp but grew up in Doornfontein where he was raised by Janie Grevler. **Rica** (née Miller) was from Johannesburg, her mother, Fanny Bartkunsky, who had a twin sister, arrived from Whitechapel, London, and one of Rica's uncles was the founder of the Poswohl shul in Doornfontein.

Issie and Rica had two children, **Brian** and **Jennifer** (Evans) Jenny now lives in Johannesburg. Brian, pictured right, was living in Cape Town before he died suddenly in January 2021.

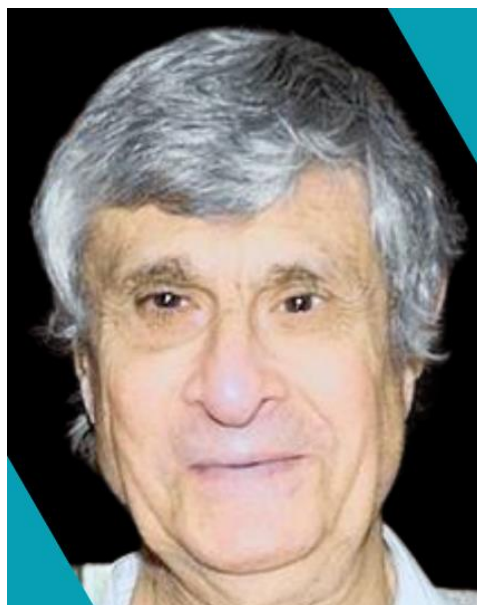
Brian wrote:

Our father **Issie Josselowitz** owned the **Tip-Top Bazaar in Roodepoort** which was reportedly sold to the Cajees, a prominent Indian family before he enlisted in the army in 1940. While serving on the front lines Issie was captured at Tobruk in 1942 and spent the rest of the time as a PoW behind the wire until demobilisation and he returned home to Roodepoort.

Our mother **Rica** was a housewife and they both served on various Roodepoort shul committees and were members until the iconic building in Berlandina Street closed its doors for the last time.

The Tornado of 1948

There were some hard times: the tornado that twisted and twirled its way through the town on November 26, 1948, blew the roof off our home in Sixth Avenue, Georginia, causing enormous damage. An old family anecdote recalls how Rica was running around the house screaming at the domestic to close the windows, while her infant son, Brian, who had contracted polio earlier that year after a visit to Mafeking, was in his cot. Meanwhile the roof was soaring into the storm-swept sky to land who knows where.





Issie's sister, **Gertie Karpas** and her husband, **Louis Karpas**, lived diagonally opposite. The tornado caused minimal damage to their house. However, if you stood at the right spot the house always looked off-kilter. The Apostolic Church

opposite was literally blown away. All that was left was a pile of bricks.

Issie's Business Career

Issie and his brother-in-law **Louis Karpas** started a dry-cleaning business, **Golden Arrow**, in Main Road, Johannesburg, not too far from where the old Carlton Hotel stood and around the corner from the Rand Daily Mail. Issie drove the big blue Dodge van they used for deliveries and to this day I (Brian) can still hear the rumble of its tyres and the growl of its big engine rounding the corner to our house and the next day when it pulled out of the driveway before the crack of dawn for the trip to Johannesburg.

Years later burglaries put paid to the business, and it was forced to close. Soon Issie managed to find employment at **Crystal Delicatessen** and Bakery in Doornfontein as a despatch manager, ensuring that the freshly-baked bread and other food products reached the customers on time. This meant more early mornings and even later nights, having to catch the train to Doornfontein and back to Georgina, no matter the weather. There was another Roodepoort connection to Crystal where many members of the shul used to buy their kosher products. And that was **Doreen? Gilinsky**, who worked at the counter. She always had a smile on her face. She had a son Joseph.

When Issie left Crystal on November 11, 1966 the staff presented him with an engraved watch. After Crystal he worked for his nephew **Harold Herson** (no relation to the Roodepoort Hersons) the owner of Robot Paint and Hardware in Booyens. When that ended **Dave Myerson** of Station Garage fame offered Issie now in his 70s a job which he accepted.

The Fire at the house in Georgina

Tragedy struck the Josselowitz household again one Saturday in 1986. Brian remembers: 'I was living in Florida at the time, and I was supposed to go and watch my son Michael, then in Grade 1, at Emmarentia Primary School, play soccer. One of the parents had fetched him and as I was about to leave the house, the phone rang. It was my mother yelling, panic-stricken, hurry come immediately, the house in which they had lived in for so many years in Georgina was burning. We reached the Sixth Avenue house in record time to see the fire department, and ambulance already there, with curious neighbours from all over gathering in front of the house, and my mother, hysterical on the pavement. It was a chilly day and when my dad wanted to light the gas heater, he was unable to open the cylinder, and he banged it with a heavy spanner to open it, which caused a spark. But he couldn't close it and a ball of flame enveloped the lounge, setting

fire to the ceilings, curtains and furnishings. Instead of leaving the cylinder and letting the house burn down, my father managed to manhandle it out through the kitchen door, suffering third degree burns to his face and hands and minor injuries to other parts of his body.

The ambulance, siren blaring, sped off to the JG Strijdom Hospital (renamed the Helen Joseph Hospital in 1997), in Auckland Park, with me close behind in my skedonk, dubbed the "Purple Peril", a Mazda 1200, driving through red lights and ignoring stop streets. Suddenly the ambulance stopped and one of the paramedics got out and warned me: 'You have to obey the rules of the road, we'll get your father to the hospital.' And so it was.

My father was in the JG Strijdom for many months and the road to recovery was long and hard. But he had an indomitable spirit and he did recover but he was still in pain, and despite that fact after his discharge and some recuperation he went back to work at Station Garage, even though his scarred face and hands must have scared many customers. I used to stop at hospital every day, morning and night, on the way to and from work, to help feed him.

In January 1992 we 'immigrated' to Cape Town and a few years later my sister, Jennifer Evans, supervised my parents move to Sandringham in 1994 where they lived peacefully until they passed.

Living in Roodepoort

Brian wrote: Growing up in the "dorp" was a happy experience. The community was warm, and no-one waited for an invitation to visit each other. Sundays our house was filled with visitors: the Simon family with their children, **Ethne and Glenda Simon**, not so much Arthur who was a lot older; Owner of Electric House, **Joe Marcus**, his school teacher wife **Maisie** and their two daughters, **Rene and Sharon Marcus**, the **Ackerman** family, the dentist, Dr **Eric Phillips** and his wife **Rae**, their children **Hilton, Judy, Michael and Allan Phillips**, and others too many to mention. They used to come for a braai and the conversations used to flow well into the night, even though there was school the next day. The men talked mostly about rugby and politics. The women probably gossiped in the dining room. Dr Phillips was a regular visitor every Friday night for a schnapps before going home and to discuss the horses' chances at the races the next day, always hoping to hit the jackpot. That didn't happen.

School

My sister Jenny and I both went to Roodepoort Town School when a well-respected educationist, Dr Jock Beron (right) was the principal. I then went to Florida Park High School. There wasn't any overt anti-Semitism although my first year in high school was miserable, being tormented by a boy called Theron because I was Jewish and smaller than he was. I didn't react to his bullying, so he eventually gave up.

Jennifer said she remembers being called a 'bloody Jew' in primary school around 1958. Dr Beron was principal then and he happened to be walking past when he heard the boy, George, swear at me. George had to stand up in assembly and apologise to the whole school. His parents were also called into the school office. Hopefully, George and his parents learned a lesson.



Jewish life around the shul



Cheder was compulsory. **Reverend Orenstein**, the spiritual leader at the time, was our teacher. I can still picture him in the cheder room in the Morris Hockman Talmud Torah Hall (right above and pictured below) with his small grey beard, yarmulke on his head, dust motes floating in the sunbeams streaming through the windows, listening to us: **Roland Ackerman, Searle Bernstein** and others, reciting the Aleph Bet and learning the Hebrew words for mother and father and learning to speak and write Hebrew. I don't recall him ever raising his voice and he seemed to be a very patient person.

Reverend Friedman, who had a beautiful voice, came next and he prepared us for our batmitzvahs which were always memorable affairs with the party most often held in the hall. I was tone deaf and it must have been frustrating for Reverend Friedman to teach me the tropes. But he did and I didn't hear anyone complain. For some of us it was a bit embarrassing. When we had finished reading the maftir we had to walk up the creaky stairs where our mothers, old grannies and aunties sat, to kiss their lined and weary faces.

Dr Sabse Spiro used to give each boy a briefcase with a cheque for one guinea which was a fortune in those days.

Shabbat

Barmitvah days behind us, shul was obligatory on Erev Shabbat when we would go with our parents and they would take turns dropping us there on Saturday mornings. The shul had an impossibly high roof or so it seemed to me and the voice of the cantor and whoever was reading the maftir would soar into the ether.

One Shabbat, particularly, stands out in my mind. It was Guy Fawkes and of course we all had firecrackers and as far as I can recall we were going to celebrate the event that night at one of our

houses. But we couldn't wait and started setting off 'jumping jacks' and thunder crackers, those short red ones that made a tremendous noise, on the pavement in front of the shul.

Needless to say, the service was halted for a while to allow the gaboyim to give us a tongue-lashing. It was mild in comparison to what our parents did to us. Those involved included the two brothers, **Searle and Hilton Bernstein, Roland and Jonathan Ackerman, Hilton Jacobson**, me of course, and one or two others whose names I can't remember.

The Jewish holidays were always special: Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, Pesach and Succoth.

Rosh Hashana meant enormous feasts with families or friends, but in our case with families such as the **Hersons, Minnie and Daniel, Mark and Shulamith, Cynthia and Jack**, who were all related to us, and everyone used to take turns hosting first day and second day, as well as on Pesach, where before we had our barmitzvahs we would practise the Four Questions, and then the hunt for the Afikoman.

We spent the whole of **Yom Kippur** day at shul as our parents didn't go home for the break, except for those who lived nearby. The men always sat in the foyer of the Hockman Hall and chatted or dozed in the hard, wooden chairs until it was time to back into shul for the afternoon service and Ne'ilah.

Those who weren't required to fast were given some money by their parents in case they got thirsty or hungry during the day to buy a cool drink or a toasted sandwich at the Rendezvous café, around the corner from the shul and next to the Roodepoort Magistrate's Court.

Simchat Torah was always a great occasion and lots of fun. It is tradition for everyone to receive an Aliya but there are only eight aliyot, five on a holiday. When we were called up we used to love trying to catch out our friends or cousins or dads by nominating them to read an aliya from the siddur. In that way every male in shul from 13 had a chance to recite an aliya. It was a good way of raising funds as our fathers usually made a substantial donation on our behalf. Flags and chocolates were always handed out and sometimes there was supper afterwards, usually catered by the women's organisations.

Communal Activities

If life didn't exactly revolve around the shul it came close. Many communal functions and outings were arranged. The most popular one was the annual excursion to **Segal's farm**, outside Pretoria, I think. Everyone used to travel in convoy to the site where fires were lit for braais, games were organised for the children like Hula Hoop competitions and there was a huge swimming pool. Everyone seemed to enjoy the day out enormously.

Ulf Segal incidentally owned landmark Segal's (kosher) Butchery in De Klerk Street, Johannesburg, where the Roodepoort bus used to stop. Segal's was famous, especially for its sausages, and cold meats. It was an old-fashioned butchery with sawdust on the floor and a big Segal's calendar hanging from the gleaming white tiled walls.

As a treat my mother used to take us to 'town' on the bus to buy cold meats from Segal's. Sometimes our granny would meet us at Stuttafords or John Orr's for tea and biscuits. Granny Fanny always asked if we wanted a "roomys". Years later I realised she was offering us an ice-cream. Roomys was the Afrikaans for ice cream. It was emblazoned on the carts which trawled the suburbs selling Eskimo pies, ice cream cones, and the like.

Often when my mother was too busy to go to town she would phone the Roodepoort bus depot near Hamburg and ask one of the bus-drivers to collect her order from Segal's. They did and went out of their way to deliver it to Sixth Avenue.

Bicycles were the main form of transport and we each owned one, either a Raleigh or a Phillips with thick tyres and no gears. The place to go for spares in Roodepoort was Kabs, owned by **Dave and Eunice Kab**, who lived in a huge double-storey house, around the corner from us. They were members of the shul and had a son, Mark. One day when I was in Roodepoort following a procession the pedal on the bike snapped near to Kabs and they quickly replaced it and wouldn't accept payment.



We used to ride our bikes everywhere, often to a dam where the Roodepoort Botanical Gardens are today, to swim and generally have fun. **The Witpoortjie Falls** (left) is situated in the Middle of the Gardens and has been a favourite Picnic Spot since the late 1800s. Few houses then had the luxury of swimming pools and we often went to the public pool in Roodepoort or at Florida Lake where over the weekend you could enjoy a ride on the miniature train. There was a café there where could buy a milkshake, chips and chocolates. Across the road was the Lake Hotel where, if you were accompanied by your parents, you could enjoy a cool drink.

There wasn't much for us in Roodepoort in the way of entertainment. There were the two "bioscopes", the Savoy and the Century, both privately-owned and which used to show the latest movies, and serials, mainly Westerns. We usually congregated at the Savoy after shul, which was a short stroll away to swop comics, and to watch a movie. There was also the Royal in Goldman Street, Florida, owned by the Dreier family. However, I don't recall going too often.

Often, "socials" were organised at the Durban Deep Mine in one of the recreation halls. It was a usually a disco with music by the Beatles, the Carpenters and Beach Boys. It was a safe environment with parents keeping a watchful eye on proceedings. Sometimes there was a live band.

We would sometimes go into "town" as Jo'burg was called then. I would catch the train at Georgia Station and the rest of the "gang" would get on at Florida and Maraisburg railway stations, and we would go to watch an early movie at the 20th Century or the Colosseum with its twinkling lights on the high-domed ceiling which was reminiscent of the night sky. It was safe then and there were no mishaps.



His Majesty's Theatre (Commissioner Street) was also within the same block. Plays were staged there and as a treat a group of parents would make a block booking and reserve tables at the Del Monico restaurant opposite, which was a favourite with many members of the congregation.

Hashtilim and Habonim were active in the area. Meetings used to be held at Florida Primary School and run by "maddies" **Leon Gork** and **Valerie Shubitz**. They arranged numerous outings including to Robinson Lake in Randfontein and to Coronation Park in Krugersdorp, which was an oasis in the heart of suburbia. Today it is home to a settlement of "poor whites" and featured in a documentary screened on satellite television.

I left Roodepoort many years ago, about 1966 to pursue a career in journalism, and apart from a few years overseas as part of my 'gap year', I was in the newspaper industry for more than 40 years. My sister Jennifer left Roodepoort in 1968.

But history has a way of repeating itself. In 1981 a few years after I got married to Barbara, we bought a house, just off Die Oupad, and I returned to my roots until the mid 1990s. Later we moved to Cape Town where we have lived for more than 26 years. Roodepoort and the shul always evoke happy times for me and though the memory fades the melody lingers on.

The Diary of a PoW in World War II

Issie was captured in Tobruk in 1942. He wrote a journal on foolscap in pencil, which has faded over the years. He wrote about the terrible conditions the Allied PoWs endured at the hands of the Italians. At one point Issie refers to B who escaped – that might have been Barney Greenberg of the outfitting store. (If that diary comes to light, it can be posted on the CHOL memoirs page where there are similar stories.) <https://www.chol.website/memoirs.htm>

~~~~~

## When Brian Josselowitz died suddenly in January 2021,

the Cape SAJBD wrote this obituary below.



We are sad to learn of the sudden death of Brian Josselowitz (Brian Joss) who has worked in the newspaper industry, as a journalist, subeditor and editor for some 50 years, including for the Cape Argus, Weekend World, Business Times, Sunday Times and Caxton.

After moving to Cape Town, the Cape Argus asked him to launch a community newspaper for the Northern Suburbs which, by the time he retired 19 years later, had grown to 15 community newspaper titles. As the editor of all the community newspapers, he always gave the Cape SAJBD's interfaith activities good coverage and tried not to publish anti-Israel letters, or when unavoidable, he allowed us space to counter them. A few months ago, he published an article in the SAJBD's journal Jewish Affairs, about Jennifer Friedman, an Afrikaans poet originally from the Free State.

He was a good friend of our community whose frequent well-argued letters in the Cape Argus attacking anti-Israel propagandists were always welcome. His most recent letter appeared in the Cape Argus on 8 January — "Letter Writer's Claims About Israel/Palestine Issue Do Not Add Up."

As a consumer activist, he wrote a consumer column called '**Off My Trolley**' for the Cape Community Newspapers for at least 12 years, his last article appearing this week on 14 January. He was always willing to take up the cudgels for our community members when they have come to the Cape SAJBD with consumer problems, usually successfully — most recently for someone whose bank account was cleared out while he was in the hospital, with the bank refusing responsibility. His sudden death leaves us the poorer and we would like to extend our heartfelt condolences to his wife and family.



~~~~~

Story from Brian Josselowitz, Cape Town 2019, edited by Geoff Boner Israel and edited,
illustrated and formatted by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London June 2024

~~~~~