

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.