

## Rev Isaac Gulis

### A Tribute by his Cheder Pupils

*Herschel Gelbart and Wilf Levin*

2021

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Whenever alumni of the Woodstock and Salt River Hebrew Congregation (WSRHC) get together the conversation invariably turns to reminiscences of our cheder days with Reverend Gulis.

He was a formidable teacher, and a loving, protective father figure. We acknowledge that the facility we have achieved in Hebrew is almost solely attributable to him.

Rev Gulis joined the cheder in the late 1940's. He had previously been employed in Bredasdorp, Beaufort West, and Paarl. He retired in approximately 1965 when the size of the community and reduced number of children made continuing the cheder impractical.

Cheder classes were held daily, Mondays to Fridays, and for an hour on Saturday mornings after shul services. The youngest class started at 3 o'clock each weekday. It was followed by three higher levels. Cheder concluded at 6.30 p.m.

He was a very strict teacher who exercised complete control from the moment we entered the class until the end of the class 45-60 minutes later. Some of us were regularly detained until we could flawlessly read the material selected for the day or answer, in Hebrew cursive script, a quiz on the day's material. The detention would last as long as it took to correctly complete the assigned task.

On Friday afternoons, after shortened classes, the whole school assembled for a full *Kabbalat Shabbat* and *Maariv* service. The students learned by copying the senior kids. Rev Gulis would call individuals to sing the concluding two to three lines of text of each paragraph and each stanza of *lecha dodi*. It seemed random so there was always anxious anticipation especially for the younger kids guessing who would be called next. We had no option but to come up to the desk, which served as the *omed*, and stammer our way through. Partly out of fear and embarrassment we quickly learned and became proficient. There was no reprise for stage fright – we had to step up and perform. This training has empowered all those who were interested to be able to lead any of the daily and Shabbat services.

On Saturday mornings we were expected to arrive in shul by 9.00. We sat in a three row block of seats to the left of the Ark. The older kids sat in the back row. We constituted the rag tag choir, the only requirements were that we enunciated the words correctly and loudly. There was no opportunity to misbehave under Rev Gulis' watchful eye. We were allowed to go outside for 15 minutes while the *haftorah* was read. It was an opportunity for a bathroom break and to play soccer in the forecourt of the shul. We were then recalled for *mussaf* after which we belted out *ein kelokein* and *Adon Olam*.

Thereafter we went to cheder where we sang the first portion of the Torah *sedra* and *maftir* and *haftorah*. Then Rev Gulis would tell us a story. The barmitzvah boys who were learning their portions had to sing for the whole class. The result was that we were very familiar with the tunes but couldn't necessarily tie it up to the *trop*. That came later.

A week before a barmitzvah we went back into the shul so that the boy could practice reading from the Torah. The rest of us were tasked with counting the number of mistakes which we eagerly embraced as we knew that we were safe. It was very competitive.

Rev Gulis was always dressed in a suit and tie. Clean shaven and neat. He smelled clean. Off shul grounds he was relaxed, but we the students were always on our guard, conscious that cheder awaited us the next day or week. He was very caring and protective of the cheder kids when he took us on public transportation to the Zionist Hall for functions or to the Goodwood Showgrounds for Yom Haatzmaut celebrations. We felt very safe with him. Rev Gulis and his wife were very hospitable when we would visit his home in Elson Street off The Avenue.

The Barmitzvah boys all performed wonderfully which made Rev Gulis proud. Despite his reputation for strictness he was sought out by parents of neighbouring suburbs to teach their children. Attaining the status of Barmitzvah really meant something. Besides completing the ordeal of davening on Friday evening and reading the *maftir* and *haftorah*, and reciting off by heart a Hebrew speech on the Saturday morning, we felt relieved from the burden and anxiety of cheder life. Rev Gulis treated us differently from that day forward.

The experiences we collectively enjoyed welded us into a group of lifelong friends and gave us an education second to none and topics for discussion 60+years later. We fondly remember Rev Gulis and thank him for educating us to appreciate our Jewish Heritage.



Rev Gulis with cheder pupils in a Purim cavalcade in the early 1950s



BACK: Elaine Yochelowitz, Issy Rosenthal, Louis Musnick, David Gevint, Simon Golshevsky, Abe Gulis, David Katz, Cecil Gelbart, Frank Stern, Rhona Sandler & Feli Gelbart. 2nd BACK: Leonard Stern, Sharon Fligel, Herschel Gelbart, Harold Fligel, Wilfred Levin, Mr De Haas (JNF Israel), Isaac Merkel, Rev Gulis, Mike Gelbart, Charles Sakinofsky  
 SEATED: Leonore Talmud, Greta Washkansky, Harold Zalk, Natie Brehm, Aubrey Geffen, Leon Munitz, Mackie Lee, Barney Breslow, Aubrey Katzeff  
 FLOOR: Harold Idesis, Hymie Munitz, Ivan Burnett, Aubrey Zalk, Sidney Gelbart, Phyllis Lewin, Elyau Golshevsky, Malka Gulis  
 FRONT: Bernice Davidowitz, Felicia Levin, Joe Talmud.

Rev Gulis with his cheder pupils in 1956

The grown-ups in the picture from left to right, a visitor from Israel, Isaac Merkel the chairman, Rev Gulis and my father Mike Gelbart, the vice chairman.

Next to the visitor, is Wilfred Levin and myself next to him (always together even then)

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Wilf Levin qualified as a doctor specialising in cancer treatment. He was the first oncologist in Port Elizabeth, before leaving for Toronto in Canada.

Read below the biography of Rev Gulis by his son Abe Gulis



## Rev Isaac Gulis (1907-1974)

by his son Abe Gulis 2021

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My father married my mother Fruma (Jane) Tzerna Rivkind in Lithuania on 11/11/1925.

After their wedding they made their way to Hamburg to board a ship to England and from there sailed to Cape Town. They were met by my mother's uncle, Mr Geffen, and stayed with them until a position became available in Bredasdorp for a single man.

Uncle Geffen suggested that my father accept the position, while my mother should remain with them in Cape Town. He served there for about a year, when one Sunday at an afternoon tea in the town, a traveller passing by popped in, and recognizing my father asked where his wife was (everyone there was shocked as they had been trying to make a *shidduch* for him). The congregation insisted my mother join them.

From Bredasdorp, they moved to **Laingsburg** and thereafter to **Beaufort West** where they stayed for 7 years. My sisters Channa and Salome were born there. Their next position was in Paarl where he served for 11 years and where I and my sister Malka were born.

Then they came to Woodstock and Salt River Hebrew Congregation in 1947, and stayed for 17 very happy and productive years. This was followed by his involvement in a new programme initiated by the Board of Education for Jewish teachers to teach Religious Instruction at the Public Schools such as in Muizenberg and Wynberg. He also taught Hebrew at Herzlia School and Cheder at Durbanville. He served for about 3 years at the Gardens Shul as Chazan Sheini and assisted in many other places when called on e.g. *Sheichet* at Sheiffers Poultry (they offered a tikkie for each chicken slaughtered) and as an extra *Sheichet* before Pesach and Rosh Hashanah.

My father was instrumental in getting the first Pension Fund for Hebrew Teachers established, despite facing great negativity from the community at the time. Later all teachers at Herzlia School were included and now benefit from the same Fund. Included at the time was a clause stating that should a member wish to make leave before Pensionable Age, to make *Aliyah*, he would still receive the pension at the due date.





**Melvin Davidewitz, Abe Gulis, Rev. Gulis,  
Bokkie Zegal outside the General Post Office  
in Darling Street**

My Father served for many years on the committee of the Jewish Sick Relief Society (Bikur Cholim) and OMER (Jewish Ecclesiastical Association).

Chana Gulis, his daughter, worked for the Zionist Fed in Cape Town and after making *Aliyah* worked for the Zionist Fed in Israel and was a friendly familiar face at the front desk for many new SA olim.

My father passed away in 1974, in Cape Town, where he had served the Jewish community with dedication for so many years. My mother then made *Aliyah* to join her two daughters in Israel, myself following a few years later.

*May his memory be for a blessing*