

Mike Gelbart and family

Chairman 1957 to 1982

*by his son Herschel Gelbart 2021,
edited by Geraldine Auerbach MBE 2025)*

Mike Gelbart was born on 14 June 1914, in Shubitz, (also known as Subate) a small Shtetl in Latvia, 40 km northwest of Daugavpils (Dvinsk) on the border of Lithuania. This was during the First World War and the family battled through the hardships with the German army taking over their home. His father Abraham had left his wife and three children, including baby Mike, in the care of her parents while he set off to make his fortune in South Africa.



(fig 1: the Gelbart family home in Brievebas Street, Shubitz)



When Mike was just six months old his mother Hannah Rive, sadly died of typhus. His grandparents and his two older sisters Hodel and Chaike looked after him in their home in Shubitz. He remained close to his sisters all their lives. Mike's father, Avram Gelbart could not return to Europe from South Africa, until the war had ended in 1918.

After the war Avram returned to Latvia where he was able to remarry, and Leah of Jakobstad became his new wife. Mike attended cheder in Shubitz to study the daily prayers, the Talmud, the Chumash and how to lein the Torah, which in later years became an asset to the Woodstock shul where he used to lein when nobody else was there to perform this function.

Fig 2: Mike and his mother Hanna Rive in Shubitz

In 1928 Avram took his new wife and his children back to Cape Town where they arrived in 1928. Mike would have been 14. The family quickly settled as members of the Woodstock and Salt River Hebrew Congregation, where they remained for the rest of their lives.

Mike's oldest sister, Hodel, married Yeshayahu Getz, and his middle sibling, Chaike, married Pinkus Rosenthal, both also from Latvia. All were based in Woodstock and Salt River.

Mike, who could hardly speak English, only Yiddish and Latvian, went to Observatory Boys High and battled to learn English, but loved maths and science. He also managed to make the Observatory School rugby junior teams and loved sports, something he passed along to his sons.



Fig 3: Zaide Avram Lieb Gelbart in Woodstock with his 2nd wife Leah (seated) and his children: Hodel, Mike, Chaikie and her husband Pinkus Rosenthal

Mike was brought up very strictly in kashrut and also attended the Roeland Street Shul, where he joined the choir with his oldest friend Hymie Geft to earn some pocket monies, but also to learn to sing more melodiously which became evident in later years.

After graduating from Observatory High School, he attended UCT where he studied engineering. However, after two years he gave this up to start working for himself in the waste and flock business for the bedding industry. Waste offcuts from clothing factories would be torn up in machines to produce a product called 'flock', which mattresses were made from before foam was invented).



Mr Klemptman, a landsleit from Shubitz (Subate) ran a huge firm in Johannesburg called SA Flock. He backed my dad Mike Gelbart to start his own flock business in Cape Town, supplying the bedding and upholstery industries with wadding which was used as fillings. (Men from this small town in Latvia. became an important cog in wheel of bedding and furniture in South African industry.)

Fig 3: Mr Klemptman with the hat, walking with Mike Gelbart in Cape Town

Marriage and living in Woodstock and Salt River



Mike married my mum Sybil Klugman who was born in Rhodesia, and they moved into Milner Court, Woodstock, where my sister Hannah was born. Later they moved to Roodebloem Road, where I was born. Finally, he bought the Marks' home, 2 Vine Road, and this is where my younger siblings Sidney and Filly were born and where we lived for many years until Sidney's death in 1974.



Figs 5 and 6 my mom Sybil and dad Mike Gelbart

Shul Activities

During this early period Mike worked like a man possessed to support four kids and at the same time to run the shul and attend services. Mike, while still a junior member, had been elected to the main shul committee in 1939, which was the era of the Marks family, who chaired the community, and eventually left Woodstock in 1941. Then in 1941 began the Merkel era, under the strong chairmanship of Isaac Merkel, who was a striking personality and who grew the community by adding two houses in Argyle Road to cater for the overflow. Isaac was chairman for the next 16 years until his untimely death in 1957, when he was killed by a car one Saturday night. Mike was the natural successor, having participated on the committee and in services all along. He had to start his era as chairman that very weekend when he had to make the speech to our dear neighbour and my very good friend Wilfred Levin, who was celebrating his Barmitzvah.

Fig 7: Gelbart family picture taken at my cousin Issy's Barmitzvah in 1955.



Back row: Aunty Chaike (dad's middle sister) Edith Abramovitz (sister to my uncle Pinkus Rosenthal) Aunty Hodel (dad's eldest sister) Uncle Pinkus, cousin Judy (Mike Getz's sister / Aunty Hodel's daughter, my mother Sybil, Gelbart uncle, Cecil Rosenthal (uncle Pnkus' brother) and aunty, My zaide Avram's, 2nd wife. (As our bobba Hannah Riva had died in 1914 from typhus, 6 months after my father was born.)

Front row: My father Mike. Cousin. Issy, my zaide Avram Leib, my younger brother Sydney, cousin Maish Abramovitz and my elder sister Hannah

On the floor: Me and cousin. Hannahle, Issy's sister (There were several Hannah's in our family all named for my bobba. We located her grave. After our visit to Shubitz.

Family Trauma

In 1958 tragedy struck our family when a car accident left my mother Sybil bedridden for eight years until her early death in 1966. Needless to say, Mike was devastated and if not for the help of close neighbours and friends like Archie and Sadie Levin, Louis and Maddie Ehrlich, Max and Sheba Fligel and Willy Stone, Mike would not have survived this tough period. Aunty Chaikie's husband, Uncle Pinkie, was also the unsung hero, keeping the family business going.

Eventually Mike recovered and returned to his duties as chairman of the community. Although he did not really want to continue, he ran the shul on a daily basis, attended services and programmed the Yom Tovim services which were some of the best in Cape Town. He had no social life and left to his sister Chaike the job of looking after his kids. Aunty Chaika was there nightly seeing to our every need. Without her we would not have survived.

His only enjoyment was flying to Israel and seeing his old



Shubitz cheder mates as well as family. At last, he remarried. His second wife was Rene Mark who had a son David. They had a good 13 years together. She was great company for him on his travels overseas and locally before they moved into Bordeaux flats where many of their friends had already settled. In Sea Point he adored his dips in Graafs pool with his friend Willy Stone and a visit to the Turkish baths every Friday before shul.



Fig # 8 Felicia Hannah and me at our father's grave in pinelands cemetery (Fig 9)

My father, Mike Gelbart, passed away in February 1983 having had a most tumultuous life which started in a little town called Shubitz, Latvia. This is where he learned a lot about yiddishkeit before he came to South Africa. At Woodstock and Salt River Hebrew Congregation he was able to pass on his wide knowledge and trop to his children and to many people in Cape Town. Many of the

recordings of his singing the prayers and torah and haftora portions have been uploaded to the South African Jewish Museum (SAJM) website and you can listen to them here [YouTube channel](#)

His dearest wish was to live and be buried in Israel – neither of which he achieved.



Fig 10: Gelbart family surviving children at Woodstock and Salt River reunion 20 December 2004

Mike's surviving children: Hannah Chait Front left, Felicia Chait front right, Herschel Back row 2nd from right (Son Sydney was lost to cancer in 1973. To cancer.

Mike's sister Hodel Getz's. Surviving children

Mike Getz Front middle, Joe Getz Back row right, (Lost daughter Judy to cancer)

Mikes sister Chaike Rosenthal's Children

Back row left Issy Rosenthal Back row 2nd left Hannah Rosenthal.

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**Herschel Gelbart**

Herschel was born in Woodstock and Salt River in 1944. He went to the excellent local primary school in Mountain Road. For many years, most Jewish kids either went to Observatory Boys High school or to Herzlia, the Jewish school which had just been created in 1950s. There was a Woodstock High, but Jewish parents wanted the best education and sent their kids away.

Fig 7: Herschel Gelbart



Herschel says: 'I was lucky. My late mother Sybil decided I needed the best education. She managed by some heavy negotiations with Mr Whiteford, the then Principal of SACS (South African College School) for them to accept me. The policy of this prestigious school in Newlands, the oldest in South Africa, was that only boys from SACS junior school were allowed into high school in Standard 6.

'Once I was accepted into SACS, a few other boys from Woodstock and Salt River came after us all, like my best friend Wilfred Levin, my cousin Cecil Gelbart, my late brother, Sydney Gelbart (an outstanding rugby player) and Rodney Ehrlich (Dr Ehrlich's son) who later became SACS first ever Jewish Head Boy in 1968 and later a Rhodes scholar. He was a genius. Rodney, pictured right, followed his father into Medicine and became a professor of public health at UCT School of Health Sciences. He retired in 2016. Fig 8: Professor Rodney Erlich



After School, and after compulsory time in the army, I joined my father in his business. We amalgamated with another textile company, also dealing in textile wastes. We then exported to Europe and the USA.

I then started a new division, making needled padding for mattresses and underfelt for carpets. I was appointed the managing director. As 60% of our business was in Johannesburg, after a few years, I was transferred there to run our factory there. We then sold out to AFCOL (part of SA breweries). I ran Johannesburg and Durban, while my partners ran Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. I basically was with the same group since 1965 until I left AFCOL for Durban to start my own firm.

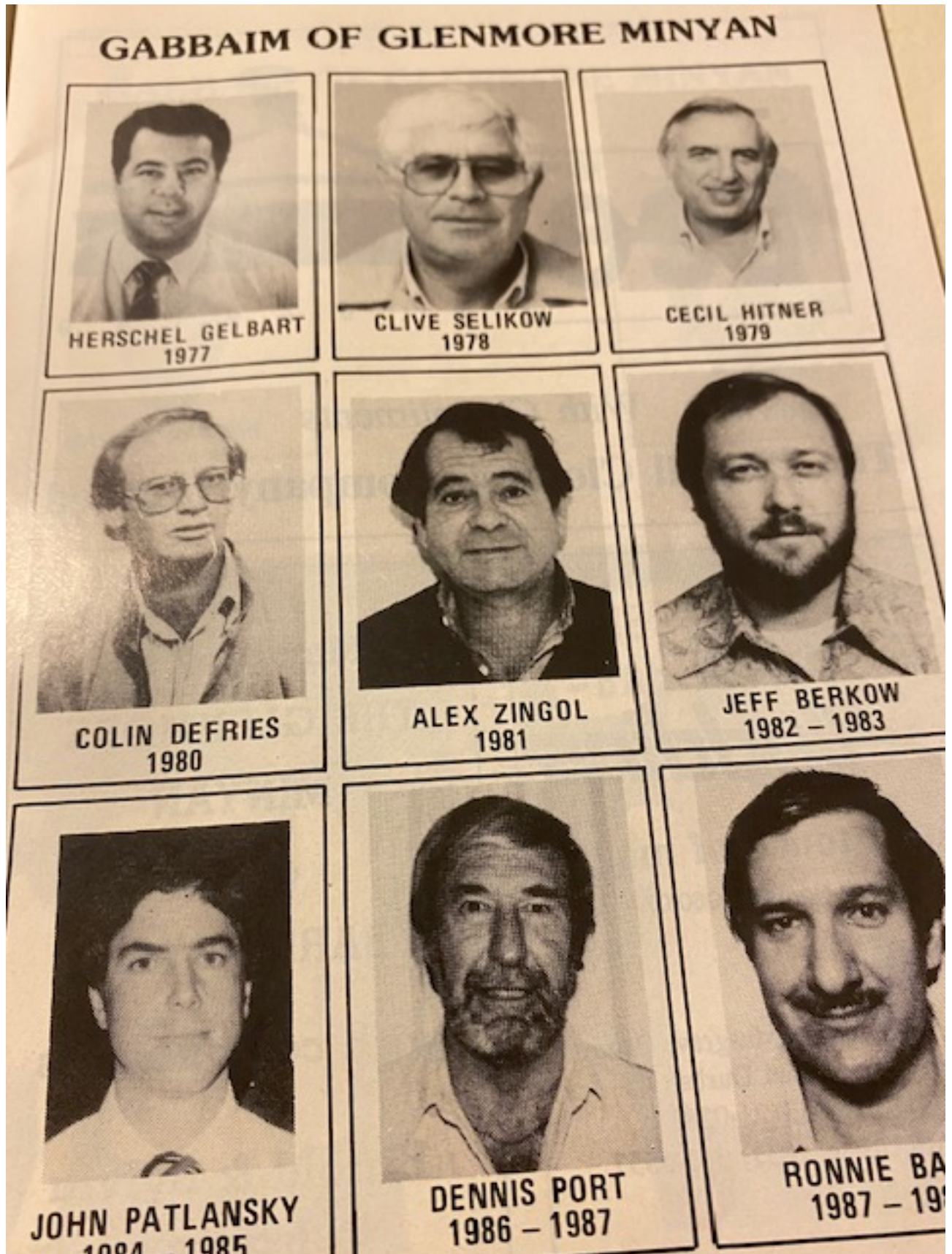
I was approached by huge group, including Beare brothers furniture Group, Jonathan Beare and Game discount owners plus a mattress group called Softex and Premier Springs. By 1973 the major shareholders were emigrating and they needed someone to run the Bedding. & Spring division. I joined my felt company with these guys. After five years, the other partners and I sold out back to AFCOL so I went back to my old group. I remained in Durban. Which I loved. I married Pam and we had our daughter Simone there.

As we were Shomrei Shabbos and the shul was not nearby, I started a minyan in my basement in Philamere Avenue in 1977. We started with just a minyan, but it steadily grew and in ten years we had 50 to 60 regular attenders. We prayed on Friday nights only (as I did not want a Torah under my roof.) Where we lived was close to Carmel College, the Jewish School and all the kids and their parents attended religiously each Friday night until we had 100 or more.

I conducted the services myself for the first year or two and then the school kids, mostly Bnei Akiva members took over with a new gabba each year appointed to allocate honours and announcements. It became so big we could not cope at home and I had to alter my playroom to accommodate all and include a mechitza. The atmosphere of camaraderie was amazing and we developed out own nusach for the services.

Pam and I emigrated to the USA In 1993. I arranged for the minyan to be relocated at Carmel College library. This minyan lasted for 43 years, until it ended due to the loss of our students. Most went to Johannesburg and Cape Town Universities, Wits and UCT. And most parents followed them or they all emigrated and the older folk died.

Durban was the best time of our lives. Sadly from 10,000 Jews in 1970s, there are now only about



800. Souls. And all my contemporaries have passed away or emigrated.

**Our close family: The Gelbart, Getz and Rosenthal clan** at the Woodstock and Salt River Hebrew Congregation reunion in December 2004 with our spouses



Back row: Geoff Chait (married my elder sister Hannah) Mike Getz (Washington ) Issy Rosenthal (Manchester ) Pamela gelbart - my wife, Me Hannahle Helman (née Rosenthal) Dr Colin Helman her husband (Birmingham Alabama USA) Joe Getz son of Aunty Hodel and Mike's brother

Front row: Hilda Getz Mike's spouse, Hannah Chait, my elder sister, Brenda Rosenthal Issy's spouse, Felicia Chait my younger sister and Anna Getz Joe's spouse. Sadly 5 of these cousins have since passed away in last few years. (Herschel Gelbart 2025)

Herschel Gelbart, 2025 Edited by Geraldine Auerbach MBE