

# My Dear Papa

LETTERS FROM  
A FARM IN AFRICA



Richelle Shem-Tov

## **Letters from Africa**

This book is dedicated to my parents Jack and Sadie Hirschmann, now long gone, who shared so many of their memories, beliefs and values with us, their children, and granted us the gift of love as a lifetime legacy.

**Richelle Shem-Tov**

## **Contents**

**The People of the Letters – FamilyTrees**

**Preface**

**Part One: Herman, 1889-1897**

**Part Two: Doris, 1897-1898**

**Part Three: The War, 1899-1902**

**Part Four: Back to Woodbush, 1902-1903**

**Part Five: Doris, 1903-1907**

**Part Six: Herman, 1908 -1912**

**Epilogue**

**Author's notes, + acknowledgements**

**Appendices**

**Glossary**

**References**

## **The People of the Letters**

### **The Isaiah Hirschmann family of Talsen (today known as Talsi), Courland<sup>1</sup>**

Isaiah (b ?-1904) m.? Kallmeyer (b?- d?)

**1.Herman** (1866 – 1922), m. Doris Thal of Mitau, Courland, (1877 -1942)

1.1 Jack, (1898 – 1977), m Sadie Kark of Johannesburg (1908 – 1981): 3 children: Herman, Richelle, David

1.2. Hilda, (1900 – d?) m. and divorced? Elkin.

1.3. Bertha (Babe) (1902 -1988) m. Max Meskin: 1 daughter Doribelle

1.4 Charlie (Isaiah) (1904 - 1973) m. Cecily Goldblatt:2 children: Harley and Lesley Doris

1.5 Maurice (Mo) (1906 -1982) m. Elsie Kahn: 3 children: Louis, Rosemary and Richard (Dickie).

**2. Johanna** (1871 - 1961) m. Joseph Kallmeyer (1859 – 1931)

2.1 .Bertha m. Sam Palte in Pietersburg: 5 children: Eileen, Rhoda, Lorna, Ziffie, Joy.

2.2. Annie m. Leo Salomon in Pietersburg: 3 children: Theo, Julian and Jocelyn

2.3. Jack m. Sophie; 1 son Ivan

2.4. Harry m. Berchon Rosenberg with 3 children

2.5. Shaia m. Gita Ezekov

**3. Bryna** m. Boris Rakusin<sup>2</sup>

3.1. Shaia m. Rachel: 1 daughter Rosa

3.2. Samuel m. Francis Tager: 2 daughters: Bertha and Hedda

3.3.Jacob (Kuba) m. Lily Levine: 2 children: Lena and Bryan

**4. Jacob** (1879-1935),m.Erna Ethel Raick (1887 – 1918)

4.1. Samuel (Chummie) (1914 - 1960)m.Gertie:3 sons:Jacob, Ezra, Saul.

4.2. Eddie (1916 -2008)

**5. Meisen m.?. Levi**

5.1. Sarie m. ? Kahn

5.2. Solly m. Kay (?): 2 children Jonathan and Gabriel.

6. Joseph (Brahle) (1886 -1974 )m. Rahel (? – 1976)

1 I was unable to locate many of the birth and death dates. Further, some of the dates given may not be accurate.

With the exception of Isiaah, who died in Europe in 1904, and Meisen Levi, of whom I have no information, all the other members of the family immigrated to South Africa during the early part of the twentieth century where they joined the Hirschmann and Kallmeyer families of the Pietersburg (Polokwane) or Zoutpansberg district of the NorthernTransvaal – today known as Limpopo Province.

(See further details in notes under Letter 6.2)

2 Tragically, Bryna, Boris, their eldest son Shaia, his wife Rachel and child Rosa, were caught up in the events of the Second World War and did not survive the Holocaust. They were murdered in Aushwitz in 1944.

## **The Thal family of Mitau (today Jelgava), Kurland/Courland<sup>1</sup>**

LEIZER THAL (JANKEL<sup>3</sup>, MOSES JANKEL<sup>2</sup>, JANKEL<sup>1</sup>) b.ca. 1849, d. 23 Feb. 1909; m.

JENNIE ROSE, b. ca. 1849, d.?

Children of LEIZER THAL and JENNIE ROSE: (Also known as Louis and Rose)

i. MOZES (Maurice) DAVID THAL b. 23 April 1874; d.?

ii. DORA (Doris) THAL, b. 22 Oct 1877; d. 1942.

iii. SHAY THAL,<sup>2</sup> b. 17 Jun 1878; d.?

iv. ETTA THAL, b. 17 May 1880; d.?

v. LINA THAL, b. 22 May 1882; d. ?

vi. JOHANNA THAL, b. 23 Nov 1883; d. ?

vii. TAUBE THAL, b. 19 Mar 1887; d. ?

1 On careful examination of a genealogical study of the Thal family, starting in the seventeenth century, I found this chart of what I believe to be Doris' immediate family, and have given them a story.

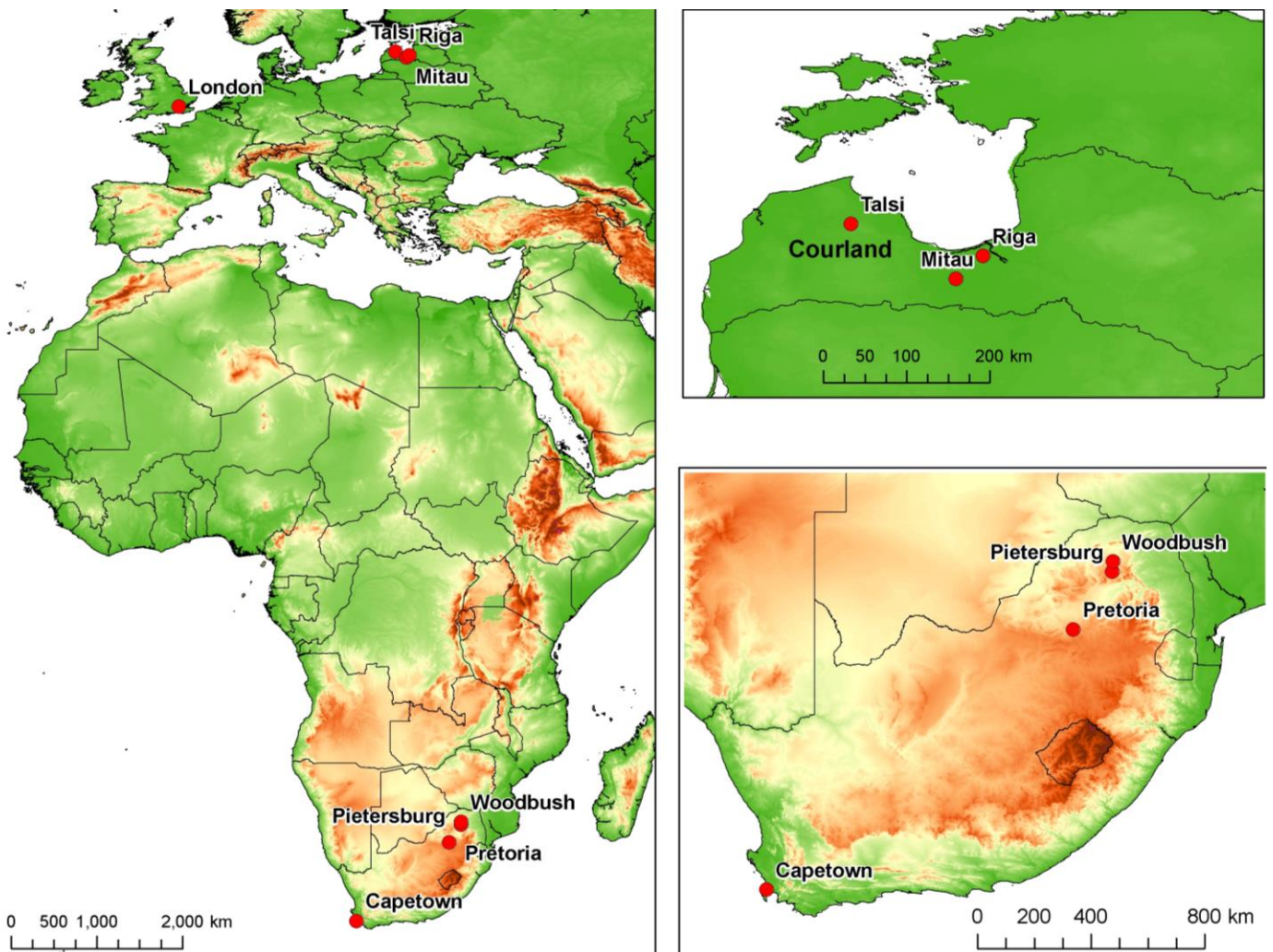
2 On further examination of the genealogy data, I discovered that Shay Thal married Sora Aronstam and they had two sons, Louis and Izaak. Louis, born 1910 in Mitau, was probably named after his grandfather Louis (Lazer), who died in 1909. From this I learned that if Shay did leave Courland, as I write later in “my story,” he must have returned there. Adjacent to Izaak, the second son, the notation “personal” appears. Could this mean that members of his family exist somewhere?



## Preface

The letters that appear in this book are fiction. They are based on real events, people and places from the lives and times of my grandparents, Herman and Doris Hirschmann.

Herman and Doris left their homes in Courland – at the time a province of the Russian Empire (later to become part of Latvia) – and immigrated to South Africa, settling on a farm in the Woodbush area (Houtbosch in Dutch; Houtbos in Afrikaans). This was part of the Zoutpansberg or Pietersburg district, in what was then the Northern Transvaal and is today Limpopo Province. The farm and store were situated approximately thirty miles north-east of the town of Pietersburg (known today as Polokwane), two hundred miles north of Johannesburg.



This map shows the areas involved and the distances between Courland and Cape Town.

The events related in the letters took place at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries

I have based this manuscript on historical records taken from books, on-line sources and novels. Much more is from hearsay, stories and anecdotes, and from memoirs, letters, pictures and newspaper cuttings that I have acquired from family and friends. All this is in addition to my own memories of places and people and childhood experiences.

These letters might have been written to or by my grandparents. Through these letters, together with accompanying annotations, I seek to tell their story.



# Part One: Herman

## Introduction

I never knew my grandfather. He was born in 1866, in Talsen, Courland (Kurland, in German), and died in 1922 of a heart attack at the age of fifty-six in Pietersburg, South Africa. The pictures I have seen of Herman show a good-looking young man, who was completely bald in his later years. Towards the end of the 1880s, at the age of about twenty, he arrived in Cape Town with masses of other Jewish immigrants, the majority from countries today known as Latvia and Lithuania. Most of these people set sail from the Baltic ports to England and from there crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa. Some apparently thought they were sailing to America and instead found themselves on the southern tip of Africa. They were fleeing a country of persecution, political unrest and anti-Semitism. South Africa, on the other hand, was a land of opportunity. It would become more so following the discovery of gold and diamonds, particularly after the termination of the Second Anglo-Boer War.

Herman, it seems, left Courland for fear of military conscription.

The Jews from Courland were usually, though not always, relatively prosperous and educated. Almost all the children – boys and girls, rich and poor – attended schools, most often providing a mixed secular and religious education. They were influenced by the Haskala, the Jewish Enlightenment movement and various other political trends of that period, such as the Socialist and Zionist movements.

For the most they were observant Jews although much less learned in Jewish studies and lifestyle than their brethren in Lithuania. Characteristically, they were considered straightforward, almost to a fault. Quite a number had emigrated from Lithuania, but the original Jews of Courland came from Prussia, and German remained the dominant culture. Although Courland was part of the Russian empire from the mid-eighteenth century until 1918, most Jews preferred to speak German. When conversing in German or Russian with other Jewish people, their talk would be spattered with colourful Yiddish expressions.

The name Herman Hirschmann is very German. His letters to his family in Europe were probably written in German.

Restrictions on the Jewish population varied, depending on the level of tolerance of the changing ruling powers. Generally they were able to earn their living as tradesmen, industrialists, artisans, teachers and professionals, such as dentists and doctors. Being well-versed in Russian, German, Lettish and of course Yiddish, many were employed in government offices as clerks and translators.

However, for this same reason they were often accused of being spies by either the Germans or the Russians.

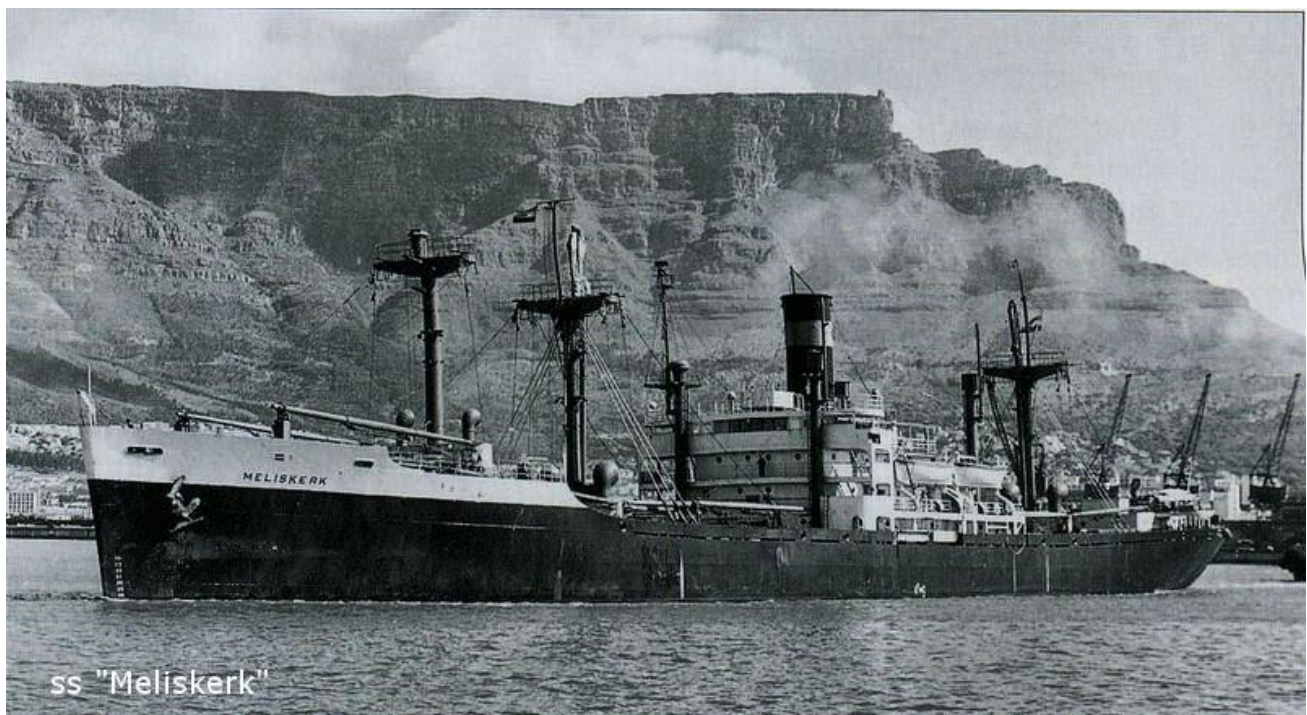
Part One of these letters covers the period from the last decades of the 1880s, when my grandfather arrived in South Africa, up until 1897 when he was joined by Doris Thal, his future wife and my grandmother.

### **1.1.From Herman<sup>1</sup> to his father Isaiah in Talsen, Courland**

Cape Town, October 1889

My dear Papa,

It is now over a month since my last letter from the high seas on my way to Cape Town. I had no idea at the time what I would find in my new country of adoption, how I would manage with the little English I had picked up, where and how I could work and earn a living. So as not to cause you concern, I did not tell you then how afraid and anxious I was. We slept on bunks on the bottom deck of the ship in crowded conditions. I found myself with hundreds of other immigrants – many of them Jews from Latvia and Lithuania, some with families, some young single men like myself – all of us hoping for a more promising future. The seas were rough and stormy. I did sometimes feel that perhaps I might have been mistaken to leave the world that I knew and the people I loved in order to come to this distant place in Africa. I thank you for your help and encouragement. I know it was not easy for you. Thank you, also, Papa, for accompanying me to part from Mama at her graveside in Talsen. I take with me something of her wherever I go.



The day we docked at Table Bay in the Cape of Good Hope, as it is called, was one I shall never forget. When we awoke at dawn, the ship stood almost still after a particularly stormy night. We went up on deck and were greeted by a sight that I believe is the most beautiful I have ever seen. Indeed, Cape Town is dominated by a table-like mountain, with clouds hanging over it like a white table-cloth and at each end a peaked mountain –like open arms welcoming the boats docking in this most beautiful country – so far away and so different from the world we come from. As much as my heart was filled with anxiety, so too it was filled with hope and optimism.

I am staying with a man who is the uncle of a friend I met on the boat. He gave us a place to sleep in the back of his grocery shop, in a suburb of Cape Town named District Six. Many of our people live in this neighbourhood. We are learning our way about the city and its surroundings. It is spring here in the Southern Hemisphere and all around there are myriads of wild flowers and plants, many of which I had never seen before. Mama would have gone wild with excitement to see such a show. There are great majestic mountains in every direction, and oceans meet in and around the capes and bays. The sea and the sky are so blue and clear. The winds sometimes blow very fiercely, and although I am told it can be wet and cold, I have not yet felt this. It is warm here now. Oh so lovely and warm!

The city bustles with people of many languages and colours: There are the white European people, unquestionably the ruling class; Indians; black Africans from the hinterland who come in search of work; small, brown indigenous folk<sup>2</sup>; other “brown” people, brought here as slaves from South-East Asia; and in addition, many people of mixed race.<sup>3</sup> We, the Jews, are considered “white”! I wonder what Roche'le,<sup>4</sup> with her ideas of revolutionizing Europe and the entire world would think – she and all her comrades would be shocked!

However, I must accept this world as it is and build a life for myself as best I can. I am grateful to be as I am and, although foreign and Jewish, hopefully, I will be able to find my way. In my dreams of the future I can picture my children and my children's children either visiting or living in or near this exciting city, surrounded by so much beauty. I can see them in my mind's eye as educated, prosperous and equal citizens of South Africa, without any need to conceal their Jewish origin.

My English is improving and at night I read newspapers and books. I try to speak without an accent and as you remember I am good at mimicking. There is another language here, spoken by the *Boers* or Afrikaners, people mainly from Holland, but also from France and other European countries. I am

determined to master this language –Afrikaans, a kind of Dutch. My knowledge of German and Yiddish is of great help.

We work most days in Mr. Levin's shop. He also sends us out into the country areas with a horse and cart to sell goods to the farmers, most of whom speak Afrikaans. Some have magnificent gabled houses and wine farms, but there are others who are very poor.

You will be glad to know that the family light candles and say *kiddish* on Friday night. Although we have to work on Saturday, we get the day off on Sunday. We are given good kosher food and we eat with the family. You may rest assured that I am well taken care of.

I hope that you and all my brothers and sisters are keeping well. How is baby Joseph? I hope that after I find my place in this new homeland of mine you will join me here. As I promised, Papa, I will fast on Yom Kippur and say my prayers at sunset. I do not smoke on Saturday!

Love from your son,

Herman

*1 Herman was the first of his family to emigrate from Courland to South Africa. His father Isaiah taught religious subjects to Jewish students in secular schools and owned a bookshop in Talsen, Courland.*

*I have neither read nor heard any information regarding his mother, other than that her maiden name was Kallmeyer. Apparently, she gave birth to eight children, six of whom reached adulthood. It is possible that she died after the birth of the youngest child Joseph, or Brahle, as he was usually called. This is what I have assumed in my letters (see Appendix "Notes from Eddie Hirschmann").*

*2 The small brown people Herman refers to belong to the Khoisan peoples who are indigenous to Southern Africa. The majority of them were either exterminated by, or integrated with the other races of the country.*

*3 Most of the people known as the Coloureds of South Africa are descended from the Whites, Blacks, Khoisans and people brought as slaves from South-East Asia. Although they are dispersed throughout the country, the majority live in the Cape Province and speak Afrikaans.*

*4 Roche'le and her husband Maurice are fictional characters, with whom Herman corresponded (see below).*

From an oxcart on the way from Pretoria to Woodbush, November 1892



The Voortrekkers

Dear Maurice,

Thank you for your letter telling me that you have at last been released from prison and that you and your wife Roche'le are leaving for Palestine. It has always been your dream. Is Roche'le happy with this idea? She was always one for changing Europe and the world and had no wish to leave her home. I believe that conditions in Palestine are very difficult but I think you do well to leave Courland and I wish you luck. You know that, unlike you, I have never claimed to be a Socialist or a Zionist but wish only to find a home and a future for myself and to bring my family here.

In this country I have been received kindly, although I do believe that anyone looking for trouble will find it. The Boers (Dutch or Afrikaans) are fiercely patriotic and the English want control of the gold and diamonds, so a war is brewing. There are also fierce battles between the Blacks and the Whites, called the Kaffir Wars. I myself, as you probably would guess, have no intention of getting involved in armed conflict for any cause.

You would not believe where I am right now – writing this letter at the side of a small wood-fire, next to an ox-wagon<sup>2</sup> in wild bushland, somewhere in the middle of “no-where.” We are on our way from Pretoria to my destination, a place called Houtboschdorp, or Woodbush. After leaving Cape Town I spent only a few months in Johannesburg and Pretoria, and could see that these places were not for me. I met and have become friends with a young man from Germany, von Reichi,<sup>3</sup> who told me of farms for sale in the Northern Transvaal at very reasonable prices. His family own a farm in that area and I decided to investigate such a possibility for myself. He himself was preparing to travel there with a group of Afrikaans *trekkers*. They travel in covered ox-wagons and agreed to allow me to join them. There are ten families, all Afrikaans speaking. I sleep with one family in their wagon, although on some nights, if the weather is fine, we sleep under the stars of these Southern skies – indeed an amazing sight. At night my travel companions form a circle with their wagons, called a *laager*. We take turns keeping watch. There is constant danger of snakes and wild animals; also an ever-present fear of cattle thieves and of clashes with militant black tribes. Even now I hear the sounds and calls of the animals of the night and sometimes the distant beating of drums. On this journey I am learning to master the Afrikaans language. I go horse-riding with the young men and enjoy the company of the girls, or *meisies*.<sup>4</sup>

One man, a farmer from that area, has told me much of this people and their history. They are devout Christians but accept Jews with warmth and even identify with us as the people of the Bible. They too feel that they are persecuted and that their trek to the North is equivalent to the biblical story of the Exodus. I keep my opinions to myself but feel no need to disguise the fact that I am Jewish.

Both von Reichi and I, being of German stock and foreigners to this country, find we have much in common. He has lived here for some time and considers himself an Afrikaner. He has taught me much of how to survive in these primitive conditions. As he lives in the Houtbosch area he promises to help me with the farm. He has taught me to hunt and from him I know never to shoot or to permit the killing of wild animals unless in self-defence, or, if needed, for food.<sup>5</sup>

Tomorrow we will be passing through a village called Pietersburg where we will stock up with supplies. There is a postal service there and I will send this letter. It may take weeks to reach you. If you have already left for Palestine, I am sure your family will forward it to you. Please give my warmest wishes to all our friends, to your parents, and of course to Roche’le.

Good luck in your new country!

Herman



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*1 Herman is able to share certain feelings and experiences with Maurice, his old school friend - feelings that he does not always feel free to share with family. I have also created this fictitious couple to give some idea of the political climate among young Jewish people in Eastern Europe at that time. Some embraced Zionism or Socialism and other political causes, while others chose to emigrate, mainly to escape anti-Semitism, military conscription and economic hardship.*

*2 Travelling in the country areas of South Africa was limited to walking, cycling and donkey or horse-riding. There were wagons, carts or coaches, and even sledges drawn by donkeys, mules, horses or cattle. The famous Zeederburg coaches, established towards the end of the nineteenth century and drawn by a team of twelve to sixteen mules, were among the first commercialised passenger coaches in the district and were faster and relatively more comfortable. A railway line from Pretoria to Pietersburg was built in 1888. This contributed considerably to the opening up and development of the northern part of the country. [see picture of 1<sup>st</sup> train in Pietersbutg](#)*

*However, until the introduction of the automobile during the first decade of the twentieth century, travel and transport were hugely time-consuming and often extremely hazardous. Mountain passes, steep, slippery cliffs, forests, rocky terrain, rivers, wild animals, extreme weather conditions and highway robbers were only some of the dangers and difficulties confronting the traveller of those times.*

*3 Up until 1961, when I emigrated from South Africa, the neighbouring farm in Woodbush belonged to a von Reichi family who came from Germany. They were close friends of the Hirschmann family.*

*4 In Afrikaans, both meisie and meidjie are used when referring to a young girl or maiden,*

*5 Even in those early days there was an awareness of the necessity to protect the wildlife of South Africa. In 1898, Paul Kruger, then President of the South African Republic, set aside a large tract of land in the North-Eastern Transvaal where the killing of animals was and still is strictly forbidden.*

### **1.3. From Herman to his Papa in Courland**

Houtboschdorp/Woodbush, February 1893

My dear Papa,

It is nearly three months since my arrival in Houtboschdorp/Woodbush and, thanks to the money you sent via your friends in Johannesburg, I have been able to purchase a farm. Once again you have helped me along my path and I hope to be able to prove myself worthy. Until I can fix up the house properly I am staying on von Reichi's farm. He emigrated from Germany some time ago. I work on



his farm to pay my way, and at the same time am learning how to farm, and indeed, how to run a farm, a completely new experience for me. I go to the markets and the villages on horseback or in a donkey cart to buy and sell. I find this to be a fine occupation, enabling me to get to know the people and their ways, and to master their *taal* – language. Many of the farmers are Boers but there are also English-speaking people on some of the farms and villages in this district. Of course, there are also the Blacks. Furthermore, I am becoming familiar with every corner of the surrounding countryside. Some parts are very beautiful with mountains and forests. I will write more of that.

My farm, our farm, is huge. It covers an area of over a thousand square acres. Can you picture me, at this young age, owning so much land? I decided to purchase this particular property rather than the more lush and greener pastures offered in the nearby mountains, because in this drier territory there is a far lesser likelihood of contracting malaria – a very serious problem in this part of the world.<sup>1</sup> The house needs a lot of repair – it needs to be almost rebuilt, but first I will erect a shop on top of the hill at the entrance to the farm. I have started doing this. The farm workers living on our farm, which I have called Woodbush or Houtbosch in Dutch, are building the shop and I have hired an experienced builder to be in charge. I have become aware that there is a great need here for a store to provide the farming community with all their household and other requirements. People living here have to travel about thirty miles to Pietersburg for their supplies – on horseback, by donkey or mule cart or by ox-wagon. And it can take days to get there. The black people are also potential customers as their men earn some money on the farms and in the towns. I believe I can provide this service and make a good profit. I will move into the back of the store and get it going as soon as possible.

The Afrikaner people here have welcomed me into house and home – their hospitality is amazing. We work hard and go to sleep early but over weekends there are often social gatherings and I have learnt their dances and songs. Although I have made many good friends, I miss you all dearly and long to be with family. I am hoping that Johanna and Joseph and their children will leave Middelburg and join me here.<sup>2</sup> I have offered Joseph a partnership in the store and am building the house to accommodate two families, each with separate facilities.

There are a few Jewish families in Pietersburg and in the district. We meet only rarely as travel is difficult, but I am grateful for their company, especially on the *Yamtavim*.<sup>3</sup> I am always received warmly and am treated with dishes that I know well from back home. They bring back memories of that home, though I believe no one can cook as Mama did. Max and Wolf Israelson<sup>4</sup> from Courland have bought a farm some miles from here. They are about my age; we have much in common and have become close friends.

The weather is warm – it is summer here! I often think of you in the icy cold cities of Talsen, Mitau and Riga.<sup>5</sup> Although I enjoy the sunny and temperate climate, there are times that I miss those walks in the snow and skating on the frozen river. I hope and pray that all is well. I sometimes hear of ugly anti-Semitic events and I hope that neither you nor our friends or family have been involved in any serious way. Please write to me. I thirst for every bit of news and information. Perhaps, Papa, you will be able to visit me here.

With love and affection,

Your son Herman

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*1 According to information I received from Lionel Stein, a great grandson of Johanna and Joseph Kallmeyer, the farm in Woodbush was indeed chosen because it was relatively arid and therefore malaria was far less prevalent than on the other side of the mountain, where rain was plentiful.*

*2 Johanna Kallmeyer was the eldest of Herman's sisters. The Kallmeyers arrived in South Africa in 1890 and settled in the town of Middelburg. They later joined Herman in Woodbush but I do not have specific information of when. It may have been at an earlier period than what I have assumed in my letters.*

*3 Yamtavim - Jewish Holidays in Yiddish.*

*4 The Israelson brothers, like the Hirschmanns, emigrated from Courland towards the end of the nineteenth century and established a farm named Turfloop, between Woodbush and Pietersburg. They also owned a second farm in the same area called Veekraal. It is not within the scope of this book to tell their story but there can be no doubt that it was closely linked to that of the Hirschmanns in Woodbush.*

*5 Talsen, Mitau and Riga in Latvia are described as being magnificent European cities, in which at that time, large, vigorous Jewish populations resided. There were periods where they flourished but others where they suffered discrimination under anti-Semitic regimes. The port city of Riga is near but not part of Courland. However, a very large number of Jews from Courland found employment and established their homes there.*

#### **1.4. From Herman to Maurice in Palestine**

Woodbush, October 1894

Shalom Maurice,

How lucky we are to have each other and to be able to share our most private thoughts. And this since we were at school! Even now when our separate paths have led us to distant places, we still

manage to maintain our friendship. I enjoy every detail you describe and am grateful to be able to share with you matters that I cannot always disclose to my family.

Mazal Tov to you and Roche'le on the birth of your little girl, a child born to you in EretzYisrael. I can well imagine what this must mean to you. I read your letter with interest although also with some concern. The conditions in Palestine seem very demanding, but I believe your faith and determination will hold you in good stead. Here, too, my faith, a powerful love of the life in the African wilds, and sheer determination, are what keep me going. This, despite the loneliness and the huge hurdles that I need to overcome.

It is evening at the end of a long day. I sit on the veranda, or *stoep*, of my house, which I have finally completed, and light my pipe – something I have learnt from my Afrikaans friends. In fact, there are two homes side by side. My sister Johanna and her husband Joseph Kallmeyer and family are planning to join me here. He will help me run the store. For the time being, the man who I have hired to help me there lives in the other house with his wife and two little boys. His name is Harry Shultz.<sup>1</sup> He is the son of a German Jewish couple<sup>2</sup> who arrived here twenty years ago and live in a village in the mountains. He will work here until the Kallmeyers arrive. He married an Afrikaans girl – pretty, full of fun, a good wife and mother. Though I write this only to you, I feel envious and lonely in my home which is ready and waiting to be filled with the joy that only a woman and children can bring.

I meet and enjoy the company of many a young lady in the homes of my neighbours and there are some whom I feel rather fancy me. One such young and fair *meidjie* nursed me through a bad dose of fever.<sup>3</sup> She brought me *muthi* – some Black or Dutch concoction and fed me chicken broth. She wiped cool my burning brow, while also turning my head and my heart. It never went further than that as she was promised to a young Afrikaner from the Limpopo River area. This is just as well as I cannot really contemplate hurting my father and family by marrying out of the faith. It took me some time to regain my strength after the fever and to still my heart after parting with that fair young lady.

I have met some Jewish girls from Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria but find that I have very little in common with them. As it is, there is no way that they would agree to live out here in the bush with me. I will be patient and soon my brother Jacob will visit me here. We will discuss the possibility of bringing someone suitable from home.<sup>4</sup> How well you did to marry the girl you knew and loved before leaving. You may remember, I was actually a bit in love with her myself.

Love and warm wishes to Roche'le and kiss the little girl, Your friend Herman

*1 Harry is fictional though there were some who could fit this part. In the 1950s my dad's brother Uncle Charlie, who still owned the Woodbush store (my father kept the farm) employed a Jewish man, Harry, to run the shop. Harry fell in love with and married the daughter of an Afrikaner who lived in an apartment at the side of our house in Woodbush and was the foreman on our farm. Marriage between Jewish men and Afrikaans women were not unheard of in those outlying areas. A small number also married or had children with non-white women.*

*2 From the earliest years of the nineteenth century, there were a small number of Jewish settlers in the Zoutpansberg district. Most of them emigrated from Germany, Holland, England and East Europe. These people arrived well before the mass emigration from Lithuania and Latvia to South Africa.*

*3 The story of the "fair meidjie" is pure fiction, but I think is a very possible scenario for a young man alone and so far from home.*

*4 I was told by my father that on Jacob's visit to Woodbush, he found Herman very closely integrated with the Afrikaans farmers of the district; he would go to their parties and dance and socialize with the young people. Jacob apparently reported this to their father in Talsen. Isaiah made every effort to find a suitable wife for Herman and eventually he and Jacob accompanied Doris Thal from Mitau to Woodbush (see Part Two below). It must be noted that many of the Jewish immigrants to South Africa at that time, were young unmarried men and it was common practice for their families in Europe to send out young Jewish women to become their brides.*

## **1.5. From Herman to his Papa in Talsen, following his naturalization on the 12th August 1895**

Woodbush, August 1895

My dearest Papa,

Well, I am now a "burgher" - a citizen of the "Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek" and have been presented with a certificate in Dutch, to this effect. This will be of benefit in many ways, but most of all I receive it with great pride and a feeling of belonging. I am hoping you and many more of our friends and family will follow me here. I had the certificate framed and hang it proudly on the wall of our shop.

I look back on those seven years since I arrived in Cape Town with great satisfaction. It has not always been easy and the distance between us is hard to bear. However, thank God, and thanks to the warmth and good will of the people here, and to the help and encouragement I have received from you, I am doing well. I hope and pray I will be able to raise a fine Jewish family in this beautiful country amongst these good and hospitable people.

The business is already proving to be a profitable venture. The farm has been less successful as the rainfall here is relatively poor. However, we have planted an orchard of loquat trees and have had some limited success with maize, or mealies, as it is known here. On the advice of neighbouring farmers and the Blacks on our farm, I have decided to invest in cattle. We have started building a cattle *kraal*. (This is the word used by the Boers for an enclosure for livestock. It is also used for a cluster of huts for the Blacks in the countryside.)

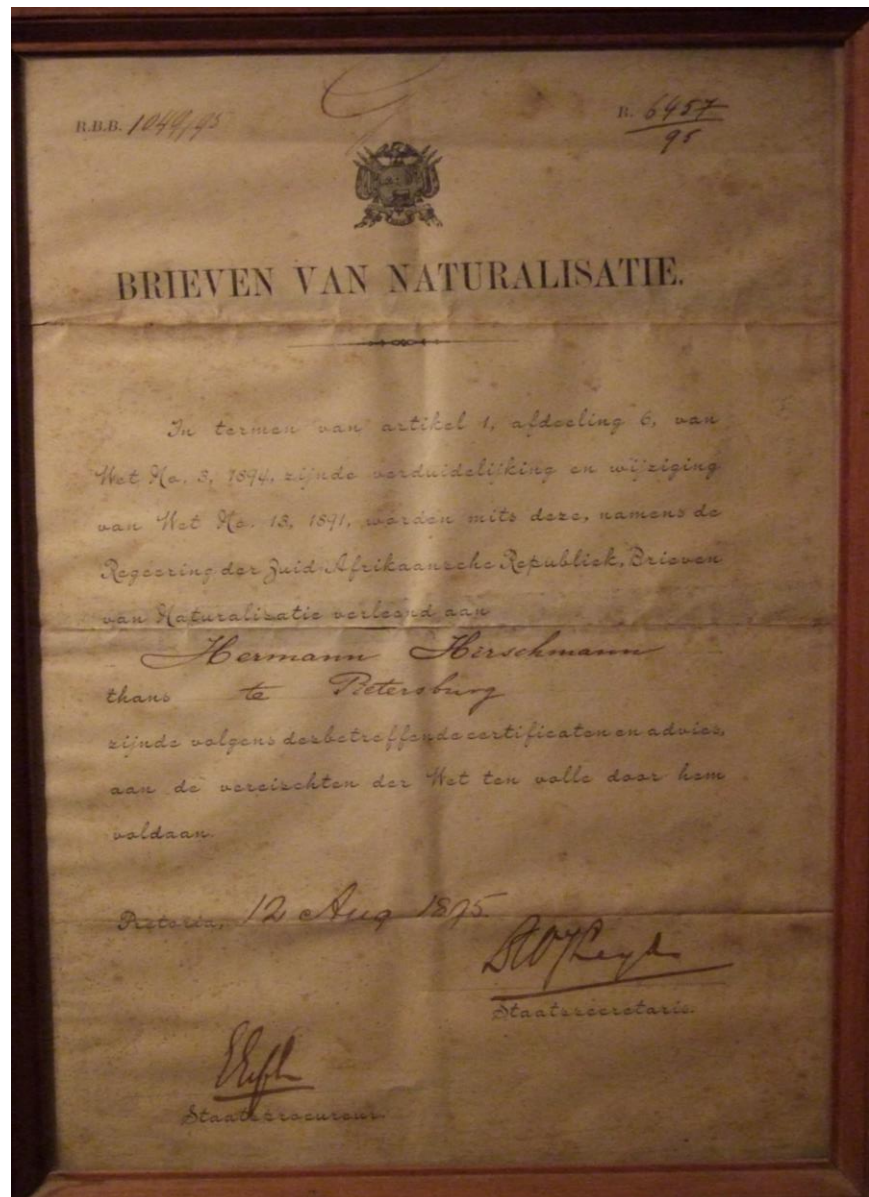
I am looking forward to the arrival of the Kallmeyer family. Joseph will be of great help in managing our business affairs.

Now I count the days until Jacob's arrival. He is due in ten days time and I will meet him at the train in Pretoria. From there we will travel to visit Johanna and Joseph in Middelburg. Thereafter, he will come back here with me to see for himself how I live and, I believe, will bring back all his impressions to you.

I am hungry for every crumb of information regarding you, my sisters and brothers, friends and family, how they fare and how those who have travelled afar have settled in their new-found countries.

With much love,

Herman



## 1.6. From Herman to Roche'le in Palestine

Woodbush, December 1885

My dear Roche'le,

Thank you for your letter telling me about your lovely baby and your life in Palestine. It seems that life there is not easy. Here in South Africa, women's lives are considerably more comfortable as most of the Whites have black servants who do much of the hard physical work in the homes and on the farms.

You ask me about the conditions of the Blacks. I must admit that it is very convenient being a white citizen with all the privileges that come with it, but I do feel a degree of shame. We used to be very critical of the rich landowners in Europe and the exploitation of the poor and the peasants. Believe me, the condition of the Blacks here is no better and perhaps worse. And yet, I find myself part of such a system. There are some areas in our district still controlled by native tribes, but more and more of their land is being taken over by the Whites – both by the Boers and by the English.



Many of the black people still live on the farms, including my own. They live in round huts, with walls made of a mud mixture and thatched rooves. A cluster of these huts are built around a cleared-out area. This is called a *kraal*. There are a number of such kraals on the farm belonging to different families.

According to accepted custom, they are allowed to work a small plot around their kraal and may also keep some livestock of

their own. In return, they are required to do all the work on the farm and are remunerated only for ninety days a year. Although, in my eyes, they are pitifully poor, my white friends believe that their needs are very limited. This is questionable as many of the men leave their homes for the towns and cities in order to find work and earn extra

I have learned much from a “boy.” In fact, he is not a boy but a man of my age, but is so termed. His name is Herbert.<sup>1</sup> He is tall and broad, more so than most of his countrymen, and indeed, more than most white men. His carriage is that of a man who cannot be put down, a leader of men. I have

employed him to guard and assist me in the shop. He comes from Pietersburg and has worked in a store before. He sleeps in the back of the store. He is smart, can manage the store and has proved himself trustworthy. He tells me that he is the son of a chief, a warrior who was killed in the battle for Pietersburg which, before the Whites came, was called Polokwane,<sup>2</sup> or “the place of rest.” Herbert's mother sent him to a mission school. He is one of a few who are able to read and write; he speaks English and Afrikaans, as well as several of the languages spoken by the Blacks. This exceptional man has spent time working in Johannesburg but rumour has it that he was involved in illegal political activities and is in fact on the run. He does not speak of this and I do not ask. He has taught me much about his people and, since you show such interest, I will write more some time. My brother Jacob will be visiting me soon, and in the near future my sister Johanna and her family will be making their home next door to me here in Woodbush. I count the days!

My best wishes to you and my dear friend Maurice. I continue to think of you and hope that you are doing well in Palestine. Do you ever come across other friends from Courland? There were many who planned to go there.

Herman

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*1 Herbert, too, is fictional. There was a Herbert who worked in my father's chemist shop fifty years later. He was a fine man.*

*2 In the new post-apartheid period, since 1994, Pietersburg has been renamed Polokwane. I generally refer to it as Pietersburg as it was named in the period of which I write.*

### **1.7. From another friend, Barney Hepburn,<sup>1</sup> to Roche'le in Palestine**

Woodbush, South Africa, February 1886

Dear Roche'le,

Yes, I do remember that we were together at school and in the youth movement. Before receiving your letter I had heard that you were in Palestine. I myself have been accepted into the University in Riga and am very active in the Communist student organisation. Perhaps there really is a chance of liberating our people and all the other oppressed peoples into a new and better world — who knows?



I am a distant relative of the Thal family and there is talk of sending one of their daughters to marry Herman Hirschmann in South Africa. They heard I was travelling to Johannesburg to attend to some family issues and asked me to go the Woodbush area and learn something of the man and the place. In addition, since I write for a student publication in Riga, I am very eager to share my impressions.

Herman was more than happy to receive me and remembers our school days with warmth. He is doing well, is accepted, respected and liked, but misses home and longs for a family of his own. He was most kind and hospitable, proudly showing me his new adopted world. Moreover, he is full of fun and can be wickedly entertaining. He demonstrated to me how the men, when they drink soup from a bowl, will suck it through their moustaches, rather like many in our own homeland, I might add. This, of course, was only when we were on our own, speaking in German (or Yiddish or Russian).

He showed me a copy of the letter he wrote to you and he has tried to be honest. But he is not unlike most of the other farmers who exploit the Blacks on the farms.

The Blacks in Southern Africa include a large number of tribes with differing language, dress and customs. Some have lived here for centuries; others having migrated more recently from the north. Throughout their history there have been periods of peaceful co-existence and others of war and bloody battles between the tribes for control of territory and power. In this northern district most of the people belong to a collection of Northern Sotho tribes, the largest being of the Pedi people. There are also the Bavenda and others. I still have much to learn.

Another indigenous nation, termed Bushmen, lived in this area, and in most of southern Africa, but only a very few remain. They have, by and large, been wiped out by, or become integrated with, the surrounding black people and sometimes also the white people. One can find fascinating rock paintings, depicting their lives and battles in caves all over the country.

The Whites conveniently regard the Blacks as inferior, with limited abilities. They are exploited in every way and perform most of the menial labour. This takeover of the black man's land and his independence; this "colonization," is happening all over Africa. At first glance, these African people appear to be barbaric savages. However, I believe that we, from Europe, can teach these black nations many a lesson in cruelty, superstition and brutal practice. I believe that, while, on the one hand, well-meaning missionary folk have introduced a degree of modern medical know-how and basic education; on the other, our so-called European civilization has done much to reduce proud tribal people to their knees. They were courageous and fierce warriors, who fought bravely to hold

onto their land, but were overcome by superior weapons and stripped of their territory, their livelihood, their nationhood and worst of all, their dignity.

Herbert Randebe, the man who works in Herman's shop and was educated at the Mission School, says that the Blacks are losing ground. In order for them to be able to make a place for themselves in this new white man's world, they have no choice but to gain Western education and learn the ways of the Whites.

There is much to learn of their customs and history and I intend to spend time travelling here in this most magnificent country and perhaps write a paper on my return home.

I hear of the hardships in Palestine but know how deeply Maurice believes in a future there, and I wish you well. I hope to visit sometime next year.

My regards and good wishes to Maurice,

Barney Hepburn

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*I Barney, like Roche'le and Maurice, is a fictional character not unlike many Jewish students who studied at European universities and were involved in the political activities of those times. I do not think that Herman would have written the observations that appear in this letter since he identified himself to a large extent with the other white farmers, especially the Boers. His main goal was to make a home and haven for himself and his family.*

### **1.8. From Herman to his Papa in Talsen, Courland**

Woodbush, September 1896

Dear Papa,

What a joy it is for me to have Jacob here with me. When I left Courland he was still a child and now he is a fine man, a wonderful companion and we have enjoyed splendid times together. We talk of home, of family and friends, of life in the old country. We talk of the political changes all over Europe and worry about our people. I know I keep repeating this but I do believe it would perhaps be well for you all to come here. Despite the hardships, most of us are doing well and making progress. Our children will have a good future.

Jacob and I have lots of laughs together; we understand each other – we speak the same language. You would get much pleasure in seeing us today. We have travelled together on horseback all over this amazingly beautiful district; have slept in bush and forest, in the homes of farmers and of friends. He works with me and with the boys on the farm, with the cattle and in the shop. You would be very surprised to see your young son working like a Russian peasant. He is keeping a journal and will fill you in with the details.

On Friday night we had dinner with the Israelson brothers who live on a farm called Turfloop, which is only a few hours away on horseback. We said kiddish and drank wine which they make from grapes they grow on their farm. My good Papa, I still keep my promise and say prayers every night and do not eat pork, although eating kosher meat is not possible. For meat we sometimes eat beef or shoot a buck, usually an antelope, or *duiker*, as it is known here. The meat when salted and dried is delicious. It is called *biltong*, which we learned to eat from the Boers.

Jacob has told me that the Thal family have a young daughter, Doris, who might be willing to come here and become my wife. I understand the situation in Latvia is becoming increasingly uncomfortable and the family would like to see their daughters married. She is still quite young – about twenty – he thinks, and is educated and accomplished. He tells me she can sing and play the piano, and is pretty, charming and kind. She has a sister who is studying at the university in Riga but he thinks this is a financial strain on the parents. They would probably be happy to have Doris marry into our family. I understand that you think well of the family and are in favour of such a match. I would be grateful if, on Jacob's return, you would visit the Thal family and see how they, and she, feel and react to such a suggestion. I am aware that for a woman from a European city to leave her family to come to a farm in Africa, and to a man she may scarcely remember, cannot be easy. But I am doing well and believe I can give a good woman much love, a very happy home and, please God, a family. I remember visiting her family and in fact I do remember Doris or Dorshen as they called her, as a bright little girl, although at the time I hardly paid her any attention.

Jacob will soon be leaving to return home. I will surely miss him dearly but believe he will be back here in the not-too-distant future.

My love to my sisters and Baby Joseph,

Your son, Herman

## 1.9. From Herman to his sister Bryna<sup>1</sup> in Talsen

Woodbush, October 1896

Dear Bryna,

I know I do not write often but I am sure that Jacob and Papa keep you up to date. Nevertheless, I do miss you and the memories of your naughty, mischievous laughter and sense of fun. You always brought so much joy to our Papa.

Jacob is on his way back to Talsen and will bring with him all his impressions from here in Woodbush. I was happy to hear from Papa that you are engaged to marry Boris Rakusin and wish you, my dear little sister, Mazal Tov and all the happiness you deserve. I remember you as a little girl and find it hard to imagine you all grown up and married. This Boris must be a good man to deserve a wife as good and sweet as you. Papa tells me that after the wedding you and Boris will be moving to Bialystok in Poland. No doubt it will be hard for Papa to part with you. By the way, do not allow this “married woman” business to interfere with your art! You have so much talent.

You will have heard that Johanna and Joseph, with their three children, have come to join me in Woodbush. They arrived shortly after Jacob’s departure, travelling from Middelburg all the way by ox-wagon, with a group of Afrikaners, much as I did when I first arrived. They have settled into the house adjoining mine. Johanna tells me she has written, giving you all the details. For me it is wonderful having them here – it has given me a home and family. It also means that I am getting good home cooking every day, something I have missed for a long time. Joseph will be of invaluable assistance as a partner and friend and our dear sister Johanna and I have always been close. You know her. She does try to boss me around and mother me at times. She does not quite realize that I am now a grown man.

Now here’s a juicy bit: About a fortnight after they moved in, Johanna was asked by a general in the Boer Army to receive and host Paul Kruger, the President of the South African Republic, for lunch, as he would be visiting Woodbush and the surrounding area.

The general explained that the President has a soft spot for *Boerejode*,<sup>2</sup> and that our home is the nicest in the district. It also appears that President Kruger likes Jewish food.

Johanna prepared a spread as she would do on Erev Rosh Hashana. She brought in all the servants who work in and around the house. They had never done anything like this before. They worked for

days getting everything ready – exactly as she wanted it. She put out her best polished silver and china crockery; served chicken soup, chopped herring, stuffed roast chicken and potatoes, and *tsimmis*, with the finest cuts of meat, apricots and prunes. For dessert, she offered rice pudding and fruit salad. Johanna, Joseph and I donned our finest outfits, as the farmers do when going to church on Sundays. The President was accompanied by his attaché and the general. And then a problem cropped up: the President does not like chicken soup. Johanna was somewhat embarrassed, but fortunately had borscht left over from supper the night before, so all was well.<sup>3</sup>

Afterwards we, the men, smoked cigars and sipped brandy on the stoep. President Kruger was full of good humour, lots of jokes - I told him a few of my own. Before leaving he thanked Johanna and praised her for her excellent cooking. She had done us proud!

Please take good care of Papa, Meisen and Brahle until Jacob returns. Give my good wishes to your Boris and tell him only the nice things you remember about me. Perhaps someday you will join us here in South Africa and I will have the opportunity to meet him.

Love and good wishes,

Herman

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*1 Although I never knew Bryna, I know her granddaughter Lena and it was her I had in mind as I wrote.*

*2 Boerejode" was the name given to the Jews of the platteland, the rural areas of the country, who lived and identified with the Afrikaners and spoke their taal (language).*

*3 According to Johanna's great-grandson Lionel Stein, the meal with the President did actually take place. He was told of this by Johanna, including the part about the chicken soup.*

## **1.10. From Jacob to Herman in Woodbush Talsen, November 1896**

My dear brother Herman,

Once again I thank you for your amazing hospitality and friendship. I always regarded you with some awe and here you were treating me as a man, with companionship and warmth. I will never forget those wonderful “days in the sun,” riding and hiking through the mountains and forests; working with the black labourers on the farm and eating mealie pap and gravy with them; sitting and

smoking a pipe in the evenings on the stoep; talking and laughing of the olden days and the new, until late into the night. Your stories and humour, sometimes not-so-proper humour, made me laugh till tears ran down my cheeks. I loved visiting and eating with your friends and neighbours – the Israelsons, the von Reichis and others. It was indeed a pleasure to observe how well you are liked and regarded by all and how they enjoy your talk and sharp wit and respect your judgement.

Now, to get to the point, my dear brother - Papa and I paid a visit to the Thal family in Mitau. As you may remember, they are a fine, highly regarded and educated family. It is sad to see that they have fallen on bad times. Since Mr. Thal is fluent in German, Russian and Latish, he was previously employed in the municipal offices in Riga as a translator. However, after one of those periodic waves of anti-Semitism he was replaced and is now working in his brother-in law's clothing shop. The family also had to leave their home and have relocated to Mitau where they are living with his sister's family. The conditions are crowded and Doris and her younger sisters share a room with their cousins. Maurice, her brother, has left school and works for his uncle. Doris has a sister who received a bursary to attend the University of Riga, but she has fallen out of favour as she is connected to some underground Communist organisation and has been seen in the company of a non-Jewish student. I must be honest, Herman, in telling you that if it had not been for their unfortunate situation I doubt if the Thals would have given their consent to Doris, this most beloved of daughters, to travel to a far-off farm in Africa, in order to marry a man they scarcely know. Nevertheless, they are acquainted with, and do respect our father and our family and, in addition, they have received a letter from the Israelson brothers who speak very highly of you. TheThals also know of many people, including members of their own family, who have immigrated and to Southern Africa.

Doris herself has asked to be given time to think it over, as she had dreams of studying music in Riga or Warsaw. She is a gifted singer and pianist.

I will give you my own impressions of this lovely lady. She is as polite as she is charming, and pretty too! She is well versed, with definite opinions on many subjects and certainly has a mind of her own. I found her company delightful and it is said of her that she is a true lady. Of course, she speaks German, Russian, Latvian and Yiddish and now that she knows that she may be coming to South Africa, she is studying English. I think she will make an excellent wife. I also observed her as she played with her young cousins and believe she will be a fine mother. In fact, I dare to say that I am a little jealous. I gave her a copy of parts of my journal on my travels in the Zoutpansburg district.

I suggest that if you have not yet done so, you should write to the family and to her, asking for her hand. Papa and I will be happy to accompany her to Africa, if and when she wishes.

With warm affection,

Your brother Jacob

### **1.11a. From Herman to Doris Thal in Mitau, Courland**

Woodbush, December 1896

Dear Miss Thal, or may I call you Doris,

I hope and trust that by now your parents will have received my letter requesting your hand in marriage. I have received a letter from my brother Jacob telling me of the meeting between your family and my father and himself. It seems that it may be possible for you to accompany them on their trip to Woodbush in the near future. I understand and very much respect your request to be given time to think it over, for this is surely not a decision to be taken lightly. I think only the more highly of you as a result. I do, however, hope and pray that you will agree to join me as my wife and soul mate in this venture in Africa; to live here with me and raise children as free and prosperous people in this land of sunshine.

I have built a fine home on a farm waiting only for a woman's touch. My sister Johanna and her family have now moved into the house next door, and I believe this will greatly ease your settling into our home in Woodbush. They are a warm and loving family. Johanna is happy to have you stay with her until our marriage – if this will be your decision. I understand that she has written to you and your parents inviting you to her home on your arrival here.

There is place for a garden in the front of the house, and Max Israelson, who is a lover of plant life and gardening, will be only too happy to help you in any way you choose.

I do, in fact, remember your fine and upstanding family as well as you yourself, but only as a small child. I have seen a photograph of you and heard much about you. I actually feel as if I know you. I am known to be, and indeed I am, a very practical man; I am not accustomed to being sentimental, but though it may sound strange to you, I do believe I can love you very dearly. Max and Wolf Israelson, whom you know, laugh at me and say that I am in love with a dream. This may be so, but, if you will give me your hand in marriage, I will love you deeply and take care of your every need and wish.



Jacob will have told you of the farm; of the indescribable beauty of the district in which we live<sup>1</sup>; about my life and work; our friends and neighbours, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and indeed, of the small and warm Jewish community living in this district. I dream, my dear Doris, of taking you to meet all these people, all in your own good time. I dream, too, that together we will entertain them and that you might agree to play the piano and sing for them. I have made enquiries regarding the purchase of a piano for you to play and enjoy at your will. I envisage showing you our farm, our fields and our livestock. I dream of sitting above the *kliplaat*<sup>2</sup> situated in a river in the valley, just a short walk beyond the back of the house. This is a flat, smooth, red rock, and when the river is in flood, the small black children, the piccaninis, slide down gleefully into the pool below. In fact, when we are visited by neighbouring farming families, their children, too, have great fun here. Dare I dream of our own children one day sliding over these rocks in joy and laughter? I dream of taking you up into the mountains in the early morning when the thick rolling mist obscures all. Then the sun breaks through, melting the mist away. It lights up a land of mountains, valleys, forests, rivers, golden fields of rippling grass – a land that will take your breath away and perhaps open your heart to love me as surely as I will love you.<sup>3</sup>

I will probably not be capable of ever expressing myself in spoken words as I have in this letter but these are my feelings as I await your reply.

Warmest good wishes,

Herman

### **1.11b.From Doris to Herman in Woodbusb**

Mitau, Courland, February 1897

Dear Mr.Hirschmann, or may I call you Herman!

I am coming!!

I will write more after speaking with your father and Jacob.

Yours sincerely,

Doris

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*1 Forty and fifty years later we, all of Herman and Doris' grandchildren, together with friends and family, would spend many golden hours on drives, walks, picnics and holidays in that exquisite land, north-east of Polokwane.*

*2 We also enjoyed unforgettable holidays on the Woodbush farm and many hours sliding gleefully over the kliplaat into the pool below.*

*3 There is no written record of their feelings for each other, but I know from my father and from others of Herman's deep love for Doris and that he did all he could to bring happiness to her life. I can never know, but believe that she too must have loved him in return.*

## **1.12. From Jacob to Herman in Woodbush**

Talsen, March 1897

Dear Herman,

Well, she has decided to come. It seems all our joint efforts have succeeded, but what really did it was your letter! I have no idea what you wrote but it certainly worked. At her family's request, I visited the Thals again to make the necessary arrangements for the journey, and to discuss the terms. We will, of course, cover all the costs. Doris will bring silver, cutlery and linen and whatever she wishes for her personal comfort. I understand, it is not very much. On this occasion when I met Doris I found in her a liveliness and a flair for adventure and romance. She is rather excited about this forthcoming journey which will change her life, and is determined to make it work. She did say to me, though, that I must write to you and make it quite clear that if you are disappointed, or if either of you feel that it is a mistake, it must be said. In such a case, which she doubts, she can return home with us.

I must tell you that various friends and family in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria heard of her plans and have written letters strongly discouraging what they call "foolhardy action." They write that the Zoutpansburg district is hundreds of miles away from any big city or centre of civilization. The roads and facilities are grossly inadequate; the white population is sparse and widely spread out and consists mostly of Afrikaners who they consider uneducated, barely speak English and only what they term "kitchen Dutch." They mention that there are black tribes, barbaric savages, who still occupy some of the areas in the district. Furthermore, they claim that wild animals like leopards and baboons roam the area and that malaria and other tropical diseases are rampant. Of course, these

“well meaning” city dwellers say of the Jews who have settled in those distant country areas that they have become close to the Afrikaner people, that they are farmers and peasants and that many do not even keep kosher homes.

Doris heard this and tossed her head in defiance. I could have kissed her. Do not be offended, dear brother – only as a sister.

By the way she has made it her business to read and learn much about her prospective new homeland and knows well that those disparaging letters, though somewhat exaggerated, are, not without some truth. This does not deter her in the least. You must have written some letter!!

We will be purchasing tickets for Papa, Doris and myself to sail to England and from there to Cape Town on the Union Castle Line. We will then travel by train to Pretoria and on to Pietersburg. I will notify you of dates. I myself cannot wait to get back! Doris asks to spend a few days in Cape Town – because of its loveliness, as described in one of your earlier letters to Papa.

Looking forward to reuniting with you, dear brother,

Yours, Jacob

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## **Part Two – Doris, 1897-1899**

### **Introduction**

In 1897, when she was in her early twenties, my future grandmother Doris Thal left her home and family in Mitau, Courland, to journey by sea and land to marry my grandfather Herman Hirschmann on a farm in Woodbush, in the far north of South Africa. She was accompanied on this journey by Herman's father, Isaiah, and brother, Jacob.

I was told by a number of family members, and indeed had assumed, that Doris came from a poor but highly educated family. I have not managed to uncover much information on her family, other than of Doris herself, and her elder brother Maurice, who joined the Hirschmanns in later years in the Woodbush area. I have been told that she had at least one sister who was a student at a university in Riga and that her family was politically active and influenced by the Socialist wave that swept Eastern Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century.

After World War II, my father attempted, with the aid of the Red Cross, to find surviving members of Doris' family in Europe. None were found. Despite having only the scantiest information on members of the Thal family who remained in Courland, I feel I need to include them in my story. Although most of what I write of them is pure fiction, the little I know leaves me without doubt that Doris must have come from a fine and worthy family.

## **2.1. From Papa to Bryna in Bialystok, Poland<sup>1</sup>**

### **2.1a. On board ship to Cape Town; later on the train to Pietersburg; and still later, from the Pietersburg Hotel**

October-November 1897

My dearest daughter Bryna,

I am sitting on deck in these Southern seas off the west coast of Africa; we should reach Cape Town within a week. Today the sea is calm and I am able to enjoy the Atlantic Ocean and write this letter. This is not always the case. There are times when the sea is rough. Then I am happiest lying down in the cabin I share with Jacob.

I am getting to know Doris.<sup>2</sup> She is most kind, considerate and attentive. She listens to all my talk, my stories, my jokes, my theories. Her behaviour is impeccable, but she doesn't hesitate to give her own opinions on a wide range of subjects; she is well read. She wants to know every detail about our family, and especially about our dear Mama. She and Jacob are very good friends – they laugh and chat together and enjoy playing cards or a kind of deck tennis. Sometimes I worry that they are too friendly, but Jacob has assured me that she sees him as a young brother and that her heart is totally given to Herman, a man who she has learnt to love through letters. I sincerely hope that the reality will be as good as her dreams.

The sea is becoming rough – I will carry on at a later date.

### **2.1b. Later, in November, on the train from Cape Town**

My dear Bryna,

I am back at my pen but admit that my eyes tire easily and will write bits and pieces here and there until we reach our destination.

I am so glad to hear that Boris brought your young brother Brahle and your sister Meisen from Talsen to Bialystok for the winter vacation. Jacob and I may be away for quite a while and I am happy to know that they are with you. If you and Boris can manage, please register them in a school next year in Bialystok – a good school, where both Jewish and secular subjects are taught. I trust your judgement in this matter. Of course, I will cover all their costs. I understand from Meisen that they would rather be with you and Boris in Bialystok than with their aunt in Talsen.

We spent a few days in Cape Town at Doris' request, staying with old friends. It is indeed everything they say about it – a city of great interest and beauty. We particularly enjoyed the sunshine, though the winds can be fearsome.

Distances are great and the train trip takes three days to Pretoria, and then an overnight journey to Pietersburg. I keep well and enjoy the company of Doris and Jacob. Jacob as always takes good care of me. I think he fusses too much.

The next part of my letter will be from Pietersburg and from there I shall post it.

### **2.1c. Pietersburg, three days later**

Our dearest Bryna,

Early this morning, our night train from Pretoria drew into the station in the town of Pietersburg – at first impression, a small, dusty place. It seems that this is not part of the beautiful mountain area of which so much has been said. We are resting at a hotel here for one night and tomorrow will be travelling by cart or carriage to the farm in Woodbush. The luggage is already on its way. Jacob and I are sitting in the lobby. Doris has gone up to her room to wash and rest.

I will try to describe our arrival in Pietersburg this morning, for it was a deeply moving experience. I felt as if I was seeing and feeling not only with my own eyes and soul but also with those of Mama who, though long gone, remains part of me. (This I can say only to you, my dear child.) Waiting on the platform I saw the man – my son Herman. It is eight years since I last saw him. He was merely a boy, lanky, with wavy black hair, braving a strange new world without knowledge or experience, pretending confidence. He has become a man, broad-shouldered and burnt ruddy brown by the African sun. He now boasts a well trimmed moustache though his hair has thinned considerably. His carriage is that of a man with confidence and pride, although I sensed some apprehension, probably

at the meeting of his bride-to-be. He helped me down from the carriage and hugged me as I have never known him do; I believe I saw tears in his eyes. His meeting with Doris I will leave for Jacob – he will know better than I to describe it.

I am now counting the minutes to our reunion with Johanna and her family in Woodbush.

Keep well and kiss little Shaia for me. Warm regards to Boris.

Love, Papa

## **2.1d. From Jacob to Bryna**

Pietersburg Hotel, November 1897

My dear sister Bryna,

I am sitting with Papa in the lobby. He asked me to complete his letter as we want to post it before leaving Pietersburg. We are waiting for Herman and Wolf Israelson and will have lunch together with some of the residents of the town. Tomorrow we travel by mule carriage to Woodbush. Papa must have told you about our trip. I must say that, on the one hand, I am grateful to have reached our destination at last, and am overjoyed to see Herman with whom I have become very close. We will also soon see Johanna and her family. It is with great pleasure that I return to this area where I have found such happiness. On the other hand, the trip here with Doris was so much fun that I am a little sorry it is over. Be that as it may, she is for Herman. Though they only know each other from hearsay and through correspondence, both he and she believe firmly in their love and are set on a future with each other. I wish them well with all my heart.

Now for the moments when the train came into the station. Doris was quiet and composed as she watched through the window, but I think I could sense her holding her breath. Our Papa was quite emotional when he saw his eldest son who has become a man. Herman was nicely dressed and well groomed, and seemed both excited and apprehensive. He first helped Papa down and hugged him – he appeared quite overwhelmed. I jumped out and helped Doris down onto the platform and introduced them. She looked up a little shyly, and for a moment I detected a hint of coquettishness in her smile. Herman smiled broadly in obvious relief, took her hand and kissed it, European style, and led us to the carriage, which was to take us to the hotel.

Our Papa is well. He handled the long and sometimes stormy trip with relative ease, though he tires more quickly than he used to. He is absolutely clear-minded, interested in everything, enjoys chatting about books and such with Doris and is really excited about this trip. I think he is also glad to be away from our so cold winter in Talsen. It is fine and warm and, as you know, here in the Southern Hemisphere we are moving into summer.

Much love, Jacob

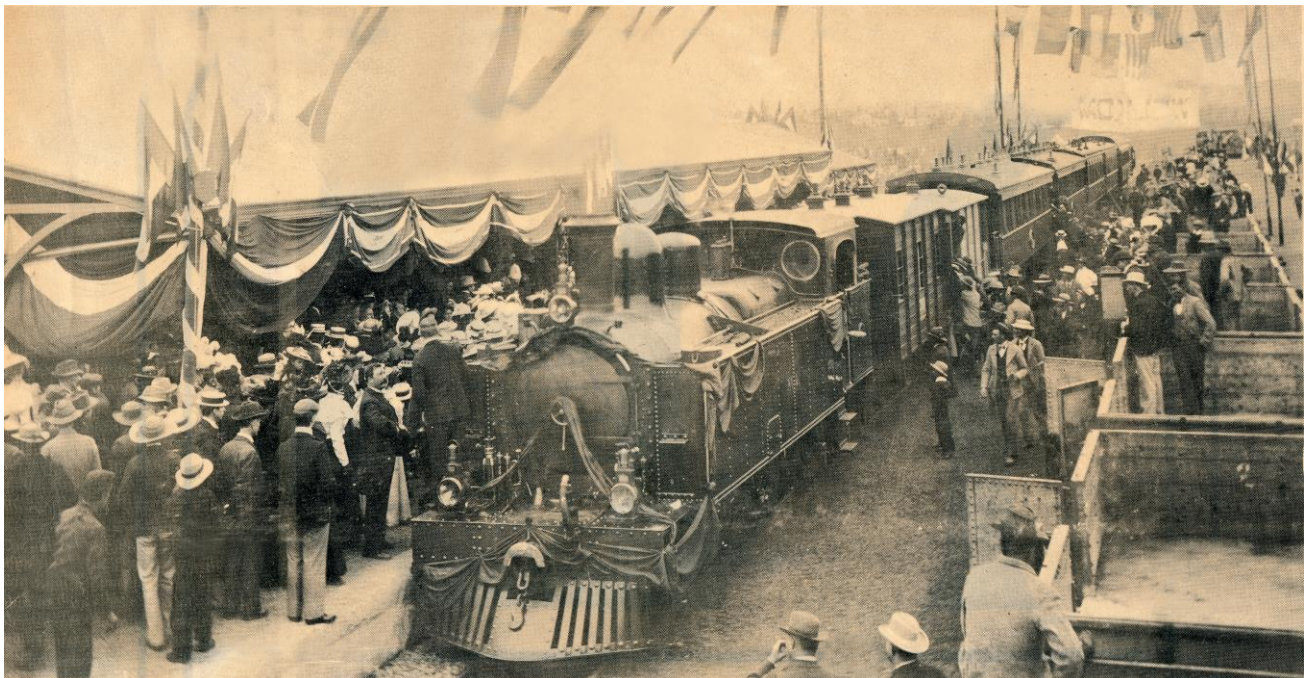
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*1 Bryna, Herman's second sister, married Boris Rakusin and they lived in Bialystok, Poland, with their children. Her younger siblings Meisen and Joseph, who were school children when Papa and Jacob travelled to South Africa, also eventually made their homes in Bialystok. They may well have been in the care of their married sister at the time these letters were written*

*2 Much has been said about Doris, by her children and all those who knew her. She was very much loved and highly respected.*

*The young Hirschmann family in Woodbush is referred to in a book, *Between Woodbush and the Wolkburg – Googoo Thompson's story* by B. Wongtschowski (See references) wherein Googoo describes Doris as a warm, kind person, but one who could be very angry if anyone offended or threatened her children in any way. (Googoo was the little girl, Awbry Eastwood referred to in Letter 5.1.)*

*I write of Doris as I imagine she might have been. I myself have only misty memories of her. She died in 1942 at the age of sixty-five, when I was barely three.*





## 2.2. From Doris to her sister Etta<sup>1</sup> in Mitau

Woodbush, December 1897 – a month after arrival

My dearest Sister,

How desperately I miss you all. Sometimes when alone at night I weep with longing. This I did not write to Mama and Papa as I have no wish to cause them sorrow. Everything has been done to make me comfortable and happy, but this world is so different from all that I know. More than anything I miss you, my sweet sister, and all our fun and laughter. The decision to come to Africa was so fast, and the anticipation of crossing the ocean with Jacob and his father and meeting Herman was all so exciting, I almost forgot the world I was leaving behind: all the problems that we had faced of recent years, but also all the warmth and love, all my friends, the loveliness of the places, the people I grew up with. I do miss those fine European cities. I now realize just how much I loved it all. I sorely miss the music and song, but tomorrow my new piano will be arriving. Herman has purchased a fine German piano and this, I am sure, will bring me much joy and comfort.

Having said that, I have no regrets and believe I will be able to adapt. I could not bear living in that little house in Mitau with all our noisy and irritating cousins. I realized that I would not be able to go to the music conservatory and that I would be married off to some stuffy suitor. I admit that I was eager for this adventure and, indeed, fell in love with this dream – the place and the man. And, Mama and Papa also really needed to get me off their hands! So I am here and intend to make a good life for myself and for my future husband. I guessed right: I can – I believe – I do love him. Here again this may sound silly but I can tell you, and only you, such silly things. Perhaps the day will come when you will have an opportunity to meet Herman.

I arrived here after a none-too-comfortable journey on a cart drawn by mules, which they call a carriage. Herman was so proud of the house that I had to pretend delight – there is still much to be done to make it into a fine home. Herman's section, our side of the house, is as yet unfurnished as he

wants me to furnish and decorate it to suit my own personal taste and needs. You see why he is special! Max Israelson will be coming next week to help us plan a garden.

Herman's sister Johanna and her husband Joseph Kallmeyer live in the house next door, with two small daughters, Bertha and Annie, and a baby boy, Jack. Thank goodness for them. She welcomed me with warmth, has given me a room of my own and has almost adopted me. This might have annoyed me if I hadn't been so grateful to have someone I can talk to in my own language, someone who does everything possible to make me feel welcome. Of course, I love Jacob – he is like a brother, he is like you - full of fun. However, he is more reserved lately; I think he does not want Herman to be jealous. I especially like their Papa – we love to talk and secretly laugh about our impressions of this strange new world; of the people, of whom I will write more; of books and memories. We think we have all the answers to all the problems. I must add that he does sometimes doze off in the middle of our conversations.

And now I will talk of Herman. He is even better looking than in his picture. He is out at work on the farm from the crack of dawn and only pops into the store now and then, as Joseph generally manages that. I see him in the evenings. He and Jacob come in washed and dressed every evening to the Kallmeyer home to join us for dinner. Here we all chat and laugh, the atmosphere relaxed. But as soon as we are alone we fall shy, or at least that was the case. About two weeks ago Herman told me that early the following morning I should be dressed and wearing good boots, as he would take me to see the cattle (yes, the cattle!).<sup>2</sup> He handed me a khaki shirt to put over my dress and we walked across the fields, wet with the morning mist, to the cattle enclosure, or *kraal*. He gave me his hand to help me across the rough terrain and into the kraal (how the touch of a hand can make a heart race). I understood then why we needed boots. There was, of course, a strong smell but it was a good smell – you see what love can do. Jacob came, too, but kept his distance. The first thing I saw was a large group of young black men and boys (they call them all “boys” irrespective of their age), dressed scraggily – some with boots, some barefooted. They approached us, talking in animated voices, partly in Afrikaans – a kind of Dutch which I am beginning to pick up, and, partly in their own strange but rather musical tongue. They call Herman “Baas Hemen.” He introduced me as “the new Missis, Mis Doris,” and they greeted me with obvious pleasure. The atmosphere was pleasant and friendly – it would appear that everyone here knows his place. (I will write at some other time of the customs and the people, but not now). Then Herman proudly pointed out the different cattle – some were being *inspanned* to be taken to plough the fields, some were being led off to more distant pasture lands. The cows were feeding their young or being milked. Herman knows each animal by

name. He examined them one by one, together with a very young man, a boy really, named Malap<sup>3</sup> who seemed to be in charge. He asked me if I would like to milk one of the cows. I was not quite ready yet for that but have done so since and it is good. He, Malap and Jacob then sat round with some of the workers and drank coffee from tin mugs. They sat me on a rock and brought me a porcelain mug from the kitchen. After that, Herman walked me home and said that he would take me to see the cattle in the grazing fields on another day. It was our first “date” and I was filled with joy.

I will get this letter off now; the post is being taken, but I will write more soon – lots more. Please keep me up to date of all your doings; I wonder and worry. Also, every detail about Mama, Papa, and all those I know

I love you, my most dearest of sisters,

Doris

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*1 Etta, the eldest of Doris' sisters could have been a person with whom Doris would write and confide.*

*2 As children, my brothers and I would go with our dad Jack to see the cattle in the early mornings. How we loved it. The picture I describe is as I remember it.*

*3 Malap was a real person who worked for Herman on the farm. His story comes later.*

### **2.3. From Doris to Etta in Riga**

Woodbush, December 1897 – two weeks later

My dearest Etta,

Thank you for your fascinating letter. What a life you are leading at the university, with all the political turmoil. Do I envy all the activities in the city and the student life? Perhaps, sometimes I do, but I must admit that this life in Africa is filled with adventure and beauty. It is also good to be so loved. You mention friendship with your professor.<sup>1</sup> It sounds exciting but do not be rash, my sweet, lovely sister.

The wedding day has been set!!!

Let me write you the sequence of events since my last mail. Almost every day Herman takes a break from work and accompanies me on short outings to different parts of the farm,<sup>2</sup> which is huge –some of it farmland, some just miles of grasslands where the cattle graze. He has taken me to see the black peoples' dwellings, or *kraals*. From time to time we have coffee with his neighbours, some English speaking, but mostly Afrikaans farmers, and also a few Jewish settlers. We travel on a cart drawn by a horse, donkeys or mules. He has promised to teach me to ride. When he has the time, we take walks on the hills around the farm; down to the *kliplaat* to watch the children sliding over the water-covered rocks. We have climbed a nearby *kopje*, a hill covered with boulders, aloes, bushes and acacia trees pushing out between the rocks. On the slope of this *kopje*, is a small cluster of round, thatch-roofed huts –the homestead of one of the black families who live and work on the farm. This *kraal* is indeed no less part of the landscape than are the bushes and the boulders that surround it. And, on the footpath there are small, multicoloured wild flowers. Sometimes Jacob and the Kallmeyer girls, Bertha and Annie accompany us. Occasionally, we see baboons, antelopes, or *duikers*, as they are called in Afrikaans, and other wild fowls and animals. It is said that there are leopards, but they usually do not venture near our farm. From time to time I go with the girls to pick fruit from the trees, or we sit and pick peapods to take home to be cooked. Sometimes we simply eat the peas, fresh on the spot. You may believe it or not, but from one who has hardly ever seen a farm I am enjoying every minute of it.

Last Friday night the Kallmeyers invited a few Jewish friends for supper. They said kiddish and lit candles. After supper I played the piano and sang for them, and we all sang songs from the old country together in Yiddish, German and Russian. I felt like crying. Herman is great in company. He has a good sense of humour and has everyone laughing at his stories of the folk here and of those back in the “old country.” When we are alone, he often makes me laugh and I love this in him, although some of his jokes would definitely shock our parents.

Then two weeks ago he suggested we go to a little village in the mountains east of Woodbush, called Haenertsburg, so as to order furniture from a carpenter there. Herman and Jacob rode on their horses. Herbert, the black shop assistant, drove a horse-drawn cart full of farm products, with me on the seat beside him. Jacob often accompanies us, but Herman sends him on all sorts of errands so we can have time on our own. It was very early in the morning and we rode into the mountains, which were thick with mist. We neared an area covered by dense, indigenous forest. Herman suggested we stop and that he and I walk up into the forest. He told Jacob to stay behind with Herbert and the horses –

we could hardly leave Herbert alone now, could we? We reached the top after quite a steep walk, barely able to see a foot ahead of us. And then the sun pushed through the mist and, just as he had described in his letter, a mountain view opened up before our eyes that was so stunning and magnificent it took my breath away. That was when he first put his arm around my shoulders. I was not quite sure what to do. He asked me if we could go ahead and make a date for the wedding. I did not even pretend to hesitate.

Haenertsburg is a charming village. Herman, Jacob and Herbert went to the local farmers' market while I remained with the carpenter and his wife to give him our order for the furniture I wanted for our home. We had come with all the necessary measurements. Hendrik Moses,<sup>3</sup> the carpenter, is a coloured man – the term used here for descendents of people of mixed race. This man told me that his grandfather was a Dutch Jew and his grandmother was black. He said that there are a few other such families in the district and that they are regarded as part of the coloured community. He told me that a wealthy English Jew who had lived in the area and known his grandfather, had assisted him in setting up his business

The wedding will be held in a month's time on the veranda of our family home in Woodbush. The *Landdrost*, Governor of the district, will conduct the civil service and a Rabbi is coming all the way from Pretoria to perform the religious ceremony – *chupa*, glass and all. It will be the first Jewish wedding in this district. Johanna, with the help of kindly neighbours, will organize the catering. The daughter of a farmer nearby is a dressmaker and is making my wedding dress. I frequently travel to her home for fittings. This has been an opportunity for me to make a friend, to hear and speak Afrikaans and, in addition, to learn more of the Afrikaans people and their ways.

In addition to Afrikaans, I make it my business to master the English language, which I believe is absolutely essential in this country. I read an English newspaper that arrives here once a week from Pietersburg. I read aloud in English to Papa and to Herman – when there is time. There is a war brewing between the British and the Dutch (Afrikaners or Boers). There is no love lost between these two white nations, but that is for another letter.

As you can imagine all this has been so exciting, I quite forget to be lonely and miserable. I must admit, though, that there are times that I am overcome by sadness and my heart aches with longing for you all.

I have written to Mama and Papa and will write to you again after the wedding.  
Please tell me ALL your news and kiss my brothers and sisters for me.

Love,  
Doris

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*1 Etta's relationship with the professor is imaginary, but possible. I have been told of a similar incident which occurred in that period.*

*2 The descriptions of outings around the farm are from my own memories of our family experiences there. During a world-wide polio epidemic, before the introduction of the Salk vaccine, our family spent six weeks in Woodbush, in order to isolate ourselves from this extremely infectious and crippling disease. How sad we were when it was all over and the schools were reopened in Pietersburg.*

*3 Hendrik Moses, the carpenter is a fictional character. There were a few so-called coloured families in the Pietersburg district, a few of whom claimed to have Jewish parentage. I have only recently read of these families. It was never mentioned when I lived there as a child.*

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#### **2.4. From Doris to her Mama and Papa in Mitau**

Woodbush, January 1898

My dear Mama and Papa,

I am enclosing a copy of a newspaper report<sup>1</sup> from Pietersburg on our wedding –the first Jewish wedding in the district. I have also sent a copy to Etta in Riga.

I am well and happy but do miss you terribly!! I am delighted to read that you are both well and that you are enjoying my letters. Do please keep writing and give me every detail about yourselves and my brothers and sisters.

Much love to all,

Your daughter Doris

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*I The newspaper report is from the Zoutspansberg Review, a Pietersburg newspaper, reprinted thirty-two years after the wedding which, I have assumed, took place in January 1898. My father Jack was born in September 1898 so I can't be too far wrong. The picture of the home in Woodbush was apparently photographed many years after they had long gone and looks much more neglected than it would have been when they all lived there. There is also a picture of cattle on the farm.*

### Hirschmann – Thal



**The first Jewish wedding held in the Zoutspansberg District was celebrated on Tuesday the 31<sup>st</sup>De ultimo (Dec.1897), when Mr. H. Hirschmann was joined in matrimony to Miss D. Thal at the Woodbush Village. The occasion was the cause of the assemblage of quite a host of friends at the hospitable residence of Mr. and Mrs. J. Kallmeyer where the ceremony was solemnized.**

**The civil portion of the ceremony was performed by Landdrost G.G. Munnik, with all the ease due to the frequent practice he has had lately in this branch of his duties. The religious and impressive rites of the Jewish ceremony were worthily carried out by the Rev. Mr. Friedman, who came specially from Pretoria for the purpose. The ceremony which differs so much from that of the Christian churches was witnessed by a large circle**

*of interested spectators. The bride, attired in a most becoming bridal costume and wearing the orthodox floral ornaments looked lovely as she stood under the sacramental canopy. The Rev. Friedman addressed the bride and bridegroom in an excellent speech, which made an impression on all assembled, pointing out the*

*duties of their new state of existence and gave some excellent advice for following their future path of life. Then followed the ancient Jewish custom of the breaking of the glass. After this the remainder of the party adjoined to breakfast most tastefully laid out on the veranda which was specially decorated in excellent taste. This and the whole day reflected the greatest of credit on behalf of the kindly host and hostess.*

*Among those present were Mr. Hirschmann's father and brother who had travelled all the way from Russia to be present at the wedding; Mr. and Mrs. Kallmeyer; Landdrost G.G. Munnik; Mr. and Mrs. von Reichi; Mr. Mrs and the Misses Richter; Mr and Mrs. Herbst of the Lutheran Mission; Assistant Field-cornet de Beer; B Hermann; S Himmelhoch; W and S Israelson and many others.*

*There being no honeymoon trip, the remainder of the day was devoted to feasting and frolic. All the arrangements for the day's amusements were carried out in incredible style. In the evening a dance was given which was largely attended and the festive couples enjoyed themselves to the small hours of the morning, which brought to an end the joyous proceedings which are not likely to be forgotten in the district for many a day.*

*Mr. and Mrs. Hirschmann were the recipients of a large number of presents and telegrams of congratulations coming in from all parts of the country. (Transcribed from the photo-copy of the newspaper)*

## **2.5. From Doris to Etta in Riga**

Woodbush, March 1898

Well, my dear sister, I am now Mrs. Doris Hirschmann, a married woman living on a farm in Africa. We have furnished and decorated our home to my complete satisfaction and live most comfortably. The piano stands in the lounge-dining room. We have a large log stove in the kitchen on which we heat the water for our bath tub in the evening and on which I do the cooking,<sup>1</sup> sometimes with Johanna's help and sometimes with the help of my maid Martha. I am learning quickly and managing quite well, although I do make some blunders here and there. Herman likes to make fun of my experiments. We light up at night with candles and paraffin lamps. We spend many evenings in the warm kitchen. Although nothing like the icy cold weather we know in Europe, it can get very cold at night. We are bothered somewhat by mosquitoes and occasionally need to sleep under nets. But in our relatively arid area, the problem is not too serious.

Jacob and Papa are staying with us as Johanna and Joseph have a full house. Papa, Johanna and I have breakfast together after the men go to work. She is soon to give birth to another baby and will probably move to Pietersburg to stay there until after the baby is born. Her children will be with her. Then I will need to manage on my own; I am a little apprehensive but also looking forward to running my life and home in my own way.



Social life in the country is not as dull as you may think. We have picnics on the riverside together with neighbours and friends. Except for a brief period after rainfall, the “river” is completely dry and is filled only with sand. The local people call it the *sandrevier*. We sit in the shade of the peppercorn trees and enjoy *braaivleis*, meat cooked over a fire, and *mealie pap* – a thick dry porridge made from mealie or maize. This is the staple food of the Blacks. We have learnt from them to eat it with our hands, dipping it into gravy – can you picture me doing that?

Last Sunday the Israelson brothers hosted a picnic to celebrate the dam they had at last completed.<sup>2</sup> They built it with their own hands – three times. Twice it got washed away, but now, at last, it is done. Guests arrived from all parts of the district. The Israelsons brought wine and brandy that they make themselves and the men all got a little tipsy.

We often have Friday night dinners together with the Israelsons and any other Jewish travellers or peddlers, *smouses*, who happen to be in the area. During the Pesach holiday we will travel to Pietersburg where we will stay at the hotel. The owner, Mr. Barney Herman, is Jewish, and he and Mrs. Herman are organizing a Seder for all the community.

As you know, we had no honeymoon, but two weeks after the wedding we spent a few days in Haenertsburg, staying at a guest house.<sup>3</sup> Of course Papa, Jacob and the Kallmeyer family all came along. And, of course, from time to time Herman and Joseph went on various business ventures. Nevertheless, we did have a lovely break, enjoying walks and picnics in those lovely surroundings. Nearby is a river with muddy banks. Jacob and I and the Kallmeyer girls sat down there with the piccaninis, or black children, and they taught us to make clay models of animals and human figures. I brought some home for my mantelpiece.

The weekend ended quite dramatically with a huge *veldt* fire right behind the guest house. It started off as a small smouldering branch, but within minutes huge flames turned the sky red, and with noisy crackles came ever closer to the house. Johanna and the children remained indoors. The rest of us, plus all the black people who were in the neighbourhood, fought it off with buckets of water and blankets. It was very hot, thick with smoke and absolutely terrifying. More and more neighbours came to help and eventually we got it under control. All the lovely green fields and trees for miles around were burnt black. What an unnerving sight – so much green beauty burnt black by this overwhelming, destructive force. Fortunately, there was not a great deal of harm done to the homes or huts, or to people – this time. But the damage to the animal and plant life was enormous. However I am assured that if I return next spring I will see that life recreates itself. It is stronger than

destruction. New growth will push up out of the soil and the grass and the bush will be restored. I am told that these fires are nature's way of renewal, of rebirth. Well, maybe? There was a strong smell of burnt bush. All the while Herman fought the flames like a demon, constantly glancing up at me to see that I was in no danger. When it was over, I wept and he took me in his arms, something he does not often do in front of others. We left for home first thing the next morning.

I must go now to attend to Papa's lunch. He also wants me to play the piano for him.

By the way I have a secret – it's only for you at this stage. I believe I am with child!!

Lots of love, my dearest of sisters. I will write more soon.

Doris.

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*1 The log stove, bathing in the tub in the kitchen, sitting near the stove in the cold evenings, the candles and the paraffin lamps are all part of my own childhood experience.*

*2 The story of the three dams on the Israelsons' farm is a true one, although I have no idea when it took place. The picnics were real events.*

*3 The holiday in Haenertsburg is fiction, but they surely must have visited that most beautiful and picturesque village, and, they must have experienced veldt fires. Half a century later my mother took us on a holiday to a Mrs. Fridjon's guesthouse in Haenertsburg. My brother David was a baby. My older brother Herman and I had lots of fun, including making clay animals with the piccaninis on the river bank. The holiday ended with just such a veldt fire which I shall never forget.*

## **2.6. From Doris to Etta in Riga, two weeks later**

Woodbush, April 1898

Dear Etta,

I received your mail before I managed to send this off. You ask me about the "others," the black people, or natives, as they are called. Most of those with whom I come into contact on the farm are servants or farm hands. I have read and learnt much from books and letters about these people. I thought I knew what I was coming to, but it really only hit me when I saw the conditions in which

they live and the way they are treated. I will write more from time to time as it is very much on my mind.

I cannot cause Herman embarrassment by speaking my mind in public, particularly as nothing I can say can change anything. Herman says that this is what is. We Jews have been accepted with warmth and have been allowed to make a home and haven for ourselves.<sup>1</sup> This is not something that can be taken lightly and we must adapt to the customs of the society in which we live. "As long as we do not surrender our human values," I add. "Yes," he agrees "we must do our best." I have seen this can easily be lost. Master/servant relationships, especially when based on race, can be very corrupting. I sometimes visit the Lutheran minister at the German Mission School. We speak German and he and his wife share my views – that is as far as it goes.

You also ask, as only you are bold enough to do, of what is not so good about Woodbush and about my husband Herman. It has not all been easy; anything but. However, my dear sister, I have found all I could ever dream of in this far-away, back-bush farm. Certainly there are moments when I wonder if I have not lost something by leaving city life in Europe, and by not going to music school as I so desired. There are, without doubt, many difficulties, being so far from the conveniences of civilization – from stores, doctors, dentists, theatres, libraries. There is always fear of tropical diseases and of snakes and animals. But more than anything else I have this deep longing to see you all again.

And then, again, I am reminded of the anti-Semitism we experienced in Courland; of how Papa lost his job and his pride; of the fear and uncertainty of the future.

To be honest, right now, the future here is none too certain either, as "winds of war" are blowing strongly. I believe it will blow past us and we shall be able to carry on as before – I sincerely hope so.

My greatest happiness comes from Herman's love. I have a husband who is caring and most appreciative and tries to satisfy my every wish. His family has adopted me as one of their own and make me feel so wanted. We do have our occasional tiffs and disagreements, but Herman, though outwardly full of self confidence and a proud strong man, is inwardly very sensitive and is hurt by the least criticism. Sometimes I do not even know what it is I do or say that offends him. So, being one who hates conflict, I am careful with my sharp tongue.

My dear husband's first priority is his family.<sup>2</sup> He does however help total strangers and sometimes invites people to stay in the house for weeks, allowing them to hunt wild fowl and duikers. This on condition they do not kill more than one buck a week. He is very aware of the importance of preserving wild life<sup>3</sup> and does not participate in hunting expeditions. Mind you, he is happy enough to participate in the meat meals that follow.

Herman is very much the *baas* with the farm hands, but knows them all; he is considerate and there is much humour in their interaction.<sup>4</sup> He can, however, get very angry when things are not done as he wants them to be. He does do kind things; he once took my maid's baby, who was very ill, by horse-cart to a doctor twenty miles away. On the other hand, I was told that he had caught a fifteen-year-old boy with stolen goods, taken from a neighbour's home and from our store. He handed him over to the neighbour, knowing full well the boy would be lashed.<sup>5</sup> I was very angry and upset at the time and I think it is unlikely that such a thing will occur again.

I know for certain now that I am pregnant. I do feel some nausea at times, but the thought of a child growing in me fills me with incredible joy. Herman is overwhelmed and cannot do enough for me. If anything, he is over-protective.

Johanna is in Pietersburg, her baby due any time now. Papa and Jacob are still around and that is good. Herman is so often busy on the farm or on business matters.

Love to you and all. I do so love getting your letters – please keep writing.

Much love, Doris

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*In her book The South Africans, Sarah Gertrude Millin writes that the Jewish emigrants from Eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth century were welcomed warmly by the Afrikaans people. It is believed that this greatly facilitated Jewish integration into South Africa, perhaps more than in any of the other countries to which they immigrated. There were ups and downs over time but they were generally treated as welcome guests. However it should be noted that though many became burghers or citizens, Jews and Catholics in the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, were not permitted to hold certain senior government positions.*

*It is said that the English were possibly more anti-Semitic than the Boers, yet most of the Jewish population in South Africa eventually adopted English as their language and identity.*

*2 I know of Herman's strong connection to his family – in Woodbush, as well as those in the “old country.” In later years he was instrumental in bringing out his brothers and his sister's children to South Africa as well as Doris' brother Maurice and a cousin, Abraham Perlman.*

*It is also told that he had an excellent relationship with the farmers and residents of the district – Jewish and non-Jewish alike. He was known to have had a keen sense of humour.*

*3 In the book *Between Woodbush and the Wolkburg*, a biography of GoogooThompson, she tells of Herman's strict requirements regarding hunting animals on the farm.*

*4 He had comfortable and friendly interactions with black people, albeit limited to the conventional master/servant relations of the time. Years later there was considerable conflict over this issue, during a visit to Woodbush by two of Doris' sisters – both active socialists in Latvia. More of this below.*

*5 This is my own version of a rumoured lashing incident.*

## **2.7. From Doris to Etta**

Woodbush, May 1898

Dear Etta,

First and foremost, I cannot wait to tell you that though my pregnancy does not yet weigh me down and can hardly be noticed, I begin to feel little movements and kicks of this small and growing life within me, which brings me unspeakable joy. Herman, too, can feel them and is completely overwhelmed.

My next mail to you will be from Pietersburg. Herman wants me to be there and to stay with the Kallmeyers, at least until after the birth of our baby. At first, I refused, as I see the women here manage well with a midwife, but he is very worried about the war and how it may affect our lives. Papa will come with me. Herman, Jacob and Joseph will remain here for now and visit us over weekends. I really am not happy about this but it seems it must be so. I hope it will not take too long before we are able to return to our farm. The good news is that Johanna gave birth to a second baby boy.

In your last letter you asked to know more about the people we meet and mix with. Before I get busy packing and preparing to move to Pietersburg, I will tell you a little about this country, some new friendships and local folklore that I have perhaps overlooked in previous letters.

My maid Martha has taught me much about the ways and background of the different people and tribes living in this part of Africa.

First, I will tell you about Martha.<sup>1</sup> She is a lovely young woman, and is of invaluable help to me. She is intelligent, good fun, and tells me about her family and her people. She also keeps me updated on all the goings-on and gossip both amongst the Blacks as well as amongst the white people for whom they work. Most, but not all of this, I pass onto Herman. She sometimes comes with her baby wrapped onto her back. I do enjoy playing with this adorable child although it's not really the done thing.

By the way, Martha is a princess! Her mother was a daughter of Mamatoori, the only surviving child of a great warrior chief, Magoeba. He, with his tribe, the Sotho Thlou, hid in the Woodbush forests and harassed the Boers for years, before being defeated by mercenary black *impis*, warriors who fought for the Boers. It is told that every member of his family was put to death, except for this infant child who was saved by a woman of the tribe and taken to an Englishman's house nearby. She grew up and married. Her children and grandchildren carry the last royal blood of that great fighting mountain chieftain Magoeba. Hence the name of that beautiful mountain area I have so often described –Magoebaskloof.

Martha also told me of another tribe – the Lemba –who live amongst the Bavenda tribe, one of the nations living here in the north and in the Limpopo area. This tribe claim to be of Jewish descent. They speak the same Northern Sotho tongue as the others do, but observe some practices not unlike our own. They do not eat pork; they practise the ritual slaughter of animals; their men are circumcised in infancy, unlike most of the others who are circumcised in puberty; and, like us, they discourage marriage with people of other tribes. It seems that centuries back, there must have been people of Middle Eastern, possibly of Jewish descent – perhaps sailors, tradesmen, adventurers – who travelled to East Africa and took black wives. The descendants of these people became the Balembas. Apparently, they migrated gradually southwards and can be found in quite large numbers north of the Limpopo. Others crossed the river and settled here amongst the local tribes. Martha pointed out one of our herdsman who is of the Balembas, and indeed he is dark brown rather than black, and has a chiselled nose. How intriguing!

Another fascinating figure of whom she told me is Modjaji, or the Rain Queen, but that I will leave for another letter.

Martha goes on and on, as she sees how I love to hear of her people. A few evenings ago, Herman, Jacob and I together with the Lutheran missionary couple, were invited to a wedding ceremony of one of our workers. It was held in their kraal. In this particular one, the walls of the thatched huts were beautifully decorated. The women, many of them stripped to the waist, wore colourful beads and clothes. At first, I was embarrassed but it was accepted as so natural that I soon got used to it, or pretended to anyhow. Some of the younger men were also stripped to the waist, several in battle dress brandishing sticks or spears. They played rousing music – drums, xylophones and other instruments which I had never seen or heard. Their dance was wild and sensuous, almost reaching a state of frenzy or trance. It was an amazing experience. We stood in the background, dumbfounded spectators. Our good Lutheran friends were visibly disturbed. Some of these people, the minister said, are supposedly Christian and are members of his congregation. Herman then told him the following story from our folklore.<sup>2</sup> A rabbi who witnessed a man shouting, jumping and ranting at the riverside in our old country stopped him and asked him what he was doing. “I am praying,” said the man.” I will teach you how to pray,” said the good rabbi, and showed him our traditional way. The next day he found the man at the riverside sitting with his head in his hands. “Why so?” asked the Rabbi. “I was not able to learn your way,” he replied sadly, “ but I have lost my own; I know not how to pray – I have lost my God.”

And now I will tell you of my friend Marietjie Joubert.<sup>3</sup> She comes from Pretoria and is the daughter of a Boer general, famous for his victories against the black tribes. They are now preparing for war with the English. He is a descendant of mostly Dutch people. Her farmer husband, who lives across the mountain to the east, has French ancestors. The French Huguenots were Protestants who fled from Catholic oppression in France and settled in the Cape. Most of the Afrikaans, or Boer nation, is descended mainly from these two nations. They speak a kind of Dutch, are fiercely patriotic, and are devout Protestants and churchgoers. Large numbers left the British-ruled Cape to escape the yolk of the English, and trekked northwards.

Theirs is a story of heroism, dogged determination and hardship of amazing proportions. They travelled in covered wagons drawn by oxen across veldt, forest, rivers, and over huge mountain ranges for thousands of miles to settle in all parts of the country, eventually also reaching this northern Limpopo province. They faced fierce weather conditions, and were constantly threatened by wild animals that roam the countryside, and by black tribes who fought fiercely to hold onto their land. Bloody battles ensued before the white man, both English and Boer, could defeat these tribal

people. Is it not strange, dear revolutionary sister, how people who fight for justice, who flee oppression across oceans and continents, so easily take on the role of occupier and oppressor?

Marietjie and her husband often visit when they come to shop in the store. She comes to our home to chat till the men come for coffee and cake on our stoep. We talk “women talk,” and she teaches me Afrikaans *liedjies* (songs) to play at their parties; I tell her of my past, she tells of hers. We are both pregnant, we are both from cities, both love nature, love to read and to cook. We have much in common. The men talk of business, their farms and cattle, but lately the talk is mainly of politics and the looming war.

Now I am going to close. I have a great deal to attend to before leaving for Pietersburg within a few days. I am sad to part with what has become my home and do not know what the future holds.

I will send you my new address from Pietersburg.

Keep well and take care.

With all my love,

Doris

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*1 Martha, the maid is an imaginary person, through whom I write something of the legends and history of the black tribes in the Zoutpansberg district.*

*2 The story of the rabbi is one that our father Jack heard from his father Herman.*

*3 Like Martha, Marietjie, the Afrikaans neighbour, is fictional and here again, through her, I am able to tell of the “Great Trek,” or emigration, of the Afrikaans pioneers from the Cape to the hinterland of South Africa.*

## **2.8. From Doris to her parents in Mitau, Courland**

Pietersburg, October 1898

My dear Mama and Papa,

Mazal Tov! You have a grandson. Two weeks ago, on Yom Kippur, I gave birth to a baby boy here in a nursing home in Pietersburg. We have named him Jack (in Hebrew, Yakob). He is a healthy and, of course, a most beautiful baby, though I am sure I cannot yet see whom he resembles. I have



recovered well from that none-too pleasant experience of giving birth, but the moment I had my child in my arms I felt so uplifted, so overjoyed – would that I could describe and relive that experience. I think it is like the feeling of a mountain climber when he reaches the peak, exhausted and elated. You, Mama, must know what I am talking about. Herman (how I wish you could know him as he is now), most uncharacteristically, wept with joy when he saw his little son. He, Joseph and Jacob all came in from the farm the day before, to spend Yom Kippur here with the small Jewish congregation from Pietersburg and district. By the way, Yom Kippur is also Herman's birthday.<sup>1</sup> The entire Jewish community was invited to break the fast at the hotel. They also celebrated Herman's birthday and drank *le'chaim* to our baby Jack. Of course I was not with them as I remained at the nursing home for a few days. A cantor who had come to conduct the Yom Kippur service and is also a *mohel* remained an extra eight days to perform the *bris*. You see, we manage to keep our Jewish traditions despite living deep in Africa. Our little boy will no doubt be a South African citizen and, hopefully, like his father, will be well integrated and accepted, but will grow up knowing of his Jewish heritage and where he comes from.

My dearest Mama, I know that in the last few years in Mitau we became distant. You were always so busy with my small brothers and sisters; so apparently disinterested in all my activities, my progress at school and my music lessons. Yet, today, as I tend my small baby, I miss you more than any other and I do so wish you could be with me to share in the joy and difficulties of caring for my child. I suddenly feel that we have so much in common, and am so much more aware of how much you did for me and of how deep is my need for you, my kindest of mothers. I do not say this to make you sad, but to show my love and appreciation for you and, yes, my deep regret that we were not closer then, and are now so far apart at this of all times.

And to you, dear Papa, I have heard that you have not been well. I do hope this will pass soon. I so often think of the times we had together, when we would read and talk of literature, politics, Zionism, Communism, Judaism, Christianity; of the different people amongst whom we lived. My thoughts linger on our walks together in the city and countryside. You would tell me of your childhood, of your parents. All this has remained part of me. So many of your ideas and ideals have become my own; so many of your songs and melodies sing in my mind. How you loved to listen to me play the piano and sing.

I know today of the hardships you had to cope with then, and can well understand your readiness to have me come to this distant land. As you will remember, I myself very much liked the idea of coming here, although I admit that at the time I did have mixed feelings and somewhat resented your

willing acceptance of my decision. I know now that it was only my happiness and well-being that you had in mind and bear no ill feelings.

My only regret is this huge distance that divides us. But, Papa, rejoice with me today for I have a child – your grandson Jack.

Before closing, I must tell you about Roxy.<sup>2</sup> Herman tells me that on the day of Jack's birth, a foal, a baby horse, was born on the farm. His name is Roxy and one day he will belong to Jack. Another bit of good news – the war seems to have been postponed, at least for the time being, and we are all going back to Woodbush. I am delighted.

Much love to you. Kiss my brothers and sisters for me and do please write!

Your daughter, Doris



HIRSCHMANN FAMILY 1898

BACK: Herman Hirschmann, Joseph Kallmeyer holding Jack Kallmeyer, Jacob Hirschmann

FRONT: Doris Hirschmann [nee Thal], Bertha Kallmeyer [Palte], Isiah Hirschmann holding Harry Kallmeyer and Jack Hirschmann, Annie Kallmeyer [Salamon], Johanna Kallmeyer [nee Hirschmann].

*Both my grandfather Herman and my father Jack were born on Yom Kippur. Every year Doris would entertain all the Jewish people living in the area – first in Woodbush and later in Pietersburg. They would come to her home to break the fast and stay for dinner; and, of course to celebrate the birthdays. My mother Sadie carried on with this tradition throughout the years my parents lived in Pietersburg. I remember those evenings well, including the huge, delicious square yeast cake specially baked to break the fast and to celebrate our Dad's birthday.*

*2 When my father Jack was a child on the farm, he was given a horse called Roxy. He would tell us stories of his horse-riding days and the love between them. Many years later, at our home in Pietersburg, Roxy was a favourite name for our dogs.*



## **Part Three: The War, 1899-1902**

The Second Anglo-Boer War in South Africa took place from October 1899 to May 1902, between the Cape Province and Natal, colonies of the British Empire, and the Afrikaans republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The history of the conflict between the two white races dates back to the earliest days of European settlement in the Cape. The main trigger was the discovery of diamonds, and later of gold, in and around Johannesburg, towards the end of the nineteenth century. We studied the events of the war quite extensively in history classes at school, though my memory of this is scanty. It was hardly spoken of at home, my father having been an infant at the time. His memories of Woodbush only went back to a period of peaceful co-existence, when the farm and the lives of those on it had been restored and rehabilitated – memories of a happy childhood. (My mother was born in Johannesburg long after the war). It was only when I began writing these letters, and reading and listening to the voices of the past, while trying to relive and revive the lives of my grandparents, that I was both shocked and fascinated by what must have been a most traumatic and sorrowful period in their lives.

### **3.1. From Herman to Jacob and Papa in Talsen**

Woodbush, November 1899

Dear Papa and Jacob,

Despite all our hopes that somehow it could have been avoided, war has broken out in this most beautiful of countries, between two nations which have given us a home and a country. So far the fighting has not reached our part of the world and we live much as we have done up to now. Our English and Afrikaans neighbours in the district are still reluctant to disturb the harmony of life around here. At least, for now.

How fortunate that you both left South Africa in good time, although I had become so accustomed to having you here with us that it has taken me ages to come to terms with your departure. I know I keep repeating this, but it is my dream that after the war you and all the family will make your home here.

I fear this war will bring with it much suffering and sorrow. We Jews find ourselves neither here nor there and, as you well know, we in the country areas tend to sympathize with the Boers. However,

we, certainly I, have no wish to participate in this foolish fighting game for either side.<sup>1</sup> There are, though, a number of Jewish boys who have volunteered to fight. As you know I am a burgher of the Republic, but hopefully, I will not be called upon to join the fighting forces. They probably will demand horses and supplies. Who knows what else may be in store for us.

The English mistakenly believed that they could easily defeat the Boers and quickly bring the war to a close. You have probably heard that so far, despite being part of the mighty army of the British Empire, the English soldiers are no match for the Boer commandos. I do believe, though, that they are learning their lessons after months of bitter defeats. We hear and we worry and pray the war will not reach these northern parts of the land. I will keep you updated as best I can

On Yom Kippur this year we did not go to Pietersburg. The Kallmeyers and the Israelsons came to us at Woodbush. They all slept over, on mattresses. We held the service as best we could and after breaking the fast, Doris and Johanna served a fine meal. This, despite the dire shortages we face in these times of war. On that night we celebrated my birthday and little Yankie's (Jack's) first birthday. We drank wine and sang songs while Doris played the piano. We all laughed and joked, but beneath it all lay a dark foreboding of what is still to come.

Both on the farm and in the store our profits are falling. Many of the young farmers have joined the fighting forces and most people are careful with spending. The Blacks also have far less available cash. Their situation is desperate and I find myself handing out food. Anyway, it will probably all be looted. I want you to know that in the event that something should happen to me, I have taken all our savings and divided them. Some I have given to Joseph for safekeeping, some to the Israelson brothers, who say they have an arrangement to keep the money hidden, and some to Barney Herman in Pietersburg. In this way I hope all will not be lost. We are told that in the war-torn areas, the stores have been looted, and livestock has all been taken by one side or the other. I am seeking out ways to protect my property, cattle and horses. Some of our horses have already been commissioned by the Boer commandos. It is all very disturbing.

Doris refuses point-blank to move to Pietersburg. She insists on staying with me through thick and thin and, indeed, I do value her gentle and never failing support. Our little boy is now one year old; he crawls, has learnt to stand, and captivates us all with his smiles and baby talk. He gives us great joy. Doris did not have enough milk to feed the baby, and a farmer's wife, who has a baby of her own, has helped with nursing him.<sup>2</sup> How much good there is in people and yet so much bitterness! Is all this killing just mad stupidity?

Take care of yourselves and give our love to my sisters and to Brahle, who I fear I hardly remember.

I have enclosed the family photograph we had taken before you left Pietersburg. ( [SEE Picture](#) )

Warmest wishes from Doris, who as you know, misses you both deeply,

Herman

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*1 It seems clear that Herman had no taste for war at anytime or any place or for any cause.*

*2 My dad Jack was breastfed by a "wet nurse," an Afrikaans woman from the Woodbush district, with whom he maintained contact throughout her life.*

### **3.2. From Herman to Jacob in Talsen**

Woodbush, December 1899

Dear Jacob,

I am enclosing this letter sent to me from Johan Pieterse. He is a young boy of barely seventeen, who arrived here from Southern Rhodesia<sup>1</sup> and desperately wanted to join the Boer forces. He was not accepted as he is very young, is not a citizen of either of the Boer republics, and to top it all, he has an English mother. He obtained a gun; I gave him a horse and permission to use my name<sup>2</sup> on condition that he would not return to the Northern Transvaal. This I did in the hope that it would prevent any possibility of my being enlisted. So far it seems to have worked. I only hope this was not a mistake!

The letter is in Afrikaans but I think that by now you will have little difficulty reading it.

Dear Oom Herman,

I write this to you as I stand on guard duty on a hill not far from the town of Ladysmith on the border between the Orange Free State and Natal.<sup>3</sup> I see the sun set over these hills, covered with thorn trees and tall grass. In the distance I watch a giraffe and a few zebras. I need to keep my gun constantly on hand for fear of animals or some stray British soldiers. I will never forget your generosity in giving me your fine horse Drojok,<sup>4</sup> thereby making it possible for me to be part of this gallant war for the

freedom of my people and my country. Drojok is right here beside me, grazing in these rich grass fields and enjoying the quiet, after all the noise of battle.

Up to now I have relished the adventure of it all. We are defeating the English – hands down, with only very few of our own wounded or lost. In the evenings we sit round campfires, each man telling his story. We thrive on the excitement of planning the battle, hiding under cover of the bush or in trenches to ambush the enemy, watching them retreat – victory! All of this is most exhilarating – riding across the veldt, returning to the farms where we are received as heroes, given nourishing home-cooked meals and a chance to wash and rest in comfort, telling of our adventures in the bush and flirting with the young girls. It seems that being experienced farmers, hunters and horsemen, familiar with the terrain and life in the bush, as well as being powerfully motivated, gives us a clear advantage. Moreover, our people's farms, spread all over the country, are of huge support - a place to rest and regain our strength.

I am frequently sent on horseback, usually at night, to notify the Boers on the farms to gather at this location or that. I love these rides, across the open spaces, as does my gallant horse. Some of the older men regret having to kill fellow white Christians – Protestant Christians at that; in fact, to kill at all. There are those who fear the tables will turn and we hear rumours that the English are planning to increase their troops by the thousands. Although we have not, at this stage, suffered many casualties, there are times when I see the dead and wounded and get a bad feeling. This must be somehow wrong. Similarly, when we loot the stores of English and Jewish people, I try not to look them in the eye. I know that Ladysmith is under siege and thoughts of the people – women and children – without food and water, creep into my mind. I try not to think and persuade myself that in times of war there is no place for thoughts of this nature.

Please give my warm regards to Mevrouw Hirschmann and thank her again for her kind hospitality.

Best wishes,

Johan Pieterse

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*1 Southern Rhodesia is today known as Zimbabwe and is the country north of the Limpopo river*

*2 Our father Jack told us that Herman had given a horse to a young Afrikaans volunteer and that the boy had used Herman's name to enable him to be accepted into the Boer commando units. I use Johan to give some picture of the Boer*

*side of the war – at least in its first phase. The brave patriotic language would be quite natural for a young Afrikaans volunteer.*

*I have since been told that this story of Herman, the Afrikaans soldier, and the horse, might have taken place in an earlier period, during a war between the Boers and the black tribes. However, I decided to leave it as is.*

*3 In 2012, I spent a few days at the Springbok Nature Reserve near Ladysmith and saw this very beautiful view spoken of by the boy. We were told of the fierce and bloody battles that took place in those rustic and peaceful surroundings, between the Boers and the English. And before that between the Zulus and the English.*

*4 Drojok is a Russian word for friend. When I was a small child, our dad's uncle Brahle, Herman's youngest brother, lived a few houses from our home on Voortrekker Street in Pietersburg. He and his wife Aunt Rahel had dogs, one of whom was named Drojok.*

### **3.3. From Herman to Jacob in Talsen**

Woodbush, October 1900

Dear Jacob,

We have entered a new century and right now the future looks none too cheerful. However, sooner or later this war must come to an end and we hope we will be able to get on with our lives. Perhaps, thereafter, the twentieth century will bring peace and prosperity. Dare we look forward to a century without war?

On the eve of the New Year, unlike in previous years, we did not join our English friends in Haenertsburg, as we did not want to be regarded as taking sides. We remained at home and were joined by a few other Jewish families.

I have not been of heart or mind to write for some time but will briefly bring you up to date. You will know that the war has taken a turn; that the English learnt a bitter lesson and reinforced their army with thousands of troops, horses and weapons. Despite suffering heavy casualties they have retaken control of the whole of the Cape and Natal, as well as of Bloemfontein, Johannesburg, and now also Pretoria. The Presidents of the Boer republics have surrendered, but the war is far from over. The Boers have taken to guerrilla warfare. They detonate railroads, destroy supplies and inflict severe damage on the British forces before retreating to their farms. The English are responding by burning the farms, blowing up the homesteads and transferring the families to concentration camps. I have been told that the conditions in the concentration camps, populated mainly by women and children, are shocking. Many men have been sent to prisoner-of-war camps in British colonies overseas. The



Blacks too have been removed from the farms and sent to separate camps where the conditions are even worse. Now this is something you can tell our friends back home who think so highly of the British Empire.

However, all this has not yet reached the Northern Transvaal. In fact Pietersburg has become the capital of what is left of the Boer Republic.

We continue to operate the farm and the store and have managed to maintain good relations with the Boers as well as with the English, but the situation is worrying and the atmosphere uneasy.

Little Yainkie,<sup>1</sup> now a toddler, has had his second birthday and chatters in several languages. Doris talks to him in English and I in Afrikaans.<sup>2</sup> He plays outside with the little piccaninis in the yard and with Martha's little boy and so he learns some Sotho as well. He is picking up something of everything. Doris takes good care of us all. She is due to have a baby in three months time and seems to be handling this pregnancy much more easily than the first.

The Kallmeyers spend a lot of time here but have a home in Pietersburg. Their two girls are at school there.

Love to Papa and Mazal Tov to us all on the birth of Bryna's second son Samuel,

Your brother,

Herman

*1 Jack had a number of nicknames: Yainkie, Jackie, and Yankel*

*2 Our father told us that as young children, Afrikaans was the language most spoken in their home.*

### **3.4. From Herman to Jacob in Talsen**

Woodbush, November 1900

Dear Jacob,

I am enclosing this letter I received from Herbert Randibe<sup>1</sup> who, you may recall, worked as an assistant in the store and as the driver of the horse and donkey carts. He left us to go back to Johannesburg in August 1899, shortly before the outbreak of the war.

Pretoria, November 1900

Dear Baas Herman and Madam Doris,

I think of you often and thought it proper to write something of what I have been through since my arrival in Johannesburg. Your letter of recommendation was a great help and I easily found work in the mines – in an administrative position and not down in the shafts. I already had more than my share of that many years ago. Living conditions in the shanty town were not good but I earned a fair salary compared to most. Then war broke out. The Boer Republic brought the gold mining industry almost to a standstill. Hundreds of thousands of English-speaking residents and foreigners, who had flocked to Johannesburg from all over the world, either left or were taken by train to camps in the Cape and Natal. The City of Gold was all but silenced. We Blacks found ourselves with no work or money and had to leave. There were no trains for us and together with thousands of Zulu mine workers, I walked to Natal.<sup>2</sup> We walked hundreds of miles and it took us weeks. There was no work to be found and I decided to join the British army – not for love of soldiering and not because I like the English any more than I like the Boers, but I needed a job and a way to feed myself. I thought perhaps I might eventually be able to send money home. I must tell you that there are many thousands of black people participating on both sides, in non-combatant as well in combatant roles, with great bravery. I do not believe this fact has been anywhere acknowledged. Some of us are armed. Although the British and the Boers have a gentlemen's agreement not to provide us Blacks with guns, this has not been strictly adhered to by either side. A bitter war rages between the British and the Boers over control of a land which belongs to the black peoples of this country. And we, the Blacks, serve, kill and are killed, side by side with our white masters. What bitter irony!

I myself was fortunate. Because I can read and write; because I speak Afrikaans and English, as well as many of the languages of the Blacks; and because I am a person who has lived and hunted in the wilds, I became a scout as well as the personal attendant of a British officer, a Scotsman.<sup>3</sup> This gallant man, who was not brought up to believe that black people are inferior and who showed me great friendship, was badly wounded in battle. At night, by candlelight I would read to him from the books he kept in his locker and also wrote letters from him to his mother.<sup>4</sup> Eventually he succumbed to his injury and died, but he left me with a gift – the English language.

During the first phase of the war, the Boers completely outmatched the English. After the turn of the century, the winds changed. We were getting the upper hand and I was among the first to reach Johannesburg and then Pretoria. We thought the war was over, but this was not to be.

Shortly thereafter, I heard that my wife, who lives in the Pietersburg district, had taken ill. I was not granted leave, so I did a foolish thing and ran away, I deserted. It did not take long for them to catch up with me and I was put into a concentration camp together with Blacks who had been taken off the Boer farms. I have in my life seen some appalling conditions. Never have I seen such total disregard for human life and dignity. I am aware that the conditions in the white camps are also sub-human, but the difference between White and Black, even here at the bottom of the ladder, is distinctly evident. There is barely any food. We are told to grow our own. Typhoid and dysentery are rampant; there is no medical care; there is no fresh water; people are dying like flies and are buried unceremoniously and namelessly. A few of us tried to organize a petition demanding better conditions, but needless to say it was ignored. Tonight I and two others have decided to break loose and run for it. Whatever will be will be. We have nothing to lose.

Could you please do me a personal favour and ask our friends from the Lutheran missionary to try to find my family and, if possible, give them any help they might need?

I hope that we will meet again in better times and that you, your kind wife and your little Jackie are well and coping. Give my regards to your father and brother Jacob when you write.

I will always remember your friendship to me.

Sincerely,

Herbert Randibe

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*1 Herbert is that fictional character from earlier letters. I have used him to relate something of the participation of the black people in the war between the two white races. It certainly was never taught in history classes and, in fact, I never heard it mentioned. I have only now read of it in books on the war and online sources.*

*2 I read of the Great Zulu March which took place during this war, at a time when there was no work in the mines and no transport for the black workers to return to their homes in Natal.*

*3 I added the bit about the Scottish officer to explain Herbert's knowledge of English. I had some questions in my mind regarding the language Herbert might have used in this letter. Taking into account the fact that Herbert was well versed in English and I myself cannot know or accurately write as he would, I thought it best to use the language as I know it.*

*4 When I wrote of this dying officer, I had in mind a song I learned from my father, "Just Break the News to Mother," which tells of a letter from a dying soldier to his mother.*

### 3.5. From Doris to Etta in Riga

Woodbush, February 1901

My dear Etta,

Just a month ago I gave birth to a little girl, a sister to Jack, whom we have named Hilda.<sup>1</sup> She came a little before her expected time and was very small, but she is doing well and gaining weight rapidly. This time, I remained at home in Woodbush, and gave birth with the help of a midwife. All went well and, happily, I have enough milk to feed her myself. Herman, Martha and the neighbouring farmers' wives have all been very helpful. I have had to manage without Johanna and the Kallmeyer family, as they are now living in Pietersburg, but I think I needed this independence. Little Hilda, or Hinde as Herman calls her, was born without hair, but the fuzz which is beginning to appear is distinctly reddish. She's going to be a redhead like you. Jackie has moments of jealousy but on the whole he is fine with her. We give him extra attention and he is a lovely playful child. He is most definitely a little farm boy, and loves to play barefoot outside with the other children, both white and black.

The war goes on and on and is bitter indeed. However, except for financial worries and our concern of what the future holds for us, it has not touched us directly and not yet reached these distant northern areas. We continue our daily lives much as we did before and are occasionally even able to put it out of our minds. However, the news is not good and many people we know have lost husbands, brothers, sons and fathers. Others have family members who have been taken to POW camps overseas or to concentration camps which are notorious for their horrific conditions. I frequently visit my friend Marietjie, whose husband is away fighting for the Boer forces. Once or twice a week, I go by donkey cart and pay a visit to the Retief family, whose eighteen-year-old son has been sent home after having been severely wounded. He is paralyzed from the waist down and sits in a wheelchair. I help to nurse him and read and sing with him. He likes that. I also go to help an English-speaking friend, Jennie Gordon. Her husband was killed in action and she has to manage her family and farm on her own. She is helped by many of the people in the district, including Afrikaans farmers who have lived nearby for many a long year. Sadly, this kind of neighbourly good-will is becoming less and less prevalent. Bitterness and bad feeling are gaining the upper hand, especially since the conditions in the concentration camps have become common knowledge.

Anyhow, I am kept busy with these visits, and with caring for our children, home and garden. I also need to help a bit in the store, as Herman has had to reduce the size of his staff.

Let us move on to a happier note, dear sister. Herman still loves to take walks or rides in the countryside. Sometimes we take Jack; I have even taken little Hilda once or twice, wrapped on my back as do the African mothers. I have learnt to ride but do not go far afield as there are still wild animals in this area. They, at least, have not yet been bothered by news of the war. We continue to entertain and visit family and friends, although admittedly far less than we used to. My piano remains my never-failing friend.

Congratulations, Etta, on completing your degree. I do hope you get a teaching position. Are you still seeing your professor? Do Mama and Papa know about it? I write to them regularly and give them every detail of the children's doings. I am worried about Papa. It seems he is not well. How are all the rest of the family? Please write, as Mama and Papa do not tell me much.

How I would love to see you and chat with you. We are so close and yet so far apart.

Much love, Doris

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*I do not know exactly when my Auntie Hilda was born, but I think about two years after the birth of my dad Jack. I remember her as being a "redhead" in every sense of the word— the colour of her hair, her complexion and her temperament.*

### **Letter 3.5. From Herman to Jacob in Talsen**

Woodbush, June 1901

Dear Jacob, I am forwarding this letter from Pieterse, the boy to whom I gave the horse Drojok. It is a sad letter of war and very different from the letter he sent me when he first joined the Boer forces. You will be sorry to hear about Drojok, a horse that you yourself loved to ride.

From Johan Pieterse to Herman in Woodbush

Durban, Natal, April 1901

Dear Oom Herman,

It is a long time since my last letter, sent at the beginning of the war from the outskirts of Ladysmith. I write now to tell you that a few months ago our brave horse Drojok was killed in battle. So many of

these brave and noble animals go obediently to their deaths without any understanding of why. Sometimes I myself am no longer able to understand why. You were quite right when you advised me to go back home; when you warned me that I would find that the war is anything but a picnic and an agreement could have been worked out between the parties, without the killing and destruction. And certainly without my participation.

I will briefly tell you of the turn of events since those “victorious” days. The English brought in more and more soldiers, many of whom died in battle, but they marched forward taking city after city. They began to burn the farms, blow up the farmhouses and put the women and children and non-combatants into camps. We could no longer find refuge on the farms; there was very little food available, and we had to hide in the woods. Our spirits were low and our clothes and shoes were in tatters. Despite the hardships, many of the men continued their brave guerrilla warfare, but others, wounded or just plain scared, deserted and it has been said that there were even those who cooperated with the enemy. My friend Hans was captured by the English and sent to a prison camp in a place called Ceylon, across the seas.

After Drojok was wounded, he lay bleeding in a deserted field. At first, I tried to save his life but eventually I had to shoot him. A group of passing Tommies, which is what we call the English soldiers, heard my shot from the bush and shot back in my direction. This “blind” bullet struck me in my shoulder and I cried out in pain and fear. They bound my wound, put me over the back of a horse and brought me to an ox-wagon loaded with women and children taken from the farms. The pain on the bumpy ride was unbearable and the soldier who had shot me gave me some morphine powder which did give me some relief, but left me half-conscious. Through my fogged mind, I could hear the crying and squabbling of children, the stern scolding of their mothers, the arguments and cursing between them and the soldiers. And then they began to sing – a hymn. I wondered where God was and on whose side. The strong African light penetrated my closed eyelids until some kind soul covered my face with a scarf and everything went black.

I awoke a few days later in a Medi-tent in the concentration camp near Bloemfontein. An English doctor tended me but I lay with a severely infected wound for many weeks before I could get about. At that time, I had no wish to escape and preferred the hot dismal camp conditions to the horror of the battlefield. Perhaps the worst part of it was the angry contempt of the Boer families on the other side of the fence, who saw us as traitors and “weaklings.”

We, together with the Tommy guards and other men who were wounded or had fled the battlefield, some with their women and children, were in a separate camp with only slightly improved conditions. I remember so well those stout-hearted, sturdy Afrikaans women who had once received us so warmly on the farms and were now so full of bitter anger and hate. One small boy would come to the fence and I would share my rations with him. He refused to talk to me.

In time, I made friends with some of the guards. The one who had shot me was stricken with sorrow. He was a boy of about my age and had never before shot anyone or anything. When eventually another fellow prisoner and I decided to escape, they seemed not to notice. We made our way to the railway tracks outside Bloemfontein and climbed onto a cattle truck on a train to Durban. A young black boy, also on the run, took pity on us and found us food and water until we reached Durban. Once there, we made our way to an address I had kept, of a distant relative of my mother. She is married to an Afrikaans doctor. She, a nurse, and her husband work in a hospital taking care of all sides, citizens and soldiers, and are not distrusted or hated by any. How I envy them.

I have been living here ever since. Often at night I have dreams of the cannon fire, the dying men and horses, the burning farms and blown up homes, the shooting and the cries of the wounded, the ugly noise of battle, the curses of the women in the camp, the starving and sick children, the hunger and the fear. I wake up in a sweat. My family here give me love and kindness and I trust that my soul will heal. They have a young teenage son and a daughter, who attend school and live normal young lives as if there was no war raging all over the country. They are slowly but surely filling my life with laughter and the optimism of the young.

Through all this I have been helped by so many good people, of all races, including yourself and Mevr.Hirschmann. I believe I am no longer a foolish boy but a man who will find my way and will do good work and be respected. I hope and pray that you and your family have remained unharmed and in good health, and that this war will soon be over. I regret that I am unable to return the horse.

Friendly greetings,

Johan Pieterse

### 3.6. From Herman to Jacob in Talsen

Houtbosdorp internment camp, November 1901<sup>1</sup>

My dear Jacob,

Well, despite my naïve optimism, this is where Doris and I have landed. I hope and pray that it will not be for long. I have never been subjected to such harsh and depressing conditions. I prefer to keep Papa out of the picture, so please do not mention this to anyone. Being Jewish has some advantages. Although a burgher of the South African Republic, I was not expected to join the fighting forces. I have, however, had to accept the indignity of being brought to this camp where there are mostly women and children taken from the farms. The few men who are here are either old, sick, disabled or deserters and are indeed a pretty miserable lot.

Pietersburg was occupied by the English in April without a shot being fired, but the guerrilla attacks have continued from this area. The British are ruthlessly burning the farms and rounding up the farming population, both black and white. I assumed, mistakenly, that like most of the other Jews, including those who have become burghers of the Republic, we would be allowed to carry on as before. We remained on the farm. Johanna and Joseph were with us when we actually witnessed a fierce battle between the Boers and the English on the two hills adjoining the farm. Perhaps one day when all this is over, you will be here with us and I will show you the site and describe this painful event to you.<sup>2</sup>

We were worried and sent the two children with the Kallmeyers to Pietersburg. On the way, they were intercepted by English soldiers and taken to a concentration camp near Pietersburg. However, as the camp was overcrowded, they were permitted to return to their home in Pietersburg where they have been put under house arrest. At least the children, theirs and ours, are with them, safe and well cared for. That same night, Malap took all the cattle and two of my remaining horses from the farm. He said he would try to keep them hidden from the British, as they are confiscating all the livestock they can lay their hands on. I fear he does not have much of a chance. I suggested to the Blacks living on the farm that they too should get away and try to hide in the forests.

A few days earlier, Jennie Gordon had helped Doris pack all her better household belongings, those she had brought from Latvia as well as wedding gifts.<sup>3</sup> She took them by donkey cart and hid them in her home. Although I had handed over most of our savings to Joseph and to the Israelsons, I had a little on me. All this happened just in the nick of time. British soldiers barged into our home, the day



after Yom Kippur. They knew who we were and that we were Jewish. They actually waited until after the day of the fast – at least that is to their credit.

I wondered why we had been singled out. Perhaps it was because we had given shelter and food to Boer soldiers; perhaps we should not have remained on the farm. I asked, and was told by the officer in charge that a Herman Hirschmann, a Boer soldier, had been captured in the Free State and had escaped. My explanation that this was all a mistake, an unfortunate coincidence, had no effect. Doris and I were brought to this camp in an area which we have learned to love. And yet, how grateful we will be to get away from here now! Of course our shop was completely ransacked. I was told by one of the soldiers, that Mackenzie, an English friend from the forestry, asked that they not destroy or damage our property. They are apparently using the house to accommodate soldiers and officers. God knows in what condition we will find it.

Doris will complete this letter. I am not in a mood to continue just now and will write again only as a free man from our home in Woodbush. God willing!

Love and best wishes,

Herman

*1 According to Charlotte Wiener (see References), the Hirschmanns, when arrested, were taken to an internment camp in Houtbosdorp.*

*2 The story of a battle witnessed on the hills adjoining Woodbush comes from Lionel Stein's memoirs, told to him by his great-grandmother Johanna (more on this in Letter 4.3).*

### **3.7. From Doris to Jacob in Talsen**

Pietersburg concentration camp,<sup>1</sup> December 1901

My dear young “brother” and friend Jacob,

I will begin by telling you that we have been moved to a camp near Pietersburg, where the conditions are slightly better. It is not quite as dirty; we are not all crowded into large tents as we were before, and families or couples have each been given a small tent of their own. We sleep on mats and have relatively clean blankets; the food is poor but edible; there is drinking water and a little to enable us to keep reasonably clean. We were told of a huge outcry in the British press and Parliament, and in fact throughout the world, against the shocking conditions in the camps. As a result, there has been

some effort to improve them or at least to give a better impression. This camp in Pietersburg is intended as a showpiece and has only recently been cleaned up a little. It is a far cry from comfortable but at least it is bearable.

Best of all, we are sometimes allowed visitors during the weekends. After a few weeks, Johanna and Joseph were given permission to bring the children to see us. Oh, what a joy. Nothing hurt me more than having to part with them. They seem well and have become accustomed to being separated from us. Martha, their nanny with her own child, has come into Pietersburg and is staying with the Kallmeyers' servants and helping out with the children. On the days they visit we also have a decent meal and they bring us a change of clothing. So many things we took for granted have taken on such huge importance since we have become camp inmates.

We were in Houtbosdorp only for a few weeks, but it felt like an eternity. The conditions were intolerable and it was almost impossible to keep any semblance of cleanliness or order. Many of the women and children were desperately ill and, in fact, were dying. The nights were bitterly cold; food was minimal and hardly edible. My God! Who would have believed that the English, in fact, any man created in the image of God, could become so completely indifferent to the suffering of their fellow men? Can this all be justified by "war"!

One of the most difficult things to bear was to see Herman so downcast. He, of all people, a man so filled with confidence, so proud of his achievements and acceptance in his adopted country, a man who could rise to every situation, a man of charm and humour, liked by all! He could not come to terms with losing his freedom, with being a camp inmate. He was saddened and deeply disturbed that I, too, had to live in these conditions. He was profoundly humiliated by the fact that most of the inmates were women and children, and that the few men there were regarded with contempt. The words Herman used to describe how he felt were: "as if I have a black hole in my stomach" or "like a flat football." He would sit outside, gazing into space, so quiet, so unlike himself.

I myself was constantly on the move, to the point of exhaustion. There were so many sick mothers and children who needed help in those unbearable conditions. My friend Marietjie was not able to feed her baby; the maid who cleaned the soldiers' quarters was breast-feeding her own child and agreed to feed Marietjie's infant. Can you believe that I had to persuade, literally, to plead with Marietjie to allow her baby to be fed by a black woman? Nonetheless, this is what saved the child's life. Marietjie<sup>2</sup> herself died of malaria, as did so many others. We had been such good friends. I

cannot speak of this as it is more than I can bear! However I had to find a solution for the child. Marietjie had told me of an aunt in Haenertsburg.

The English soldiers are feared and hated. But there was one guard with deep sadness in his eyes. There was something about him that made him look the other way when a child took extra bread, something in the way he tended his horse, which made me realize that hidden beneath that hated uniform was a caring human being. I spoke to him and told him of the now motherless baby. He took the infant, as well as Marietjie's two-year-old child, and, accompanied by the maid and her baby, they rode off in a donkey cart to the aunt. She accepted them all into her home, thank God. Some of these soldiers are really only boys, far from home and longing for this war to end, no less than ourselves. This act of kindness has relieved me of the burden of hatred.

Herman seemed to pull himself together towards the end of our time in the Houtbosdorp camp, particularly when we learned that we were being moved and that it was becoming clear the war would not last much longer. At the new camp he persuaded the soldier who was in charge of supplies to take him as an assistant. This is something Herman does most efficiently and the Irish soldier, who has no love for the English, this war or his job, is able to drink beer or whatever he can get hold of, to his hearts content. Herman is kept occupied and is able to bring extra supplies of food, soap, bandages and whatever else he can, to the camp inmates. He brings as much as possible without making it too obvious. It gives him a sense of being in control; he does good and it makes him feel good.

The best news of all, dear Jacob, is that I believe the war is coming to an end – it should not be long now and, please God, we will soon be back home, together with our little ones. We have heard shocking stories of the terrible damage inflicted on the farms all over our district and can only hope that Woodbush has remained intact.

Much love to you and Papa – I miss you both but am thankful that you are not here to witness the ugliness and destruction around us, in what we thought to be a promised land.

Doris

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*I was completely taken aback to learn that our grandparents were incarcerated in a camp in Houtbosdorp, and apparently sometime thereafter, in the Pietersburg concentration camp, though I don't know exactly when. No one ever mentioned this. The British take-over of Pietersburg took place in April 1901.*

*According to Lionel Stein's memoirs, the Kallmeyers also spent a short time in the concentration camp, but since they had a house in Pietersburg and the camp became seriously overcrowded, they were moved and put under house arrest in their own home. It is reasonable to assume that they would have taken Jack and Hilda with them.*

*There are historical references relating to the outcry in the British press and Parliament against the conditions in these concentration camps. My understanding of the lives and conditions in the camps comes from a variety of books and on-line sources, but primarily from the novel *The Undesirables*, by Dave Boling.*

*Approximately eighty Jewish men and women were reportedly sent to concentration camps in various parts oth sides.*

*I cannot know if Doris lost a friend during the Anglo-Boer War, but it is not unlikely as many Afrikaans women from the farms perished in the camps. I do know the depth of pain from the loss of a dear friend of the country; some were said to have died there. Of the notorious concentration camps much has been written. More women and children perished from disease and starvation than soldiers killed in combat, on both sides*

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## **Part Four: Back to Woodbush, 1902-1903**

In May 1902 the war came to an end and the Boers signed a treaty of surrender. The scorched earth policy and destruction of the farms, as well as the confining of the Afrikaner women and children to concentration camps, contributed much to breaking the spirit and the fighting ability of the Afrikaner guerrilla commandos. The Afrikaners' hatred and resentment towards the English was compounded and continued for decades to follow. The Transvaal and Orange Free State, together with Natal and the Cape, would eventually form the Union of South Africa and became part of the British Empire. The concentration camps were closed forever and the survivors were free to return to their homes and farms, or what was left of them. The destruction of the farms and their way of life had disastrous effects on some of the Afrikaans families, a number of whom had to give up their farms and move into the towns, where some became desperately poor. The Blacks, likewise, paid a bitter price. They lost the little they had before the war, and on the whole, their economic conditions and general status verged on slavery.

#### 4.1. From Herman to Jacob and Papa in Talsen

Woodbush, June 1902

Dear Papa and Jacob,

The war is over. A peace treaty has been signed in Vereeniging. The Boers have been brought to their knees. We feel for them. There has been terrible suffering brought on by this long-lasting war and we are grateful that it has at last come to an end. We understand that the British are in a reconciliatory mood, and that the Boer republics will be given full autonomy, for a start. Perhaps even compensation.<sup>1</sup> The Afrikaner people can only be respected for their brave and honourable resistance, but it will take many a long year for them to forgive the English for the horrendous destruction of their farmlands and the imprisonment of their families in concentration camps. And that includes Doris and myself!

I have no wish to hate either English or Boer but to put that period of my life in Africa forever behind me.

Nevertheless, I learned much from this bitter experience. I have no words that can adequately describe the love and respect I have for Doris. She proved herself a pillar of strength. Her first concern was for the children. She made sure that they were well cared for, even at the expense of having to part with them. She gave me infinite love and support in one of the most difficult periods of my life and enabled me to get through it in an honourable and manly manner; she was untiring in her help to others in far worse condition than we were, with optimism, common sense and sheer goodness.

Of that period I will say no more except to mention the tremendous part played by friends and family, especially Johanna and Joseph, who were there for us throughout. I will never forget the many people living in this district, the Israelson family, the Pietersburg Jewish community, the black people of my farm, and most particularly Malap, whose heroic story I will relate below.

Doris and I, with the two children, are back home in Woodbush. Thank God! The house and shop are somewhat worse for wear but we are working on getting all that straightened out. Joseph and I will restock the shop and get it functioning as soon as possible. Fortunately, our savings were kept in safe hands throughout our absence. We have other investment plans, but all in good time. Slowly but surely we will also get the farm going.

Now for Malap's story<sup>2</sup>: You will remember I wrote and told you that in an attempt to hide our livestock from the British, Malap had taken the cattle and two horses away from the farm. This was done shortly before we were taken from Woodbush. While in the camp I was told that Malap had been caught and beaten. I assumed I would never see him or my cattle again. On the day of our return we were called outside. I was amazed, amazed beyond words, to see Malap with a few other young boys, coming across the field, leading the herd of cattle towards the cattle kraal, or what was left of it. All the black people of the farm and all our family and friends who had come to welcome us let out a great cheer. The black women ululated and began to sing and dance. I could have wept with joy. Who would have believed it possible!

The following morning, after our first night back home, and after counting, checking and milking the cows we sat round on the rocks near the kraal, drinking coffee. All the farm people and all our visitors stood around. Doris and Johanna came down to the kraal to join us.

Malap told his story: The night before Yom Kippur, well after dark, he and a two or three young herdsmen from his family kraal, left the farm with all the cattle, two horses and a donkey, with blankets and a bag of mealie meal across its back. The English did not arrive until the day after Yom Kippur. Malap, his companions and the animals had plenty of time to distance themselves. The cattle grazed in hidden fields and moved forward during the night. He was kept informed by passing fellow Blacks, mostly farm workers fleeing the British, of the exact position of the soldiers. At times these herdsmen would split up into smaller groups and later gather at some meeting point. There were times when they had to lead the herd up or down steep slopes, across rivers and streams and over difficult terrain; they needed to watch out for wild animals, to be constantly on the alert. They ate wild fowl, berries and wild fruit. It took them more than a fortnight to reach the forests of his tribe. Here the Bavenda people still ruled. In fact, he told me that seldom does a white man dare enter those dense forests. Since Malap is of this tribe, they allowed him and his companions to bring the herd into the forest – for the price of a few cows and calves. On several occasions he visited Woodbush to try to find members of his family and also to learn of our situation and of the war. On one such occasion he was caught by the English. They had been told he had stolen the cattle. They actually had him lashed, but he never disclosed the whereabouts of the cattle. Somehow he managed to get away and return to the herd in the forest. On hearing that the war was over, he and his companions left the forest and led our cattle back to the farm. God bless him!!

My dear brother Jacob, I want you to come back to us here. I need you to help me rebuild Woodbush. I believe Papa is planning to sell his property and that he would like to go to Bialystok to

be with Bryna and her family. I understand Papa does not wish to come to Africa again, that he does not feel strong enough to undertake such a journey. Once Papa settles down in Bialystok, we hope you will come as soon as you can. Doris and I both miss you.

Love and good wishes,

Your brother Herman

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*1 Herman apparently requested compensation from the British government, but although he had received citizenship in the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek, his application was turned down on the basis that he had left Russia illegally and without official documentation.*

*2 We knew Malap. He lived and worked for my grandfather and later for my father on the Woodbush farm. He hid Herman's herd of cattle from the English during the Boer War and despite being beaten, managed to keep their hiding place a secret. Herman related this story to our dad and he told it to my brother David. He said that Malap and his family must be allowed to live on the farm for as long as they wished. On our visits to the farm, my dad would always seek out Malap to give him mealie meal, gifts and money. I remember him as a small, wizened old man.*

## **4.2. From Doris in Woodbush to Etta in Riga**

Woodbush, June 1902

Oh my dearest sister, at last I can write from our home in Woodbush, sitting at my desk, rested, clean, my hair brushed back, nicely dressed as I love to be, surrounded by my own things. I hear outside the sounds of the birds chirping, the cocks crowing, the call of the ha-de-dah bird, the cooing of the doves and the mooing of the cows – farm noises; the laughter of the children, my own amongst them. I hear the voices of the black women<sup>1</sup> singing in harmony as they work – tribal songs mixed with hymns they learn in church. I walk to the stoep and see the gum tree<sup>2</sup> we planted – there are some who choose to believe it has magic qualities. I look across the fields to the hills and can weep with joy.

I heard from Jacob that he has told you and the family about the concentration camp. Two weeks ago we were released from it. It was a Thursday night. They only notified us that morning although we already knew that the war was over. Joseph and Johanna<sup>3</sup> were waiting outside with a cart to take us into town. There were many other such carts but some of the people just walked. We simply hugged each other and rode quietly to their home in Pietersburg. The children were asleep. There was hot

chicken broth, chopped liver and freshly baked bread awaiting us. Then a bath and bed – so warm, so clean, so comfortable. We lay awake in each other's arms, close together, unaccustomed to such comfort, and fell into a wondrous sleep. The next morning little Jack ran into our room and jumped into the bed. Herman threw him into the air and laughed – that big hearty laugh that I had not heard in ages. Johanna brought Hilda in and she lay cuddled up next to me. I looked away so that my tears would not be seen. We spent the weekend quietly, playing with the children, eating and resting. People, friends, business associates – Jewish, English, Afrikaans and many from the Indian community kept popping in to welcome us home. In the evening, the small Jewish community came to the Kallmeyers house to have the Shul service, but afterwards Johanna shooed them off as she could see we were very tired. By Saturday evening Herman was back to his old self. He and Joseph were discussing getting back to Woodbush and re-opening the store and farm. They have much to talk about. This is the best medicine for Herman.

On Sunday we took the coach back home. The Kallmeyers came with us to help us settle in and we sent a cart and mules ahead to bring supplies and essentials for our immediate requirements. The Jewish community had brought us everything we might possibly need, from blankets and towels to soap and tinned foods. We reached Woodbush after a bumpy ride in the late afternoon. We were tense and apprehensive as we drove up the left-hand bend from the river bed towards the farm. On the way we had seen burnt fields and homes and outhouses in total ruin; many of the African kraals were deserted. On the side of the road we handed out food to groups of piccaninies, with the bloated stomachs of the undernourished, hands outstretched, begging from passing travellers.

We were hugely relieved when we saw both the shop and the house in reasonable condition. The fields were dry and neglected, the cattle kraal damaged and empty, but our home was there and waiting for us. As we rode down to the house, we were surprised to see a group of people waiting to greet us on the stoep. The Israelsons, von Riechis, Jennie Gordon, some neighbouring farmers, the Lutheran minister and his wife and, of course, the forester Mackenzie,<sup>4</sup> who had persuaded the English not to burn our home and shop.

There were some who were not there. They had not yet returned from the camps or their men folk had not yet returned from the overseas POW camps. There are others who will never come back. On the side of the stoep stood a group of black folk. Here again, not all had returned. Martha was there. She had left Pietersburg a few days earlier to help put the house in order. Everyone cheered and came forward to help us off the coach. The little ones ran to Martha, their nanny, and so did I.



In the kitchen there were pots of food cooking on the stove, the house was clean and tidy, the furniture a little worse for wear, but still here. Apparently Hendrik, the coloured carpenter from Haenertsburg, had come to do some repair jobs. The piano is a little scratched and in need of tuning, but I can do that.

Shortly after our arrival we heard shouting from outside. “Kom kyk, Baas” (meaning “Come and look, Sir”), a boy called out. We hurried outside and in the distance, coming across the fields we saw a large herd of cattle accompanied by a few young boys and a young black rider on horseback approaching the farm. It was Malap – he had hidden the cattle and saved them! Herman seemed to grow in height; I saw those rare tears in his eyes. That evening he said his evening prayers, something he had not done for months.

The Kallmeyers and Israelsons slept over that night to help us get settled in. We sat talking until late in the warmth of the kitchen around a paraffin lamp. Such friendship is God-given. At one stage when telling of the camp, I was overcome with both sadness and joy. I went into the room next door. Johanna came in and sat next to me. I wept and wept. She cradled my head in her arms and wept with me. From the time that I first came to Woodbush, and ever since, the kindness and help extended to me by this family, and especially Johanna, has been amazing. However, I always had the feeling that this was because of their love for Herman, rather than for me, and we did have our difficult moments. That has all changed; I feel now as if I have a true sister here. Of course she can never be what you are to me, dear Etta, but she and I have become very close.

I have not mentioned this before as the future all seemed so uncertain, but I am expecting a third baby soon. Despite all the difficulties I have kept fairly healthy and strong, although I am finding it hard to throw off the unhappy memories of all that took place during the war and the experiences of the concentration camp. I also find it hard to come to terms with the depth of hatred, fear and cold, calculated cruelty that comes to the fore during war, evident in the suffering and destruction left in its wake; I sorely miss my dear friend Marietjie. Perhaps time, life in Woodbush, my loving family and surely my new baby, will help heal those wounds that haunt me.

My love to you, my so faraway sister and to all our dear family, whose faces have become dim in my memory – it has been so long.

Doris

*I My mind goes back to a time when I stayed at the University Residence in Johannesburg, and, through the window of my room, heard the women singing in beautiful harmony, while doing the laundry in the back courtyard.*

*2 I remember that gum tree in front of the house in Woodbush. Perhaps there was more than one.*

*3 Only now do I realize how close the Hirschmanns and Herman's sister's family, the Kallmeyers, were. Joseph and Herman were business partners all their lives. Our families remained in close contact throughout the years we lived in Pietersburg. Aunt Johanna was an old lady whom our father insisted we visit from time to time. She died when I was about nineteen.*

*4 Mckenzie is an imaginary person, but there were many farmers and foresters from England and Scotland who lived in that area. I believe that the house and shop were not destroyed by the English. According to Charlotte Wiener, it was confiscated by the British when my grandparents were arrested (see References).*

### **4.3. From Herman to Maurice in Zikhron Yaakov, Palestine**

Woodbush, August 1902

Shalom, my dear friend Maurice,

I hope you will forgive me for not writing but so much has happened – I just did not have the mind for it. Jacob wrote that he met up with you in Talsen after the death of your father. I send you my deepest sympathy. Indeed, I do remember your father as a kind and wise rabbi. I understand that you have returned to Palestine and that you and Roche'le with your three children live in a home in Zikhron Yaakov, where you grow grapes and work in the wine cellars of Baron de Rothschild. I hear that your situation is much improved and that you have been joined in Palestine by many Jews from all over Russia, including a large number from Courland. All in all, it seems that things are at last working out for you.

Jacob told me that you were deeply concerned about us during the years of the Boer War, and that all your letters had gone unanswered. I do regret this, but these letters never arrived. I believe Jacob has now brought you up to date and shown you our letters.

It was indeed a trying and difficult period. On our return we had to start almost from scratch, but we still had the house, the farm, the store (although quite empty), and a herd of cattle. Jacob will have told you about Malap. I am proud to say that together with my brother-in-law, Joseph Kallmeyer, we are “back in the saddle” as they say, and the store is now functioning, though it will take time. We are also investigating the possibility of making other investments. The farm, though struggling somewhat, is beginning to take shape again. We have rebuilt the kraal and a canal with water and disinfectant in which we dip the cattle to keep off the ticks.<sup>1</sup>

After the war, many of our black labourers came back to the farm and we assisted them in rebuilding their kraals. We gave them seeds to plant and some livestock for their plots of land. Though many of them managed to hide from the English and escape almost certain death in the concentration camps, they were quite desolate. You can tell your Roche'le that I am not such a bad person after all. To be honest, in order to have a good workforce on the farm I need to help them get back on their feet. This also pleases Doris and it is something that Malap asked of me.

My sister and her family have now permanently vacated their side of the house and moved into their home in Pietersburg. My neighbour von Riechi, who has always been of great help to me, will stay there with his family until he gets his own farm back into shape. Thereafter we shall rent it out.

Doris has managed to restore our home into ship-shape condition. She herself, who was so strong during those difficult war years, is not quite her usual self. Although everything is done as it should be, she spends much time with the children, taking them for walks and to play in the river. She also visits neighbours to help in every way she can, but she carries a sadness about her, which she finds hard to shake off. She barely plays the piano – her heart is just not in it – and saddest of all, we rarely hear her sing. We are expecting a new baby; perhaps this will do the trick.

Maurice, my friend, there is great interest here in the events taking place in Palestine, particularly since so many of our people, some of whom we know, have immigrated there. I understand that you generally get on well with your Arab neighbours, but now there seems to be a growing resentment towards the Jewish people since the Arabs are afraid of losing their land. This rings a familiar note, and I fear can lead to armed conflict and violence. I doubt if you or I can have any influence on these events in either country, but my advice to you is to keep your distance from anything like war, from killing or being killed. We have seen here, as we saw in the old country, the appalling results of armed conflict, the massive destruction, death and suffering; the huge waste of money and resources, and perhaps worst of all, the hatred and loss of human empathy for “the other.” People become more savage than beasts for the sake of flag and country, fuelled by nationalism, religion, fear and greed. This Anglo-Boer war left behind so many dead and wounded in its tracks. So much suffering, poverty and hate could surely have been avoided.

My family and I have emerged with our feet on the ground. This despite our unhappy period in a concentration camp, our close witnessing of the tragic events of this country and life, which has become so dear to us, and seeing the fall of our Woodbush enterprise, which happily we are now

rehabilitating. There are however many who will never recover and many more who will never forgive.

By the way, we actually witnessed a fierce battle between the English and the Boers on the two hills bordering our farm. The Kallmeyers were here with us and as we watched, we saw these two armies killing each other mercilessly with cannons, guns and swords. We saw in the distance the fall of many a horse and rider. We heard the noise of it, the shouting in triumph and in suffering, and the hollow sound of bugles. We saw the Boers surrendering and fleeing and we saw the bodies – many bloodied bodies covering the once green and brown earth. It was too far to actually see their faces, but we knew that some of them were of boys who grew up in this district. It was a last attempt to prevent the English from taking over the farm on the hill and burning it. There were now very few farms left for the Boers to escape to. We ourselves had helped them to hide and provided food and safety to many, but we were very scared. This is possibly one of the reasons we were sent to the concentration camp. The battle I describe took place shortly before we were arrested by the English. Jacob will have told you that our farm was left relatively untouched since it was used to house British troops. For this we are truly grateful.

Well, Maurice, it seems I have got carried away, but all that has been is still fresh in my mind and, if not with you with whom can I share these thoughts? Believe me, I will not let all this get me down and God knows, we have much to be thankful for.

Please give my love to Roche'le and your three children. Write again – we are here in Woodbush and the postal service is again in operation. I want to hear all you have to tell.

With warm regards,

Herman

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*I The cattle dip was a canal with water and disinfectant to get rid of ticks and other pests. The cattle were run through it. My dad took us children to watch this activity which was a cause for much excitement.*

#### **4.4. From Doris to Etta in Riga**

Woodbush, October 1902

My dear Etta,

Our new baby girl Bertha is now nearly four months old and what joy she has brought us! We call her Babe.<sup>1</sup> Can there be anything in the world more soul-restoring than that of the warmth of an infant held close? Since her birth, I feel myself reborn and once again can enjoy the beauty and happiness of the world around me. She is sweet, good and full of smiles and love. Herman even manages to make her laugh – he is quite besotted with her and I need to invest quite a lot of effort in making sure that Jack and Hilda get enough of our attention. Jack and Hilda, four and two years old, are growing up to be lovely, healthy children with all the advantages of living on a farm. They have many scraps but also have lots of fun together. As the weather gets warmer they spend more and more time at the kliplaat, sliding down the slippery rocks of the river. Herman takes Jack and Hilda with him to see the cattle in the morning and gives them rides on the back of a donkey. Soon Herman will start teaching Jack to ride his horse Roxy; though I think he is still a little too young. Their companions are the black piccaninis and the Afrikaans children from the neighbouring farms, and they tend to speak mainly Afrikaans. I think in a year or two we will bring out a governess from England – some of the English families in the district have done this. Herman is not very enthusiastic, but generally accepts my decisions on the children's education and we are making enquiries as to how to find a suitable person.

This year we celebrated Rosh Hashana, the first since the war, in grand style. There was much to celebrate. The Israelson family invited the entire Jewish community from all over the district and held the religious service in their home, followed by a sumptuous meal. We were all in great spirits. The following week, for Yom Kippur, many of these same people from the district got into their carts and carriages once again and came to Woodbush. We put down mattresses in both houses and in the back of the store. We prepared a light meal of chicken soup, boiled chicken and vegetables before the Kol-Nidre and evening service. A young man, with a fine voice, recently come from a Lithuanian *yeshiva*, conducted the service. There was much work to be done, but Johanna and the servants were on hand. During the day the prayers were held on the stoep. We needed to provide the children with food, as well as for a few of the adults who secretly stole away for a bite. The nannies took the little ones to play at the river. At the end of the day we broke our fast with soda water and milk, followed by coffee and a big square yeast cake with a hole in the middle, or bagel as we call it. This was also Herman's and Jack's birthday cake. Later we served a fine dinner. After we put the younger ones to bed and finished clearing up, we talked and sang and indeed rejoiced. For the first time in a long time I played the piano and we all sang again in Yiddish, Russian and German. This

time we also sang in English and Afrikaans. I even taught them a little Sotho song I learned from Martha.

It is spring here and everything is coming to life. Wild flowers are everywhere, the rich green of the mountain forests is turning ever more lush, and there are myriads of chirping birds. And, the ice around our hearts is gradually warming and melting. Having said this, I am not sure that anyone will be quite the same ever again. However, I am more or less back to my old self and I would love you and our sisters to visit us. Perhaps come with our brother Maurice. He is planning to leave Mitau to join us here in the Woodbush area.

This letter is short but I needed to tell you of our baby and how much better I am feeling. I will write more soon.

Love and good wishes, my dearest sister,

Doris

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*I My cousin Doribelle told me that her mother, my Auntie Babe (Bertha), was born on 28 June 1902 in Pietersburg. My dad told me of her sweetness as a child and of his father's love for her. I knew her as a fine and loving aunt.*

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## **Part Five: Doris, 1903-1907**

Letters between Doris in Woodbush and the Thal and Hirschmann families in Mitau, Riga and Bialystok (Poland), 1903-1907

### **5.1. From Doris to Etta in Riga**

Woodbush, March 1903

Dear Etta,

I see you have a position at the university. You mention that this is not so simple, being Jewish and a woman. I can well imagine. I understand that you do have the necessary qualifications, and that you have been able to keep this job because of your connections with your professor. I am not sure exactly what this means but at your request I will not mention it to Mama and Papa. I have written to them of the children and of the birth of our new baby girl.

We have new neighbours who have become wonderful friends. The house next door became available and we rented it to an English family, the Eastwoods. Arthur Eastwood is a forestry officer and, for a start, is required to make a survey of the indigenous forests still left in the district. They covered a far greater area before the arrival of the white man, who took or bought huge tracts of land from the black tribes and handed them out to Whites, either for farming or for the timber industry. Vast areas of these rain forests have been thinned out and felled, and only some have been replanted. There is not much that can be done about private land, but Arthur's mission is to try and preserve and redevelop the amazing rainforests that are still in existence. Many of these forests can be found beyond a hill to the south-east of our farm and up the mountains a few miles away. The Eastwoods lived in the most primitive conditions in the forest and now in the rainy season their quarters there have become almost uninhabitable. They have rented our house next door until such time as Arthur can manage to build a home fit to live in. For me this is a blessing. Although we are friendly with the people of the district and in Pietersburg, it is all quite far. Herman is kept very busy and though he does try to get home to play with the children before they go to bed at night, I do not see as much of him as I would like. Over weekends we do go picnicking, visiting and riding so I really should not complain. Nevertheless, there are times when I do long for more company. Or I did, before the Eastwoods moved in. Emma loves company and though we are from different worlds, we have much in common and have a lot of fun and laughs. We read English classics and plays together; I teach her how to make Jewish food; she helps me in the garden and has much knowledge of what and how. She has a little girl of eight, Awbry,<sup>1</sup> who likes to play with Jackie and Hilda and take them to the river to slide down the rocks.

When the weather permits, I leave the baby at home with her nanny Cynthia, while Emma and I, together with the children, take the donkey cart into the forest to visit Arthur, who camps there. We take him food, and go for wonderful walks through dense entangled indigenous forests, through underbrush rich with ferns and foliage and insects galore, plus a countless variety of butterflies and birds that fill the air with their song. Emma cuts and collects different types of ferns from the undergrowth for a study she has undertaken. She teaches me much about the plant life of which I know so little. At Herman's insistence, we are always accompanied by an armed man as there is a danger of wild animals and snakes. Sometimes we bump into monkeys or buck but we keep our distance and love to watch them. They are almost human in their family love and play, but they can be dangerous. We meet up from time to time with tribal blacks still living in these forests, and as soon as they understand that we pose no threat, are usually friendly and show us new paths and

places. Here and there we come across rivulets where we take off our boots and wade through. In some of these places, the children can bathe.

My thoughts go back to our childhood when we walked and picked mushrooms in the forests near our cities. They were magnificent in their overwhelming and so “European” beauty, but so very different from, and somehow so much more civilized than these wild African rainforests. We occasionally leave the children with Arthur and take to the road on donkeys to see again the incredible mountains and valleys of the Magoebaskloof area – breathtaking. Words cannot do credit to such beauty, and in my mind I return to that morning when Herman and I watched the mist rise up and up, exposing the forested mountain-side and the valley below; up and up till the sky cleared and turned blue – that morning when he asked me to accept his offer of marriage and held me in his arms for the first time. It seems so long ago.

On some weekends we have meals together or go on outings. Our men get on well – Herman can be a lot of fun, as indeed can Arthur. He tells us stories of his days at sea and as a soldier in the English forces during the Boer War. We tell him only a little of the “other side.” Mostly we keep it light. There is much that is better not spoken of.

On one outing together at the edge of the forest, we reached a waterfall<sup>2</sup> of indescribable loveliness. We needed to climb down a steep and rocky path. The men helped the children down. We were all quite hot and exhausted when we reached the falls. The kids jumped into the pool under the cascading water and whooped with delight. And, yes, we adults, with only a minimum of clothing, enough to be decent, joined in and then sunbathed on the rocks. The weather was warm and our clothes soon dried. A picnic lunch of *boerewors* (minced beef sausages) made over a fire, and mealiepap, in the shade of the trees, was most welcome. We drank from the cool clean water of the river. The children ran around, slid down the rocks and played while we chatted. Later we climbed back, Herman carrying Hilda on his shoulders, up to the donkey cart waiting for us at the top of the hill. Awbry and Jackie needed only a little help here and there. We slept over with the Eastwood family at their campsite and returned home the next day.

On another occasion, Arthur took us all to be presented to Modjaji, the Rain Queen.<sup>3</sup> This was an amazing experience. It was quite an adventure and a rather harrowing journey getting there by donkey cart and in some places on sledges. We were guided by tribal men. Modjaji's kingdom is situated in yet another wonderland, a little further north. Most people are not received into her presence but Arthur has a special relationship with her. She had “finger-printed” her “signature,”



agreeing to prevent the selling of trees and land to lumberjacks and white farmers. She received us standing, an indication of mutual respect and friendliness; and hosted us to a meal of cooked meat, spinach and mealie pap. Then her guards and maids and a group of small children danced and sang for us. She knows that white visitors love this. At Arthur's suggestion, we brought her gifts of silk materials, clothes and a handsomely carved walking stick.

Soon the Eastwood house in the Woodbush forest will be complete and the rainy season will pass. They will be leaving us but I hope we will still see each other often and remain good friends.

Enough for now, dear sister.

Be well and happy,

Affectionately,

Doris

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*1 In later years, after she was married to Dr. Louis Thompson, Aubry was known as 'Googoo' Thompson. Much of what I write here is based on her biography, Between Woodbush and the Wolkburg. (see references)*

*2 The waterfalls I describe are the Debengeni Falls, named by the Pedi people and meaning "place of the big pot." It can be found at the edge of the Woodbush forest reserve. It was and remains a stunning place, and stands out, even, in surroundings such as these for its beauty and abundance of bird and plant life. We spent many happy hours at this wondrous site*

*3 It is from the book on Googoo Thompson that I know of the contract signed by Modjaji, and of her friendship with Arthur Eastwood. More on Modjaji in the Appendix at the end of Part Five.*

## **5.2a. From Etta to Doris in Woodbush, sent with Maurice**

Mitau, June 1903

My dear Sister,

It is so good to know that the dreadful war is over and that you, Herman and the three children are back on your farm in Woodbush.

I have left Riga and am now staying with Mama and Papa, who have moved into a small home of their own. The professor<sup>1</sup> from Riga has left for a post in Germany. There was no future for us, as his mother was set on him marrying a Catholic woman of wealthy family. I did not fit. In any event, I had become friendly with a young Jewish student from Russia. He is excited and deeply involved in the revolutionary ideas. You know me; I have been caught up in his enthusiasm. It has been like a breath of fresh air. I brought him home to meet the family. Mama and Papa are delighted that I have found a Jewish husband, as they had begun to despair. We will be getting married soon and plan to go east to Russia, probably to Moscow, where Sasha will seek employment.

I am sending this note with Maurice,<sup>2</sup> together with a letter from our Papa. He and Mama are ageing but still keep fairly well, at least now that summer is here. Maurice, as you know, has studied accountancy and English, and he plans to leave soon and join you in Woodbush, as suggested by your kind and generous Herman. Our two sisters Lina and Johanna are grateful for your invitation and will accompany him. They plan to return here as they wish to complete their education, but they do want to see if they can adapt into that part of the world. Perhaps in the future they may also decide to immigrate to South Africa. This will depend on many factors. What Mama and Papa want is for them to find suitable husbands!

Our younger brother Shay works as a silversmith and is very involved in political activities. This is a worry! Our little brother Taube, whom you will remember as a mischievous child, continues to be bright and full of life, though our parents spoil him horribly.

Mama is sending you a few gifts. She has embroidered little dresses and pinafores for Hilda and Bertha and she has made a fine suit for Jackie. She is also sending a pair of silver *Shabbas* candlesticks.

Now I will make way for Papa and wish you, my dear sister, only love and happiness. How I miss the times we would chat, laugh and cry together. Please do keep writing – these letters keep you near me. You may send them via our home address in Mitau until I know where I will be.

With much love,

Etta

*1 After immigrating to South Africa, Doris' brother Maurice worked in the Zoutpansberg district and eventually ran the store in Woodbush. He was married for a period in the 1920s and later divorced. Maurice had two daughters, Ruth and Bella. They spent much of their childhood and youth in our home and in the home of our granny Doris.*

*2 I eventually decided on a Jewish husband for Etta, as perhaps there are family or descendants to whom this issue may be of importance. This is not impossible, as although most of the Jews who remained in Latvia perished during the Holocaust, others who moved to Russia managed to survive. So if indeed Etta (or any other family members) left for Russia, her descendants could perhaps be alive.*



**The Hirschmann store in Woodbush**

### **5.2b. From Papa, Doris' father in Mitau, to his daughter in Woodbush; sent with Maurice**

My dearest child Doris,

Thank you for your letters and pictures of your three lovely children. How sad it is that we cannot see them, know them and hug our dear grandchildren, and perhaps we never shall. We hear from many who have gone to South Africa that life is good for us Jewish people there. Now that the war is over, many more are going. We believe you and your children will have a good future. Soon we will need to part from Maurice and, please God, he too will find happiness. Etta is marrying and leaving for Russia. It seems it is the fate of our generation to be separated and to live apart from our children and grandchildren.<sup>1</sup>

Like you, my Dorschenke, I have only the warmest of memories of the times we spent together – walking through streets and forests, skating on the frozen rivers, singing and talking on every subject in the world. You always wanted to know, you always had such strong opinions. I keep those memories close to me and imagine you now as a fine, upstanding person, wife and mother. How lucky they are to have you.

I am kept busy enough. I help a little in your uncle's store; I still love to read and I do some private translating work, which I enjoy, and it does help bring in a little extra money. Your Mama suffers from arthritis but this does not stop her from caring for us all, and from being the best of cooks. You cannot beat her *gefilte fish* and stuffed chicken. She continues to take in some mending work, but is no longer able to do her dressmaking.

She sends you love and kisses. Like me, and perhaps even more so, though she is not one to talk of these things, she misses you deeply.

I hope your sisters will enjoy their trip. Your mother asks if you could perhaps introduce them to some suitable young Jewish men, though I prefer that you do not tell them we mentioned this.

Little Taube has been expelled from school. He was very unhappy. He was unable to learn or to behave appropriately and gave them no end of trouble. They sometimes hit him with a cane and he would run home. So now I am his teacher. His brothers and sisters also help from time to time. You will remember that you used to teach him songs to help him learn the letters and numbers. Lina draws the letters and pictures, which he colours, cuts out and pastes. Maurice uses coins to teach him to count and do maths. I have bought a second-hand typewriter and he is typing little stories. I believe he is making good progress. Perhaps a time will come where there will be special teachers and parent guides for such children who are different and have difficulty in regular studying. He and I spend much time together. This is a blessing for both of us, but most of all for your mother. Shay takes him to his work-place from time to time. It seems that young Taube is good with his hands and may be able to become an artisan one day.

I still sometimes feel a little guilty that we were not able to send you to a school for music, but circumstances did not allow this. I am deeply grateful that fate has brought you a good life and into a good family, though so far away. Today things are a little easier for us, thanks to the kindness of your mother's uncle who was left on his own after his wife died. His children all left for America. Since your mother has taken care of him for many years now, he has allowed us to live in this small apartment next to his home. He also helps pay for the children's education.

So much for now, my dear Dorschen.

My fondest good wishes to your kind husband and kiss the little ones for us,

Your loving Papa

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*I can only imagine how hard this complete separation of young immigrants from their parents and families must have been. More often than not, after leaving to live in other countries and continents they were never able to see each other again.*

### **5.3. From Doris to Etta in Mitau,**

Woodbush, October 1903

My dear Etta,

I must start off with a big Mazal Tov. I have read that your wedding ceremony, though small and modest, was a joyous occasion, held in Mama's uncle's home. I wish you and your Sasha much happiness and hope that you find the life that you seek in Russia.

Herman and I travelled to Pretoria by train to meet Maurice, Lina and Johanna. We spent four days there at a Jewish guest house. Herman wanted to give me a little holiday in the city with my brother and sisters after so many years of separation. We had a joyful re-union, catching up with so much that has happened over these many years since I last saw them. Maurice was quiet and eager to get started in his new life. The girls are both delightful and full of youthful chatter and laughter. I wish you, and indeed, the whole family could have been here. We roamed through the busy bustling city, with modern shops and streets lined with purple blossomed Jacaranda trees brought here from Australia. That evening we attended a show in a German theatre. All this was a great treat for me and really exciting for all of us. The girls, however, were already very aware and critical of what they saw of the condition of the Blacks in the city. I tried to explain...

Of course, we bought shoes and clothes, as well as gifts and toys for the children who remained in Pietersburg with the Kallmeyer family. The train brought us back to Pietersburg, where we picked up our little ones, and from there we travelled by coach to our home in Woodbush.

The days and weeks have gone by bringing me great joy. Together with the children, whom they simply love, we have taken Lina and Johanna, and sometimes Maurice, to see the Woodbush forests and the beautiful mountain country of Magoebaskloof; to meet with friends and families on picnics and outings; to our kliplaat and to surrounding kopjes. We have entertained ourselves playing the piano and singing together. We enjoyed family gatherings with good food that we know from home and we also introduced them to South African braaivleis, *biltong* (dry salted meat), mealie meal, *melktert*, rusks, apple jam sandwiches, and curry and rice which we have learnt from the Indians living in our district. Herman has been an excellent host. He put Maurice straight to work at the shop so that he can learn the ropes and eventually, we hope, he will start a place of his own in the district. With the girls, Herman has been charming and playful and joined in their fun. We have taken them to meet people and have introduced them to a few young Jewish bachelors. There were some who kept coming back and showed obvious interest.

Then came the explosion!<sup>1</sup> Lina and Johanna had already told me how unhappy they were with our life-style, and particularly with our master-servant relationship with the Blacks. They are young, perhaps foolish and idealistic (or could they be right?). They were just not able to come to terms with our way of life. One morning they went out and invited all the servants and farm workers to come into the dining room to eat breakfast with us. These people know the world in which they live and of course, refused. Herman was very angry and upset. I never managed to get the relationship back on track. Maurice understood this and suggested that the girls return to Mitau, at least for now. They are on their way back. I was quite heartbroken when I parted from them at the railway station in Pietersburg. I would have so loved to have them live nearby. Only now that they have become young adults have I really had a chance to get to know these dear sisters. Please God, they will find true happiness in the old country or wherever their fortunes lead them.

Our other news is that a young governess<sup>2</sup> from England will be joining us next year to help me with the education of the children. The Eastwoods have met and strongly recommend her. They put us in contact with her family. She is a widow who lost her husband in battle with the Boers. What cruel fate brings her now to this country! We hope it will work well as I am very determined that despite living so far out in the country, the children will have a good education and will master the English language. She is also able to give them music lessons. When the time comes they will go to a primary school in the district or in Pietersburg. Their Jewish education will come from home. Fortunately, Herman relies on me totally in these issues and lets me handle them without question.

There is yet another event that I will share with you – but only with you – dear Etta. Herman and I went through a difficult period – there was much tension and silence. Herman works long hours, often having to travel to far places in the district. He has expanded his business and he and Joseph are now dealing in lumber and furniture. It involves a lot of work and there is a never-ending line of wagons outside the store loading and unloading the merchandise.<sup>4</sup> Herman had been tired and distant, sometimes lacking patience with the children; often worried and tense, but he did not share his concerns with me.

I missed the Herman as I knew him. I had heard a rumour<sup>3</sup> from Emma Eastwood that greatly disturbed me. It was said that he was a hard business man; that he allowed farmers to buy on credit and that, in order to repay their debts, there were some who were obliged to sell their farms. He had, in fact, hired such a farmer who had had to sell his farm, and who became a foreman on our farm. This man lived with his family in the small flat on the side of our house. I eventually confronted Herman with this issue and he was deeply offended. For a few most bitter days, he did not speak to me at all. We would lie in bed at night as though an invisible wall ran between us. Needless to say, I did not sleep. Then I wept and he broke the silence. He clarified that in order to make a living, he, like all merchants and tradesman, need to be paid for their sales or their services. It is true that sometimes one should, and we do help people in financial distress. However, when doing business, it is on the clear understanding that debts must be paid. He explained that he and Joseph had started several new business ventures and they too owed money. “If people do not pay their debts, we will not be able to repay ours,” he said. He found these rumours hurtful and unjust and he was most disturbed that I had doubted him in the least way. This talk between us pulled down “the wall” and we hugged quietly – our relationship was too precious to be spoiled by such malicious and baseless talk.

I hope this will reach you soon in Russia wherever you are. Please write from there. What is happening in that faraway world? Has Sasha found work?

Yours affectionately, Doris

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*I My father Jack told us of Doris' two sisters' visit and that they had invited the black servants for breakfast with the family. Of course, this was not possible in the world of that time. Apparently, Herman was most relieved when they decided to return to Europe.*

*2 A governess was brought out from England to Woodbush for the children – I do not know when or for how long.*

*3 I read of this rumour regarding my grandfather's business dealings and found it unacceptable and unfair. I felt it necessary to put the record straight!*

#### **5.4. From Doris to Bryna, Meisen and Brahle in Bialystok, Poland, following the death of Isaiah in 1904**

Woodbush, September 1904

Our dear Sisters and Brother,

I write this letter to you, whom I have never met and know only from hearsay – from what I was told by Herman, Johanna and Jacob, and from your dearly beloved late Papa. However, I do hope and believe the day will come when you and your families will be here in this country with us.

I write to tell you that we have a new baby, a brother to Jackie, Hilda and Bertha, born last month. We have named him Isaiah<sup>1</sup> in memory of his grandfather, who was to me a father and a friend at a time when I found myself in a strange land, far from my own dear family. I know that Herman and Johanna have written to you and I join them in thanking you for having so devotedly taken care of Papa over these last years. I am also told, Bryna, of the loving care you and Boris have provided for Brahle and Meisen.

I know that Herman has written of how well your Papa was regarded, both in Pietersburg and here in our district; of the large number of people who came to pay respects at Johanna's home in Pietersburg during the time they sat *shiva*; and then again, here on the farm when we returned. This included people throughout the district as well as the black people of our farm who remember him kindly and came to pay their respects to Herman. Herman handles his loss with dignity – he is not a man who shows his feelings, but it will take him time to come to terms with it. The birth of our fourth child Isaiah has done much to relieve the pain and bring joy to our hearts.

It is Sunday morning<sup>2</sup> on this fine spring day in Woodbush. This morning, as on most Sunday mornings, the three children came into our bed to cuddle, talk and play. The baby lay in his cradle beside us, fast asleep. I brought in a tray with tea and rusks for all of us. (Rusks, or *boerebiskuits*, are delicious hard-baked cookies which we dip in our tea – I shall send you the recipe if you wish.)

Right now, while writing, I am feeding the baby, and next to me, Bertha or Babe, as we call her, is playing with her dolls. Herman has taken Jackie and Hindi horse-riding. She is with Herman on his horse while Jack rides his own Roxy. He is only a little fellow, but rides well and loves this horse of



his very much. Herman gave the new-born foal to Jack on the day he was born and Malap managed to save this horse, together with the cattle, during the war. Your Papa would have loved to see his grandson riding Roxy. He knew them both!! Roxy is a most faithful friend to our Yainkie. He fell off some weeks ago and injured his foot. That faithful animal<sup>3</sup> stood over him and did not move until some farm hands found him and brought him and the horse safely back home. Thank God.

We see the Kallmeyers quite often. Joseph sometimes sleeps over at our house, as he and Herman have a number of business ventures in the district. From time to time the family join us over weekends and holidays. The children all love being here.<sup>4</sup> If they don't go down to the river, they love going to the back of the shop where they climb over the big bags of mealie meal. They love the smell of tobacco and coffee there. When they have had their fill of that, they run around outside or ride on the donkeys.

We are all eagerly awaiting the arrival of Jacob back here on the farm. He has written that he has finalized all the family finances, that he is leaving the younger children in your capable hands and is at last able to join us.

I believe, Bryna, that you are soon to give birth to a new baby.<sup>5</sup> Please God all will go well and that this child will bring you all much joy.

Best wishes to Boris and kiss your little boys for us.

Affectionately,

Doris

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*1 Charlie (Isaiah) was born in 1904. This information was given me by his daughter, my cousin Penny*

*2 The "Sunday morning" in bed is in fact from our own Sunday mornings with our parents Jack and Sadie.*

*3 My dad told me this story about his horse Roxy.*

*4 Penny, my cousin, reminded me of how we as children loved to play in the back of the shop.*

*5 Bryana's third son, Kuba (Jacob) Rakusin, was born in Bialystok in December 1904.*

## 5.5. From Lina Thal in Mitau to Doris in Woodbush,

Mitau, November 1905

To our dear sister Dorschen,

I am writing to thank you and your family for the wonderful hospitality and regret that we caused you so much embarrassment. We will certainly never forget, and will always be grateful for the time we spent with you and your lovely family. Please apologize again to Herman – he received us so generously, but we felt as we did and needed to say so. Perhaps in light of the events taking place here now, it was a mistake. However, be that as it may, what was said was said.

Much has happened here since we left South Africa. You might have read in your newspapers of the uprising of the Latvian peasants<sup>1</sup> against the Russian rulers and the wealthy German landowners. Well, I am proud to say that our young Jewish people strongly support them, and many of our men and boys have joined forces with the peasants all over the country. Needless to say, our Shay was amongst the first to go. We barely saw him for months. At first, the peasants seemed to be having huge successes, taking over property and estates. Though anxious for the safety of our boys, we were secretly quite elated, but it did not last long. The Russian Police and Cossacks brutally crushed those brave revolutionaries. We hope and believe that their day will yet come!! People were arrested, many put to death; villages and towns were burnt down, including a large area in Talsen. Thank goodness Herman's family have all moved away.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Mama and Papa, like most the Jewish community, were very concerned and apprehensive about the repercussions our people might suffer. Partly for this reason, they persuaded Johanna to accept the offer to wed a Jewish doctor who is highly regarded, is needed in the hospital and has good connections. He is a widow with a little girl and very much needs a wife and mother for his child. Our Johanna as you know is pretty, smart and capable. The man is presentable, kind and generous, and his family owns a large furniture factory. He is somewhat older than Johanna but she decided to accept the offer. She loves the child and believes she will learn to love her husband. She was probably wise in her decision. He succeeded in getting Shay out of prison and helped him flee the town and reach Riga where he hopes to find passage to Palestine, or perhaps America. Our family, fortunately, was not harassed in any way, despite Shay's participation in the aborted revolution. Our young sister is happy enough

Be that as it may, it could not have happened to me. I have no wish to marry and am studying to be a nurse. As usual, I have not chosen an easy path, but it brings me great satisfaction. I live with Mama and Papa and Taube. I share my small earnings with them and this helps as they are able to do less and less. Our new brother-in-law, Dr. Max Fischer, and our Johanna also help from time to time.

So now you know, dear Doris, that we are all alive and well. Very occasionally we get a message from Etta and it seems that she has a baby boy. She and Sasha seem happy, though who can really tell? I hope all is well with you, and that you continue to enjoy your lovely farm life and family. Mazal Tov on the new baby boy. What joy, and how lovely your world is – that is, at least for some! Anyhow what really counts for me is your happiness, dear sister. After all, everything comes down to the fact that the most important thing in life is family.

I also hope that Maurice is finding his way. Give him our love and please ask him – no, tell him – to write to Mama and Papa.

Much love to you and yours,

Lina

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*1 According to the on-line references I read, the 1905 abortive uprising of the Lettish peasants was widely supported by young Jewish people. Talsen, known for its beauty as “the Switzerland of the East,” is specially mentioned in connection with the exterminations, imprisonments and burning of the cities and countryside. In later years, some of the leading members of this peasant uprising, including a substantial number of young Jewish people, were actively involved in the Russian Revolution.*

*2 As far as I can gather, all of Herman's family in Talsen moved to Bialystok in Poland. I am not sure when, but have assumed that it was before the 1905 uprising in Latvia.*

## **5.6. From Etta to Doris in Woodbush**

Mitau, November 1906

My dear sister Doris,

Yes, Dorschen, this is me, back on paper and back with Mama and Papa in Mitau. I travelled here from Moscow on the long train journey with our little boy Karl Joseph. Sasha has been sent to a

work camp in Siberia after being arrested for revolutionary activity. For a time after 1905 life was most exciting as we were very involved with youth groups - there was a feeling that there was real movement towards social change. But then everything went wrong; our comrades were being caught and sometimes executed. Someone must have disclosed our identity and the situation became very frightening. We were constantly in hiding and on the run. Sasha persuaded me to take little Karl back with me to Courland and wait for him here as he was in imminent danger of being arrested. The last I saw of him was at the station in Moscow. I have received messages from him – he is determined to survive and please God (if I may say so), he will come back to us.

Mama and Papa have not much room or money, but being the people they are, they welcomed me with love and warmth. I think when we were young we did not fully appreciate these wonderful parents. Little Karl and I share a room with Lina. Taube is upstairs in the attic. Papa sometimes sleeps with him there. They are so close. Our sister Johanna lives in a fine house with her husband the doctor and their three children, the eldest being from his first wife, who I think you know, passed away. They sometimes help the family with money and gifts but we do not see much of them and, of course, they do not have room in their house for any of us! (Mama will not hear a word against them.) I help Papa with the few documents he is still given to translate, and I also help Taube with his studies. Papa has developed quite ingenious methods of teaching him, including the use of a typewriter and he is doing well. It is quite amazing. He even writes short stories and he works as a silversmith. By the way, he loves the stories you send him.

I also help Mama with mending and have found a new talent – I design dresses, and word is spreading. Even Johanna asked me to design a dress for her! I will soon have more work than I can handle. One way or another, between Lina, who works as a qualified nurse, and I, we are able to add a fair amount to our income. By the way, strangely enough, she and I are getting on very well together. Perhaps we have simply grown up, or possibly, we have not enough time to squabble. We are both quite hot-headed people. We do not hear much from our brother Shay. Apparently, he tried to make a life in Palestine but found conditions too harsh and is now somewhere in America. We are told that he still talks of the 1905 Revolution and dreams of coming back here. After all that I have seen, I think he should stay where he is.

Karl is a bright and lovable child. He is almost two years old and brings much joy to Mama and Papa. In fact, Mama is quite besotted by him. It seems that this little child has changed her life. Her face and eyes, so often sad and weary, light up when she sees him. She fusses over him, sings to him in Russian and Yiddish, and hugs and soothes him. She laughs and delights in his baby talk and play.

We, as children, never saw such loving warmth – I think we never knew she had it in her (Now do not scold me and tell me all the good things about her – I know!).

So, dear Dorschen, we live in such different worlds. I read your letters– indeed, again and again; I hear from Lina and Johanna glowing descriptions of the wild and most magnificent African world you live in; how you handle your home, your family and your life with love and efficiency; how much pleasure you bring with your song and piano playing; how much you are involved with all those who are in need around you; how you easily blend in with the ways, the language and the people among whom you live. They tell me of Herman and his family and how much they accept, love and respect you. Their reports on relations between the races, between master and servant and the conditions of the Blacks are far less glowing. I wonder if I could have adapted to such an environment, but I suppose that in your situation I would not have done otherwise.

We have not heard from Maurice for some time and hope all is well with him. Please send him our love. My love to you and yours. I miss you, dear sister, and eagerly look forward to your letters.

Your sister Etta (still your favourite, I hope!)

### **5.7. From Doris to her family in Mitau**

Woodbush, January 1907

My dearest Mama, Papa, Etta, Lina and Taube,

Though I am sorry to hear about Sasha and of course hope there will be good news from him, I was so relieved that you, Etta, with your little Karl, are back with the family. It seems that you are being of great help at home. Although I would not change what I have, I do wish I could be there with you, if just for a little while. I read your letters and in my mind picture every detail. It is all so distant from my life here that I sometimes imagine that I am reading a novel written about my own family.

Our home is one of children – I think I have written that we have a new baby, Maurice, or Mo, now eight months old; loved and spoiled by all. The house is filled with their laughter, tears, squabbles, joys, lively chatter and frustrations – the problems that every child, each so different from the other, must face. Filled also with activity - eating, dressing, playing, learning. They are farm children, outdoor children and their life experiences are enriched and enhanced by the joys and challenges of country life. We live their every moment, every venture, every achievement, every sorrow and every hurdle.



**Hilda, Babe and Jack**

And there are many other children continually running in and out of our home – children of family, friends and customers from the district; piccaninis of all ages and sizes. A menagerie of young people. Martha's little ones, Daniel and Minna, often play with our children, but alas, I know that as they grow older, such a friendship in our society cannot continue. I see this amongst all the children on the farms. It is sad but something beyond our power to change.

Jackie and Hilda attend a junior school, across the hill, for both Afrikaans and English children.<sup>1</sup> I believe I have written that in order to complement their education we have brought out an English governess.

However, our English governess recently married an Italian woodcutter and she now comes only twice a week to give the children extra lessons. The Italian is a real charmer and would serenade our Mary Louise with delightful Italian songs. Herman thought he was something of a rogue but he captured her heart. I myself actually thought him quite good fun and thoroughly enjoyed his singing. As it turned out, we found a Catholic priest from Pietersburg, and held the wedding ceremony one morning here on our stoep. It was a jolly occasion. The guests were a strange mixture of woodcutters – some of them rough and tough Afrikaners who had deserted the army during the war – together with Government forest protectors who are always at loggerheads with these wood-hungry people. Friends and neighbours from the district also joined the party, including our friends from the Lutheran mission station. There was good food in plenty and wine and brandy flowed; there was singing and dancing with me at the piano and Enrico singing. Many of the children joined in the fun and the black people stood on the side, clapping and dancing. For a short while, all the enmity between the Afrikaners and the English, between the foresters and the woodcutters, between the Catholics, Protestants and Jews, and between the Blacks and the Whites, was put aside and it was a happy event, indeed.

In any event the time is approaching when we will need to make decisions regarding the children's schooling. I think that when they reach high school, I will send the boys to a good boarding school in Johannesburg. Regarding the girls, we do not really like the idea of their living away from home, so we might at some stage need to move into Pietersburg where they will attend a high school for girls.

Running a home for a man who enjoys hosting his family and business acquaintances, and caring for a family with five children, while attending to all their individual and collective needs, is a full-time job. Farmers and others living in the district come to do shopping at the store and often bring their



wives and families. We are always ready with coffee and rusks or cookies. I do not have too much time on my hands.

And with all this, I cannot ignore those many around me who are in need of help. I regularly ride out to the mission station. I have much in common with the German couple who run it and feel very close to them. While there, I help teach the children and read to them in English. From time to time Martha and I take a donkey cart and visit the kraals of the farm workers and servants living on our land; to learn of their needs and problems and in what way we can be of help.

Lina and Johanna, you will surely remember our maid Martha. Apart from her ever-ready helping hand, we still have much to talk, laugh and sometimes cry about.

Recently she and her husband William<sup>3</sup> suffered an overwhelming tragedy – the kind that sadly is so much part of the Africa we live in. He works as a domestic servant in Pietersburg. In a different world he would surely have become a person of standing. William had a son from a previous marriage. This boy left school at the age of sixteen and, against his father's wishes went to work in the mines in Johannesburg. A few months later he was murdered there by thugs. They were never found. Herman helped William get the body brought here and he was buried in the cemetery near the mission station. Martha and William needed much support over that period, as the boy was like a son to her. I believe we proved true friendship.

Our brother Maurice plans to return to Woodbush and help run the store. Herman can do with extra help. Here in Woodbush, our brother, who is lonely on his own, will have family, company and home-cooked meals. Hopefully it will not take long before he finds a wife. Jacob, Herman's brother also lives on the farm with us and is of invaluable assistance to him in all his dealings. In addition, he is a wonderful friend and companion to both of us and our children.

Herman works long hours and his only real family time is over weekends and in the evenings. These are precious hours. After supper, when the children are in bed, he and I sit over a hot drink in the kitchen, still warm from the log stove, and talk for a while in the light of a paraffin lamp. We speak of our children, of my activities and plans, of the farm and business. We talk of the people amongst whom we live, of our people, our families, here and over there in Europe and Palestine. We even "solve" the problems of the world, (or should I say I do – Herman has given up on that!) It is the end of a long day and we are tired, but it is a comforting and binding moment in time.



So much for now, my dear ones. Keep me up to date. I want to read every detail about every one of you. These letters are all we have. Sometimes when I read about your children and grandchildren and when I write of mine, I dream that a day might come when they will be able to play together and get to know each other. You may remember, Mama, you would often say to us as children, “There is no harm in wanting; no harm in dreaming.”<sup>5</sup>”

Affectionately,

Doris

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*1 This school is referred to in the book about Googoo Thompson.*

*2 Mary Louise’s wedding is pure fiction, but there was an English governess.*

*Googoo Thompson speaks of woodcutters and foresters in the surrounding forests. I have also read that Italian immigrants came to work as woodcutters in the forests of South Africa. So why not have a wedding?*

*3 At our home in Pietersburg we employed a man servant, Daniel, who worked with us from the 1940s, from the age of about fifteen. He remained until my mother left the town in 1978. He was a fine person with three sons, one of whom was murdered in the mines in Johannesburg. On our recent visit to Polokwane (Pietersburg) we had coffee with him and some of his family. He is now over ninety and as fine a man as ever he was.*

*In real life, Minna was a maid in our own home; Martha was my nanny; another Martha was Daniel’s wife and William is Daniel’s grandson. Herbert worked in my father’s chemist. I have used their names in my story.*

*4 On winter nights in Pietersburg, after our bedtime, my own parents, Sadie and Jack, would often sit and talk in the kitchen, warmed by the dying embers of a coal stove.*

*5 This is an expression used by our own mother, Sadie.*

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## **Appendix to Part Five: From Doris to her Papa and brother Taube in Mitau**

Woodbush, 1907

My dear Papa and Taube,

I read with pride of how the two of you have proved wrong those who thought you, Taube, would never read. Not only do you read, my dear bright brother, but you also write charming letters and stories. I, too, have a story to send – a story from Africa, which I believe you will love.

Before I do that, however, I will tell you briefly what it is about: To the north-east of our farm is an area of great beauty, with spectacular mountains and valleys and a green belt of forests and rivers. There are indigenous cycad groves from hundreds; some say millions, of years back; and flowers, birds and magnificent wild animals such as elephants, zebras and giraffes. There are also huge, weird, ancient baobab trees, with trunks that that can be encircled by ten or more people. This is the land of Modjaji, the Rain Queen of the Lobedu tribe. It is called Modjaji'sKloof, or Duiwelskloof, by the Whites

Modjaji is said to be descended from a king who ruled over the Karunga people in the sixteenth century. His was the kingdom of Monomapatu, north of the Great Limpopo River, part of a country now known as Southern Rhodesia.<sup>1</sup>

Modjaji is believed to have special powers, including control over rainfall, for which she is honoured by tribes all around. These include the Zulus, one of the largest and most powerful of the black tribes of South Africa. Even the Whites respect her land and status.

Martha, our maid, sometimes tells our children stories and legends of her peoples, which she permits herself to alter, enhance or simplify to make them more palatable for the ears of small children. One fine afternoon when the younger children were asleep, Yankie, Hindi and Awbry, our friend's child, sat eating mealie pap dipped in gravy, together with the black servants outside, all sitting around a big black pot on a fire. With them also were Martha's children Daniel and Minna. It was then I overheard Martha tell them this story of Modjaji. I have written it down as best as I can remember.

### **Modjaje, the Rain Queen<sup>2</sup>**

A great river called the Limpopo forms half a circle around our land. To the north of the river lies another land. [Martha pointed in the direction of the river.] There, far back in time, lived a powerful and peaceful African king who owned much wealth and mines of gold and copper and other valuable metals. He had built cities of great splendour. Black people and brown and fair-skinned people from north, south, east and west, from beyond the river, and from across the great ocean, came to this kingdom to

trade and to work in the mines. These people brought with them silks and spices and fine works of art in exchange for gold. They taught and learnt new techniques in art, metal and woodwork, mining, farming and hunting. There were also small brown people, the "wandering people"<sup>3</sup> who had lived in the bush and in caves with the animals, long before any other man had set foot on these lands. They knew how to survive in the forests and dry desert. They knew what was safe to eat and what was forbidden. They were fine hunters, but would kill only what they needed to eat and would ask forgiveness from the animals they killed.

From all these different people, this nation, the Karunga people, also taught and learnt song and dance, and how to make and play musical instruments. They learnt to respect the magic, the gods and the ancestors of other peoples. For many years there was peace and prosperity and the rains fell in season.

The King had many sons and daughters. One daughter he loved more than any other. She had a baby girl named Dzugundini, though it was not known who the father was. Our King greatly favoured this child above all the others and dressed her in brightly coloured beads and clothes. The child grew up with a strange knowledge of the forests and when the drums beat at ceremonies, she would begin a wild dance which aroused all those who watched to join her in her dance. It was said that she had learnt this from a woman of the wandering people, who had nursed her as an infant and taught her many secrets of the wilds. The princes of the family were wild with jealousy. The King feared for the peace that reigned amongst his people, as well as for the safety of his beloved Dzugundini. So he sent her away. But before she left, he gave her a magic horn that would protect her from her enemies and which could also bring rain. He sent men and women from his court who could be trusted to remain loyal, to accompany his granddaughter on her journey.

They fled to the south until they reached the great river. They could hear the drums in the distance of those who sought to do them harm and take back the horn. The river at this point was shallow and sluggish and in parts completely dry and sandy.<sup>4</sup> There had been no rain here for many a month. No animals drank at its banks and even the crocodiles had distanced themselves. Dzugundini and her people were able to cross to the opposite bank. Then they heard the sound of their enemies coming ever closer. The young princess took out the horn, put it to her ear and called out the sounds she heard. She began to dance and all around joined in. The clouds gathered, thunder and lightning clapped hands, and rain came pouring down for days and days. The river swelled and flowed. When the tribesman, soldiers of her jealous brothers, neared the river, they could not cross. Those who dared were swept away and drowned.

From the river, Dzugundini and her people travelled further to the south until they reached a land of great beauty, of mountains and valleys and all the good things that the earth with rich soil and good rains can bring. A land as fair as the Garden of Eden. Here, in the valley of Molototsi they established their kingdom, the Kingdom of the Balobeda tribe. A son was born to our princess Dzugundini. He and his male descendants ruled for the next two hundred years, during which they developed the land, built farms and villages and generally lived in peace with the neighbouring tribes, most of whom were larger and more powerful than the Balobeda.

Then came dark times. There was drought, more severe than any they had known in the past. The land around became dry and the grass brittle; the cattle grew thin and there was discontent and hunger in the land. The people of neighbouring tribes became restless and troublesome. The reigning king told his people that the horn gave him no sounds to bring rain. However, the ancestors had brought him messages from the gods telling him that the tribe must be ruled by a princess, his eldest daughter, descended from Dzugundini. Though it was not customary for a woman to reign over black tribes, he handed over the crown to her and she became the first Rain Queen Modjaji, which

means "the Ruler of the Day." She heard the voices of the horn and knew the ancient dances and she brought rain to the entire countryside, even to those drier pastures beyond the mountain, here to our Woodbush. There was great rejoicing, and prosperity was restored.

Today, her daughter Modjaji the Third is the Rain Queen. All the tribes of Southern Africa, including those of distant lands, and even the white man, recognize her magic powers and her ability to bring rain. The chiefs send messengers with gifts of good will. Her people speak our North Sotho language, but when they speak you will hear the special sounds of the language spoken by the Karunga people.

And so, "Bana,"<sup>5</sup> my young friends, you see we have a true queen living in the mountains nearby,<sup>6</sup> a queen with the royal blood of great kings who lived north of the Limpopo River. From them she received the magic secrets and the power to control rain - without which there can be no life.

\* \* \*

I will add here, my dear Papa and Taube, that the children listened, completely captivated, as Martha interspersed the tale with little songs here and there. They were joined by others, sometimes contradicting or adding their own version in their Sotho language. Later, our Jackie went to his father - there were things he could not understand: How could a princess not know who her father was? How could a horn know how to bring rain? Who were the ancestors? Herman did not have the answers but explained that other people from different worlds have legends and stories and traditions which are different from ours. They believe in them and accept them, just as we do our own. We must respect their beliefs and ways as we would like them to respect ours.

I hope you enjoy this little story from our faraway land, my dear ones, and I look forward to reading more of your writing, my dear young brother, or *boetie*, as we say in Afrikaans.

With love and hugs,

Doris

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1 *The country to the north of the Limpopo River, once called Southern Rhodesia, is today known as Zimbabwe.*

2 *Martha's story of Modjaji is borrowed from, but not identical to, legends I have read. The story is inspired by those legends, and also by the novel *The Sculptures of Mapungubwe*, by Zakes Mda, and by biblical stories that Martha had been taught at the mission school.*

3 *According to on-line sources, the “wandering people” referred to were probably part of the Zhun/twasis of the San people.*

4 *Tamar, my daughter-in-law, and her family often spent their summer holidays on a family farm near the Limpopo River. From her I heard how some parts of the river would almost dry up in dry seasons; of how the almost dried-out river bed, where the children played in the sand and mud, would be flooded by a huge wall of water, rolling in during heavy floods. They would race out of its way onto the safety of the banks.*

5 *Bana is a Northern Sotho word meaning “children.”*

6 *Modjaji's Kloof, or what was once known as Duiwelskloof, is north of Tzaneen in the Limpopo Province, and is on a magnificent mountain with an indigenous Cycad reserve. It is a popular tourist attraction. The third Modjaji died in 1959; she had lived for a hundred years. The fifth Modjaji died in 2005, and her daughter, born to a commoner, has still not been given the crown and apparently does not particularly covet the tribal throne. The acting ruler is her elder brother. It is not yet known who will be the next Modjaji. (Some wonder why there have been such terrible droughts in the Limpopo area in recent years.)*

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## **Part Six: Herman 1908**

### **6.1. From Herman in Woodbush to Maurice and Roche'le in Palestine**

Woodbush, 21 October 1908<sup>1</sup>

Shalom my good friends Roche'le and Maurice,

I have not written for years now – I think since the year after the war. Your long and detailed letter brought me back to you and to all the years we spent together. Although Doris usually handles our correspondence, she insisted that this letter must come from me.

I will start off by updating you on our Talsen family. After all, Maurice, we practically lived in each other's homes. Johanna and Joseph now have five children; they have purchased a large general store

and a home in Pietersburg. Jacob joined us here in Woodbush after our Papa passed away in 1904. The Rakusin family, my sister Meisen and my brother Brahle, all live in Bialystok. Perhaps they, too, will find their way to our Northern Province in South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Thank God, they all left Talsen well before the Lettish peasant uprising in 1905, which was so brutally crushed by the Russians. They were spared having to witness this, our childhood home, the fairest of cities in all of Courland, bombarded and almost totally destroyed by fire. They were also spared the trials and suffering of those who fell under the heavy boot of the Russian oppressor, including many of our Jewish comrades, several of whom we knew well, who had supported and fought alongside the peasants.

On a completely different note, my dear old “comrades,” can you imagine your young friend from school and youth movement days, as an owner of property— a farmer, a manager of a general store, and a trader in timber and furniture? All this in a farming district in faraway Africa. Moreover, can you picture me as a married man with five children?

Now, just as you did, I shall update you on my own family.<sup>2</sup> How I wish you could know them. Our eldest son is Jack (Yainkie, Yankel, Jackie, depending on the company) is already ten years old. He is a serious and sensitive child, but not without a good sense of fun. He loves to go out on the farm with me, enjoys horseback riding into the bush and forests, and wants to understand everything he sees and hears. I do not always have the answers. He does sometimes overhear things that are not suitable for young ears and more than once appeared unexpectedly in the shop when I and a group of all-men customers were heartily enjoying jokes and stories that I would have preferred him not to hear. At least he knows what not to repeat to his Mama, whom he adores. Hilda, or Hindi, eight years old now, is a redheaded firebrand and Jackie's best friend. Berthe, or Babe, as we call her, is six years old, a sweet and lovable child who knows how to twist me around her little finger as no one else dares. Isaiah, named after my Papa, is a cheeky little four-year-old, full of pranks and fun. We call him Charlie. His two-year-old brother Maurice, or Mo, is our sweet and gentle baby.

You ask of Doris. I wish you could know her. She is widely liked and respected; is forever busy taking care of our home and five children; provides us all with excellent meals and does me proud when we entertain from time to time. As you know, my wife also sings and plays the piano, is a

charming hostess and can be full of fun and laughter. Moreover, it is she who reads the weekly newspapers and keeps us all up-to-date with local and world news, and, of course, news of Palestine.

At heart Doris is a “city girl,” loves company and frequently rides out to visit friends in the neighbouring farms and villages. City girl or not, at critical times, when extra hands are needed on the farm, when harvesting must be completed or when we need to pick fruit and get the products to the markets, she is more than capable of going out into the fields. Along with me, the two older children and all available farm hands, she does her share of picking and gathering of the crops.

What more can I say of my wife who came to this primitive African farm and these harsh conditions? She left her family to marry a complete stranger. We both wanted it to work and we made it work. I have been blessed with a most loving and devoted wife and soulmate, a splendid mother to my children, a woman who came with no money, but is rich in goodness, wisdom and charm. She is a lady to the core, educated, knowledgeable and with a high sense of moral values, and is ever at hand to lend a hand wherever required – be it for friends and neighbours, for the farmhands, the children at the mission school or any passing stranger.

And with all this, she is strong-willed and courageous in times more difficult than I wish to recall. My Papa loved her. How I wish that my Mama could have known her.

You ask how we manage to maintain our Jewish identity, living as we do so far from any sizeable town or city. Neither Doris nor I are particularly religious, but our Jewish identity is of great importance to both of us. Though the children play with the black piccaninis and the neighbouring farm children and go to school with English and Afrikaans-speaking children, they do know who they are and where they come from. We are not really able to keep a kosher home but we do not eat pork, do not mix meat with milk and eat no bread or non-kosher food over Pesach. On Friday evenings we light candles, say kiddish and enjoy a special dinner. We celebrate the Jewish holidays with the family and the Jewish community. Our children are very aware of the importance of maintaining their identity. Perhaps, even more importantly, we try to teach them the values that we believe are Jewish values, human values. Doris is stronger on this than I am, but I accept her wisdom and am a better man for it.



Since the end of the Anglo-Boer War there has been huge development in our country, encompassing railroads and transport, industry and electricity. Much of this has not yet reached our far northern areas.<sup>3</sup>

The driving force behind this rapid progress has been the extraordinary discovery of gold in and around Johannesburg. Since the end of the war, thousands upon thousands of people – including large numbers of our own people, mostly Litvaks<sup>4</sup> – in search of gold and what it brings with it, have made Johannesburg the fastest growing city in the world.

Doris reminds me that, although for some, this progress has brought huge prosperity, for masses of others it has brought more suffering and poverty, both amongst the Whites and the Blacks, but especially the Blacks! Massive slum townships are burgeoning around Johannesburg and the neighbouring mining towns. Black men have flocked to the city in search of work in the mines, while the women remain behind to take care of the families and till the fields. Doris tells me that the men may or may not send money back to their homes; they may or may not return home at all; and there are those who bring back infectious diseases they sometimes pick up in the city slums. These problems are only beginning to be observed, but I fear they will only grow. Doris is very aware of all these issues.

In search of a better life, our people are ever on the move, travelling to the far corners of the earth. You have realized your dream and are living in the place of your choice. I, like you, have realized my dream here and achieved happiness, well-being and prosperity in a nation where we are generally accepted and respected as people and as Jews. I have a loving wife and family and we live in a country, beautiful beyond description, one that I have learnt to love.

Here, too, there have been hard times – that war between Boer and English was a bitter lesson. It seems there is no escaping the ugly side of human nature. We are thankful that that period has passed, yet there is still no love lost between these two European races. The black people have lost the little they had and are all but slaves.<sup>7</sup> It is true that we, like other white people, benefit from this unjust condition. However, though it may take many a decade, their day of freedom will come - or so Doris believes.

In your letter you bring up the issue of anti-Semitism and racialism. Of course from time to time, we do have to contend with anti-Semitism, but on the whole it is not a significant issue in our lives. We have the good fortune to be regarded as “white.” The major issue in this country is colour prejudice. For example, there are Indian communities in most towns. They are usually business people, and indeed, I have a wide range of dealings with them. These people simply cannot, by any standards, be classified as “savages.” In many cases they are more educated than some of the Whites. Furthermore, it cannot be said that there are any issues of land disputes or historical tales of bloody battles, as is the case between the Whites and the Blacks. In many ways they are rather like us. Nevertheless, because they are darker skinned, they are classified as non-Whites, and bound by discriminatory laws and regulations. Not as bad as for the Blacks, but bad enough.

Although I, for one, admire and feel very much at home with the Afrikaans people, there is this profound colour prejudice which I fear seeps into us all. Some day in the distant future it may hound our children and grandchildren and perhaps drive them away from this sunny land. Be that as it may, I learn and hear stories of discrimination and racial intolerance in most other countries, including the United States of America. I see there are no utopias and we must make our lives as best we can wherever we are. Even in Palestine, we hear with pride, on the one hand, of the wave of Jewish immigrants from Russia, filled with ideals and dreams of developing the country. Yet on the other hand, we hear that the Arab people feel threatened by this large influx of Jewish settlers. I fear that in the future this may have serious implications. Unlike you, Roche'le, I am not optimistic about changing the world – but who knows?

And now, my dear friends, I have exhausted my writing capacity. We were so close, and yet our paths have taken us far apart. Our children do not know each other and may never meet. We spoke one language, which our children do not know. Now you speak Hebrew and we speak English and Afrikaans. At least we can still correspond in German. Perhaps we still dream in German. We of the old country do often reminisce, discuss and sometimes yearn for those childhood years in the beautiful cities, countryside and seaside of Courland. We talk of our families and others near and dear whom we may never see again. We can never erase these memories from mind or heart; it will always be a part of us. We may have adopted new homelands, languages and lifestyles but, though warmly accepted, can never really belong; we will always be a little on the outside. We remain immigrants, foreigners. Perhaps our children will be more fully able to integrate into the society into which they were born and in which they live.

Write to me again, Maurice and Roche'le. Your letter has brought me much joy and for once compelled me to put pen to paper and write and tell you of my world and some of my passing thoughts. There are not many with whom I can share.

Doris, who has heard much about you, sends her very warmest greetings. She reads this letter, here and there raising her eyebrows, almost in disbelief. Both she and I have almost forgotten how much I can write when my heart is really in it.

With affection and good wishes,

Herman

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*1 I chose to date this letter the 21 October 1908. On that day in Johannesburg, a baby girl, Sadie, was born to Yehezkiel and Annie Kark (Kramer) who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, emigrated with their families from Lithuania. Twenty-nine years later, Sadie married Jack Hirschmann of Pietersburg. That was the beginning of my own story.*

*2 In Herman's letter I describe his children as I assume they may well have been, based on my memories of them as adults.*

*3 Electricity and running tap water never did reach the Woodbush we knew. This was part of the novelty and fun of being there.*

*4 Litvaks was a term used for Jews from Lithuania.*

*5 Regarding Herman's attitude to the condition of the Blacks, I have no doubt that he very much identified with the Afrikaner farmers and was proud to be a typical Boerejood. Certainly, he enjoyed the privileges of the Whites of South Africa. But I think – perhaps, I would like to believe – that Doris would have had a considerable influence over him. I do know that she came from a family inspired by the Socialist, Communist and revolutionary climate of Latvia at that time. I also understand that the Lutheran missionaries, close friends of both Doris and Herman, were extremely liberal in a world where racial discrimination and exploitation were an accepted part of the lives of all. Nearly ninety years of cruel oppression and bitter struggle would pass before the Blacks of South Africa would gain their freedom and rule in their own country.*

## 6.2: From Herman to Jacob in Riga, Russia

Woodbush November 1912

My dear brother Jacob,

Doris and I were delighted to hear that you have at last met the girl of your dreams, Erna Ethel Raick.<sup>1</sup> Doris remembers the family from Riga as fine and good people. We wish you, our dear brother, only happiness and eagerly await your return with your new bride.

We read of your visit to Bialystok with great interest. You write with warmth and affection of our sister Bryna, who you say has a lovely family and that she and Boris are doing well. You write of Brahle and Meisen as being bright and intelligent young people. You mention that there is much talk of the family coming out here to join us. Assure them that I will do everything possible to assist them.

By the time you arrive, you will find some significant changes in our lives. We have bought a house in Pietersburg and will be moving there next month – before the new school year. The girls will soon be ready for high school and will attend the convent in Pietersburg where Doris believes they will receive a good education. Jack as you know is at boarding school in Johannesburg. Charlie and Mo will go to the Afrikaans primary school in Pietersburg and when the time comes, will also attend high school in Johannesburg. Doris has gone into all this very thoroughly and believes this is best for our children.

In fact, though I trust her judgement and am resigned to all this, I, personally, would rather have remained on the farm. The children too are very reluctant to make this move. Doris herself has mixed feelings and is rather sad. We will however, still run the store and the farm and keep up the home, where we plan to spend the weekends and school holidays. Morris Thal will manage the store and I will continue to oversee the farm and carry on my various business ventures in the district.<sup>3</sup>

Since Joseph and I have purchased a motor car, travelling to and from Pietersburg has become so much simpler. Joseph and I are amongst the first to own a car in this district. I must tell you that wherever we go, children run after us with great glee, and of course, everyone wants a ride. In fact,

the country roads are in no condition to accommodate these machines and on numerous occasions after breakdowns, donkeys or cattle have had to haul us out and tow us to the nearest farm. However, when all goes smoothly, instead of being on the road for hours or even days the car brings us to Pietersburg within an hour or two. By the way, the first time Jackie saw a car driving into the farm, he waited for it to stop, then lifted the bonnet to try and find the horses!<sup>2</sup> It is amazing, is it not?

Again I send warmest good wishes to you and your bride.

With love, Herman

Before sealing this mail Doris wishes to add a few words.

To Jacob and Erna Ethel,

Mazal Tov to you both. How thrilled we were to read of your marriage. Jacob, as I know you, you will be a splendid husband, and Erna Ethel, if Jacob loves you as he describes you, you must be a fine person. We are eagerly awaiting your arrival and I will do everything in my power to make your stay in our world a joyous one. We shall surely love you as we do him.

We are starting a new chapter in our lives – we are moving to Pietersburg. However, for us, Herman, our five children and myself, Woodbush will always remain our true "home"<sup>3</sup> in the deepest sense of the word.

With all my love and good wishes,

Doris

*I Jacob visited Woodbush twice before the turn of the century and returned to settle after the Boer War. He married Erna Ethyl Raick of Riga in 1912, apparently on a visit to Europe. She passed away in 1918 in Pietersburg, leaving two little boys, Chummie and Eddie. Jacob died in 1935 at the age of fifty four. The youngest of Herman's brothers, Brahle, came to Pietersburg with his wife Rahel from Bialystok. They themselves had no children but helped bring up Jacob's boys whom they regarded as their own.*

*Herman's sisters did not reach South Africa. Bryna and Boris Rakusin, and their son Shaia and his family perished in the Holocaust. Their two younger sons Samuel and Kuba immigrated to the Zoutpansberg district in about 1924 and established themselves and their families first in Tzaneen and later in Pietersburg.*

*Of Meisen Levi I have no information other than that her two children Seri and Solly also settled in the Pietersburg district.*

*2 This story of Jack opening the bonnet of the car is one told us by our father.*

*3 Herman maintained the farm and store in Woodbush and, in fact, it belonged to the family until the mid-1950s.*

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## **Epilogue**

Herman died suddenly from a heart attack in 1922 at the age of 56, leaving a relatively young widow and five children.

There are several records of when the Hirschmann family moved to Pietersburg. The year 1912 seems the most likely as the girls were approaching an age when they would need to attend high school. Moreover, motor vehicles had by then reached that area and enabled getting to and from the district to the town much easier and less time consuming. It is also possible that at this stage Doris would have preferred the advantages of living in a town.

Doris died in 1942 at the age of 65. I include a newspaper cutting relating just a little about this noble person during the period she lived in Pietersburg (see Appendix).

Doris realised her dreams and aspirations. Jack, Charlie and Maurice completed their schooling at Jeppe High School in Johannesburg. Thereafter Jack qualified in pharmacy and optometry, Charlie studied law and Mo, pharmacy. The girls finished their schooling in Pietersburg: Hilda, a gifted pianist, studied music and taught the piano; Babe worked in what was to become the family pharmacy and was also a talented ballroom dancer. They all later married and, (with the exception of Hilda who was divorced and never remarried), had children who today have made their homes in

America, South Africa, England and Israel. Their cousins, descendants of the Isaiah Hirschmann family, are scattered throughout many countries of the world.

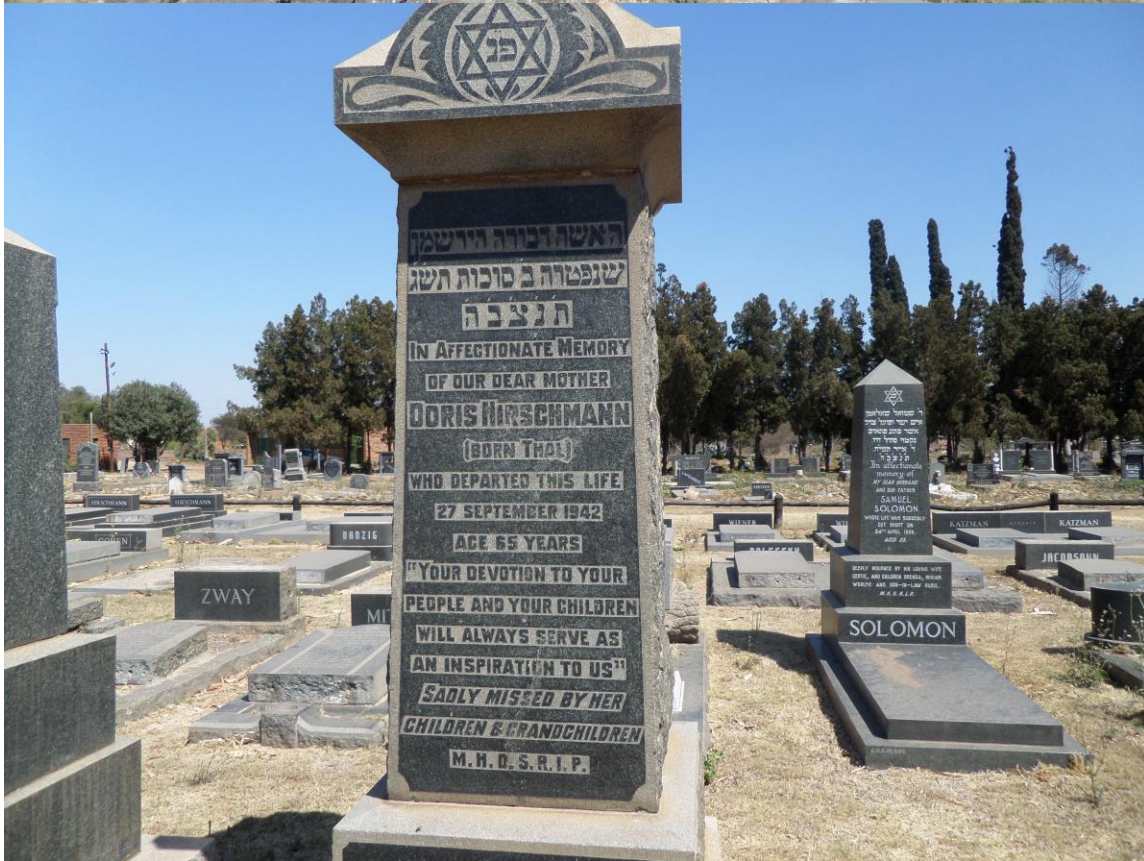
After my father Jack matriculated in 1916 he hoped to join the forces fighting in World War One. My grandfather, of course, would not hear of it, claiming that he needed help on the farm and in his business dealings. My father related many a tale of these ventures.

In 1918, when peace was declared, Herman told Jack that he was no longer needed and was free to go his own way. My dad hoped to become a farmer. This time it was his mother who put her foot down and insisted that he choose a professional career. He sailed to England to study at a pharmaceutical college. In 1919 Herman purchased a property on which he built a pharmacy for a Mr. Last. After qualifying, my father Jack worked there and eventually took over Last's Chemist on the corner of Voster and Mare Street – now the corner of Thabo Mbeki and Mare streets.

Jack was in the midst of his studies in England when he was informed of his father's death. He returned to find himself head of the family, with business complications, serious debts and not a clue of how he was going to pay. Apparently, during this period, my grandfather had been involved in the buying and selling of properties and of mining rights with a variety of partners. With the guidance and help of friends and family, and the Barclays bank manager, Jack settled all the family business obligations, before returning to London to complete his studies.

Almost all of the Jewish people in the district around Pietersburg eventually moved into the town. The community consisted of several large families: the Hirschmann/Kallmeyer families and the Israelson/Eicholts families, being the dominant ones. In the 1960s when I emigrated from South Africa, there were approximately ninety Jewish families in Pietersburg. Today there are hardly any – almost all having left for the big cities of South Africa or for other countries.













## Author's Notes and Acknowledgements

In writing this story I set off on an incredible writing journey— an adventure of fiction married with fact. I re-lived almost every detail in my thoughts, only some of which have gone down on paper. I found myself in another world and another time. As I wrote I saw my work taking on a life of its own. I was led from year to year and from place to place. I discovered in my wanderings and searching through history and geography ever new vistas of lives and a way of life, long gone. I learnt of East European Jewry, of Courland; of immigrants who came to a primitive, undeveloped African world to build new lives; people who parted from their parents and family – often never to see them again. I learnt about the South Africa where I grew up; about the Second Anglo-Boer War, with all its horrors and into which my grandparents were trapped; how they coped and created a home for us, their children and grandchildren. I felt as if I was bringing these people, some of whom I never knew, back to life.

There are many to whom I am indebted for being with me and for me in this writing experience:

Firstly, to my children Ioel, Ayelet, Tami and Ami, and most especially to my husband Sabih, for his help, encouragement and boundless patience in this hugely time-consuming project.

To my brothers: Herman, for listening with appreciation to letter after letter, read aloud, again and again; and David, for advice and patience and for sharing so many stories and memories he had heard from our dad Jack.

To many cousins and childhood friends, who contributed from their memories. A special word of thanks to Jacob Hirschmann, Jacob's grandson, for the invaluable information he sent me in "Eddie's notes"; and "Memoirs" written by Lionel Stein, Johanna Kallmeyer's great-grandson which added so much spice to my tale.

To Lena Woolf for encouragement, an ever-listening ear and for information on Bryna and the Rakusin family.

Also to my school friend, Marion Miller, who married an Israelson grandson and told me something about them and the von Reichi family of Woodbush. Marion also introduced me to the ninety-year-old daughter of Googoo Thompson, on her farm near Haenertsburg. She told me much, and wanted to know all about "Jackie's children."

A warm thank-you to Dawn Promislow, a well-known short story writer, a true friend and a distant cousin, who has given me the support and courage required to write at all, and especially for an undertaking such as this. I think that without her I would not have got here.

Thank you, my dear cousin Janet Levy. Though not of the Hirschmann family, Janet knew us, our parents and the area in which we lived. She has gone through every letter, at least once, checking the spelling and grammar. But most important are the comments on the content and the people. This has been amazing for me and often got me re-thinking and sometimes backtracking and making changes in form or content. It has been a partnership of love.

I am both honoured and indebted to Professor Louis Changuion of Haenertsburg, an expert on the history of the Limpopo Province and the Boer War, who kindly agreed to read through my manuscript and to offer his advice and opinions on the historical background. It was my pleasure to have met him over a cup of tea in his bookshop in Haenertsburg, where he gave me some fascinating information about that part of the world. He guided us around a small museum which he has

established, where we saw farm equipment and household appliances similar to those that must have been used by our grandparents in Woodbush.

I would also like to add a note of gratitude to my editor Beryl Belsky who, through her website The Writer's Drawer ([www.thewritersdrawer.net](http://www.thewritersdrawer.net)), has enabled me to publish essays and stories – a gift to anyone who yearns to write. She is now giving me the professional guidance and support needed to finalise this hugely important venture in my writing life.

Most of the memories came from my father Jack. He and my mother Sadie gave us the opportunity to experience life on a farm in most wondrous surroundings. For this I will always be grateful. In addition, my mother Sadie compiled scrap books and albums with pictures and newspaper cuttings. Would that they could read and know of this book.

Recently, I re-visited the area about which I have written, where the people I come from built their homes, their farms and their stores. For this I must thank Etienne Els, our guide and driver who, in September 2014, took us, a small group of family and friends, through a “root digging trip” in Polkwane and district. We visited Haenertsburg, Magoebaskloof and Debengeni Falls. We searched through forest and hair-raising gravel roads until we found, what I believe to be Woodbush. It doesn't look the same: the roads leading up to it are different; the house no longer stands but the shop, or what remains of it, appears to be there. It is all overgrown with bush and is barely visible from the fence around. It stands on a hill with a gum tree behind. The hills and mountains are unchanged and we were told that a neighbouring carnation farm once belonged to the von Reichi family. This surely must be Woodbush!

We stayed in a cottage in a valley in Magoebaskloof, between Haenertsburg and Tzaneen, surrounded by thick rain forest, abundant with birds, butterflies, wild flowers and dense green undergrowth. A stream runs through it. Each morning we woke up to watch the heavy mist lifting up over the forest-covered mountains.

It was on this journey that we met with Professor Changuion and with Googoo's daughter at her plant nursery Cheerio, near Haenertsburg.

In Pietersburg, today Polokwane, we visited our home and the Jewish cemetery where we found and photographed the headstones of the graves of some of the “People of the Letters.” We also met Daniel Makwela and his family over lunch at a mall in what is today a modern and large city (see annotation no. 3, Letter 5.7).

I have portrayed the “People of the Letters” as I imagine they might have been. There are certain to be family members and friends who may have known, or known of, some of these people. For any mistaken representation I sincerely apologise. Regarding the factual background, I have attempted to remain as true as possible to the times, people and places referred to but I have not intended this to be a document of historical accuracy.

The stunning natural beauty of the Woodbush, Haenertsburg and Magoebaskloof area has been extensively described by famous travellers such as Rider Haggard, Harry Klein and John Buchan (see References).

*“... a place secret and strange, with a beauty so peculiar that the people who tried to describe it were rarely believed. A delight in the Woodbush is apt to spoil a man for other scenery.”* John Buchan

# Glossary

## South African and Afrikaans Terms

Afrikaans – the language spoken by Afrikaners and most of the Cape Coloureds, derived mainly from Dutch, but also incorporating words from other European languages, from the Khoisan people, and from Indonesia and Madagascar, brought by slaves from those areas.

Afrikaners – a South African ethnic group mainly of Dutch descent

Baas – boss or master

Biltong – spicy dried meat, usually wild game or beef

Boetjie – a term of endearment for a young brother

Boerejode – Jews living in country areas of South Africa who identified with the Afrikaner people and culture

Boerewors – spicy minced sausages

Boers – literally “farmers,” but often used when referring to the Afrikaner people

Braaivleis – meat cooked over a fire

Duiker – antelope

The Great Trek – the eastern and north-eastern migration of Afrikaans people away from British control in the Cape Colony that started in the 1830s and 1840s

Impi - (Zulu) - an armed body of warriors

Inspanned - harnessed

Kaffir – a derogatory term referring to a black person (literally, non-believer)

Kopje (koppie) – hill

Kraal – an African family home made up of a cluster of huts surrounding a courtyard; also used to describe an enclosure for cattle

Landdrost – district governor

Liedjies – songs, usually referring to Afrikaans folk songs

Mealie pap – a thick porridge made from maize

Meidjie – young maiden

Melktert – milk pudding, traditionally made by the Afrikaners

Meneer (Mnr) – Mr.

Mevrouw (Mevr) – Mrs.

Muthi – African tribal remedy

Oom – literally “uncle,” used as a term of respect when addressing older men

Platteland – rural areas of South Africa

Stoep – porch or veranda

Taal – language, usually when referring to Afrikaans

Tommy – slang for a common soldier in the British army

Trek – a long journey, usually along difficult trails

Veldt – wide open rural landscape

Voortrekker – Afrikaans pioneers who left the Cape in ox-wagons to reach the hinterland of South Africa

### **Jewish, Yiddish and Hebrew Terms**

Borscht – beetroot soup

Bris – (Hebrew: Brit Milah) circumcision

Chupa – a bridal canopy

Eretz Yisrael – The Land of Israel – Palestine

Gefilte Fish – a well-known Jewish minced fish dish

Haskala –Jewish Enlightenment movement

Kol Nidre – the opening prayer on the Eve of the Day of Atonement

Litvaks – Lithuanian Jews

Mazal Tov! –literally, Good Luck! used as an expression of congratulations

Mohel – ritual circumciser

Pesah Seder – ritual Passover meal

Rosh Hashana – Jewish New Year; Erev Rosh Hashana– the eve of the New Year

Shabbas – the Jewish Sabbath, starting on Friday evening and ending at sunset on Saturday

Shalom – “Peace,” a Hebrew greeting

Shiva – seven-day mourning period

Smouse – travelling pedlar

Tsimmis – a beef goulash with prunes and apricots

Yamtavim – Jewish holidays

Yeshiva – an institution for Jewish religious education.

Yom Kippur – Day of Atonement

Zikhron Yaakov – a town in Palestine

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Following are some of the books that I have used as references for my story. These complemented the knowledge I had already accumulated at school and throughout my reading life.

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