

Roodepoort The Silber family

by Gus Silber

Gus Silber writes: My grandparents on my father's side, were **Gerson and Rose Silber**, originally Silberman. They came to South Africa from the village of Rosikis in Lithuania. On my mother's side, my grandparents were Elias and Freda Adelman, also from Lithuania, via Manchester in England. Both families settled in Johannesburg on arrival.

My parents **Max and Ethel Silber** grew up in Potchefstroom and Roodepoort respectively. They first lived in the far western Transvaal, in the mining towns of Oberholzer and Carletonville, before settling in Roodepoort. I was born in Potchefstroom.

My father, a schoolteacher, was transferred from Carletonville to teach at Hoërskool Roodepoort. We first lived in the suburb, Horizon, and then later in Roodepoort itself, at 35 Meyer Street, very close to Roodepoort Primary School, and just a short walk from the Roodepoort Shul. My mother worked as a saleslady in retail stores in Roodepoort.

My father's sister, Hilda Silber married Zelig Josman from a strong Roodepoort family. We were close to the Josman family and would visit them often. They lived in Horizon. Their son, Gerald Josman, became a judge in the South African Cape High Court, and his brother Lenny ran a popular clothing shop, Lenny's, on Van Wyk Street, Roodepoort.

I have two sisters, Rhoda and Elaine, who both live in Sydney, while my brother Harold made Aliyah in 2010 and now lives in Netanya in Israel.

I remember it being a fairly sizeable Jewish community. At least 50 families, possibly many more. I remember, among others, the **Josmans**, the **Meyersons**, the **Osrins**, the **Hersons**, the **Geffens**, the **Rappaports**, the **Joselowitzs**, the **Traubs**, the **Phillipses**, and the **Harrises**.

The Roodepoort shul

The shul was a humble building with an adjacent hall. I remember it being a bit run-down, and yet imposing inside, with big, high windows that the sun shone through. It always smelled a bit musty to me, partly I think it was the smell of the Siddurs, with all their ancient and much-thumbed wisdom.

I remember that the mahogany on the bima shone too, and that the heavy curtain over the ark was a deep velvety red and seemed to me to have been in place for centuries. Rabbi Kaye was the Rabbi. I think his full surname was Kwaitovsky. He was old and earnest. I don't think I ever saw him smiling. His son Barry Kaye was the Rabbi for a while. He was a much more jovial character, full of laughs and chatter.

I don't recall my parents being actively involved in the shul other than attending services on a regular basis. I don't recall them ever going to shul during the week, other than on the High

Holidays. But I went some Friday nights and almost every Shabbas morning, for all the time we stayed in Roodepoort. I had my barmitzvah at the Roodepoort Shul in 1971.



Roodepoort Shul left and the Morris Hockman Communal Hall next door on the right.

It was not just difficult to get a minyan, it was near impossible. Dave Meyerson used to phone my father every Friday night to ask whether we would be coming along. It was a given that we would be. My father, my brother Harold, and I would thus make up about a third of the Shabbat minyan. On many occasions, there were as few as six or seven of us at the shul, excluding Rabbi Kaye. We would all sit waiting, the men chatting among themselves, until about 8am, and then we would disperse.

We didn't keep a fully kosher household, but my mother often cooked dishes that were Jewish and Eastern European in origin, keeping up the tradition. I remember the kosher meat coming from a delicatessen in downtown Joburg. We would sometimes go along with my mother, by bus, to do the shopping there. We did observe Passover and the High Holidays. I don't recall any communal activities being organised other than those at shul, as part of barmitzvahs or holidays.

Growing up in Roodepoort

I went to Roodepoort Primary School and Florida Park High School. Back then, I was an obsessive Airfix model-plane maker and guitar-player.

I do remember Morrie's Outfitters very well. But mostly I remember Lenny's which was owned by my cousin, Lenny Josman. We bought clothes from him out of family loyalty and a good discount, I suppose!

There were two cinemas in Roodepoort, one was the Century, the other was called The Savoy. We knew both of them, affectionately, as "bughouses". Tickets were 10c for matinee, and 25c if it was a really big and important movie. The bughouse in Florida, on Goldman Street, was called The

Royal. We would go often to see the latest movies. There was a movie-hire shop too, called Lefty's, which we visited often, to get movies to watch on our projector at home, before TV arrived.

I did occasionally visit the Savoy Hotel, to the worry of my mother and father, who didn't think it was the sort of place I should be frequenting. I wasn't exactly a regular, but I do recall winding up there a few times with my school friends. In my defence, there wasn't terribly much else to do in Roodepoort.

The people I remember mostly, are the **Meyersons**. Dave was a pillar of the community, a generous and wryly humorous man. He owned Station Garage in Roodepoort. Both my brother Harold and I worked for him. He was a good businessman, an archetypal "Boerejood" who had loyal customers across the spectrum of language, culture, and race. His son, Julian, who eventually took over the business, was the same age as me.

I also remember the many businessmen who had offices or professional, premises in the centre of Roodepoort, most notably **Mark Herson, the pharmacist**, and **Barry Geffen, the optometrist**. At school, I remember **Alan Phillips**, and **Beverley Traub**.

I enjoyed growing up in Roodepoort. It was a small town not far from a big city. It was the kind of place that was easy to wander around. The school and the shul were at the heart of it. There was a big sports field and swimming-pool just down the road from where we stayed, so there was plenty of open space and space for leisure. And Florida Lake wasn't too far away either. It was a quiet town. Nothing much happened.

I do not recall any overt anti-semitism at all. We grew up among Afrikaans families, and they were friendly and warm people. We spoke Afrikaans to them, and they spoke English to us. If anything, I recall the opposite of anti-semitism. The school principal at Roodepoort Primary once called me to his office, and I thought I was in trouble, but then he pointed to the calendar and asked why I wasn't at home. It was a minor Jewish holiday that I had never even heard of.

I also recall a teacher named Mr Joubert, who told us his name was pronounced "Jew-Bear". But I laughed at that at the time and still find it funny. I recall on a couple of occasions, while attending shul, that a non-Jewish passer-by would wander in and ask if he could attend the service. The Rabbi would always graciously let him in, give him a yarmulke, and invite him to sit down.

From that I learned, implicitly, a curiosity and respect for other religions, and this has stayed with me for life. I also have a strong memory of a holiday service where we all wandered in to see that a dove had made its nest above the clock in the shul. Rabbi Kaye told us it was a sign from heaven, and that the dove would be left alone. I was very pleased to hear that, in part because I spent a fair bit of time staring at the clock during services!

I was never terribly devout, and I didn't exactly rush to shul, but I liked the notion that my presence at a service, especially on Shabbat, literally counted, and that I was connected across the ages to an ancient tradition and culture. I enjoyed the singing, the old liturgies of lament and rejoicing, the rain of sweets on Simchat Torah, the handshakes and conviviality outside the shul after a service. I enjoyed the beauty of the texts, which I read to myself in stumbling Hebrew, with the English translation close to hand. I enjoyed the feeling that I was part of something bigger than myself and the small town in which I grew up.

I very occasionally find myself in Roodepoort, these days only if I'm there to get my driving licence renewed, or similar. I always drive past the shul and pause there for a while. And I hear the songs in my head, and I picture the throng outside, and I feel, even after all these years, connected. I still feel like I belong.

I went to the army straight after school, and did not go to university. I am only now doing a master's in journalism, via Rhodes University. I am a journalist and author.

I left Roodepoort in 1980, when I began at The Star in Johannesburg. I am a journalist and author, based in Northcliff, Johannesburg.

I met my wife, Amanda, when we were working together on the Sunday Times Magazine in Johannesburg. She is from Cambridge, England.

We have three children, Sarah-Jane, Max, and Rachel. They are all in their twenties. They all stay at home and are studying. Sarah-Jane also works as a special-needs teacher while studying for her second Masters.

I don't have much contact with many of the people we were friendly with then. We were very friendly with the Meyerson family in Roodepoort, but they have all either passed on or moved overseas. I occasionally bump into **Ian Osrin**, the pharmacist **Benjy Osrin's** son, who I have known over the years from his active involvement in the music industry. He stays not too far away from me.

In South Africa at least, the Jewish community as a whole has dwindled in the smaller towns and dorpies, but it is still vibrant and active in the big cities, especially Johannesburg and Cape Town. There is a strong cultural element to this, such as the annual Limmud festival, at which I have been a presenter on several occasions, as well as the very popular Jewish Literary Festival in Cape Town, where I have also presented. The Jewish community has dispersed to the cities or to overseas in a very big way.



I enjoy travelling, reading, walking, music, all the usual activities of the home-worker and occasional wanderer.

My father, Max, and my mother, Ethel, are buried in Jewish section of the Roodepoort cemetery. Also, Hilda and Zelig Josman, my aunt and uncle.

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**Story of the Silber family:** collected by Brian Josselowitz from their son Gus Silber, Johannesburg, 2018  
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