

## **Jewish Life in District Six in the 1920s**

**by Esther Wilkin (based on interviews with Gwynne Robins)**

(compiled with pictures by Geraldine Auerbach)

At a photographic exhibition – Cape Town Jewry from 1870 – 1990, I saw a photograph of children participating in a march to honour the ratification of the Palestine Mandate. Those too young to walk the long route were on a lorry following the marchers, and on the lorry was a chubby little girl wearing a white dress with a large blue bow in her black hair – that was me.

Like in a dream I heard my Zayde's voice saying in Yiddish 'Hit Zich vun A loshenkaydishe Vroy' (Beware of a Hebrew speaking woman) voicing the sentiments of the majority of Jewish men of District Six. My memories focused on the two opposing sides of my upbringing. Many memories were evoked making it virtually impossible to chronicle them all.



Hanover Street District 6

### **My Background**

Let me start with a little bit of background. My Zayde – my maternal Grandfather arrived in Cape Town in 1904, the year in which there was a sharp drop in the number of immigrants entering South Africa due to the raising of the financial requirements from Five pounds to Twenty pounds and to the non recognition of Yiddish as a European language. He passed both tests. He had money and could read and write German and Russian. The reason he had left Latvia was because his tobacco factory was confiscated by the Tzarist regime under an edict preventing Jews from owning businesses and employing labour.



Lithuanian immigrants celebrating the Jewish New Year at sea, 1903.

He was on his way to join a brother in New York. On reaching the shelter in London he met friends returning from America, who told him of long and painful hours spent in workshops trying to earn a few dollars, of the huge masses of poverty-stricken Jews and the overcrowded tenements. They spoke of reports

received from South Africa where there was a warmer way of life in many respects and the prospects of a good life, so my Zayde changed his ticket from America to South Africa and after a three week uneventful voyage travelling cabin class and not steerage, he arrived in Cape Town to be met by Landsleit (people from his hometown) who arranged accommodation and provided him with employment – selling Holy Books.

## **What work we did**

My Zayde had never worked in his life – the tobacco factory was run by the women in the family while the men studied with the Rebbe. In Cape Town he lived sparingly eking out a bare living and only four years later was able to send for his wife and two youngest children. Often many years went by before families were reunited. Husbands and wives met as strangers and children did not know their fathers, as was the case with my uncle. A large double story house was rented in Brown Street, a short street between Caledon and McGregor Streets. The house was surrounded by large grounds and had stables for horses.

My Bobba, ever the enterprising woman, built up a profitable business. She saw the need for a cleaning and ironing service – men immigrants on their own had no one to care for the little clothing they possessed. Employing a coloured woman to help, trousers and

jackets were cleaned and ironed, shirts washed and ironed and starched. The last members of the family to arrive were my mother and sister in 1914. They were excellent seamstresses and helped in the family business by mending clothes sent for cleaning – a button to be sewn on, a collar turned, a patch on trousers or jackets and they soon established their own business as well. Sewing and embroidering trousseaus for brides. A trap and horse were bought, and my Zayde became the delivery man.

As soon as my mother and her sister reached marriageable age suitors started invading the house. Girls were scarce in those days and they could pick and choose. A bright young spark, known as 'Der Anglishe' The Englishman, became my father. He was orphaned after Barmitzvah and was sent to London from Latvia to join his paternal uncle and family. He had a few years schooling in London and so learned English. At the age of 19 he arrived in South Africa with his family who settled in the Gardens area. Possessing a magnificent voice and having sung in Shul choirs as a boy in Libau and subsequently in London, he was immediately accepted as a member of the Gardens Synagogue choir where he sang for over forty years. So my childhood was divided between the Chassidim to which my Zayde belonged and the Gardens Synagogue.



In the morning from the age of three, I attended the Hebrew Nursery school the first in Cape Town, in the old Zionist Hall at the lower end of Hope Street. (pictured above). I loved the Hebrew songs taught and which I remember to this day, and which I have sung to my children when small and also to my grandchildren.

In the afternoons to appease my Zayde whom my parents greatly respected, my brother and I attended Cheder in a badly lit, ill ventilated room in the basement of the Constitution Street Shul. We sat on hard benches and our chain smoking Melamed (teacher) had to contend with boisterous youngsters to whom he referred as 'Afrikane Vilde Chayes' (African wild animals) With cigarette ash flying all over he read from a Siddur and the pupils, parrot wise repeated the words until he was satisfied. If you asked the meaning of a word or two – if a boy you were most probably rewarded with a hard slap and if a girl told not to question.

A large section of the people living in District Six at that time were Jews who had come from Eastern Europe to find a better life for themselves and their families in this new country where there were no Pogroms, no Ghettos (although they made their own) and where they hoped not only to make a good living but to be able to send much needed financial help to family left behind 'In Der Heim' (their home towns)

They always referred to their Eastern European Shetlech or towns as 'Der Heim' (the home). Many of your great grandparents and grandparents were amongst these people. They had one common language which welded them together – Yiddish, a language I learnt as a little girl enabling me not only to communicate with my Bobba and Zayde but also with the children of the immigrants whom I was able to help learn English.

## **Our homes in District 6**



Let me describe our homes – most of the homes in District Six were modest, terraced three or four roomed with toilets in the backyards and many having no bathrooms. A large zinc bath was brought into the kitchen when needed and water was heated either on

the coal stove or if no coal stove in the house on paraffin stoves.

Although the toilet in our double fronted house in Chapel Street was just outside the kitchen door we had an inside proper bathroom and as long as the stove was fed with coke (what a change of the meaning of the word) (distillation of coal) hot water was on tap. My Grandparents home also had an inside bathroom, water was heated by a wood-burning geyser. Many men went to the public baths in Hanover Street and women to the mikveh in Long Street.

Very few homes had electricity and oil lamps and candles were used for lighting .Our Chapel house had electricity which held no appeal for we preferred the oil lamps in our Grandparent's home and when we stayed overnight our greatest joy was in helping to pull the lamps down from ceiling height, watch Zayde put in oil, light the wick, put on the glass cover and then be allowed to work the pulleys raising the lamps to the required height. We went to bed by candlelight. We carried a candlestick with lighted candle climbing the stairs to our bedrooms – we washed, undressed by candlelight and used our imagination making up stories by watching the shadows the flickering candlelight cast on the walls.

Most of the houses had backyards and however small each house had a hokkie for poultry. New laid eggs were collected for breakfast and one large omelet with milk and cheese added made a substantial breakfast for a family where the norm was six to eight children. Years later I realised that my parents, aunts, uncles and their friends were the radicals of their time as they had only two children at the most three.

Children had to share bedrooms and in some cases beds as well. Until my sister was born when I was about ten years old, I had a bedroom to myself excepting when new immigrants arrived. My brother and I never knew whether we would be sleeping in our own beds or on the couches in the lounge on arriving home from school.

On Friday nights after Shul the family gathered at my Grandparents house. The children queued up for my Zayde's blessing and after Kiddush and Bentching the Sabbath meal was served, usually consisting of chopped and pickled herring, chopped liver, putcha, gifilte fish, chicken soup, roast chicken, roast potatoes, vegetables in season and for dessert always compote.

Kitkas were baked at home and those unfortunates who did not possess an oven, prepared their dough, shaped their kitka and paid for oven space at a Jewish baker and so had kitkas for Shabbas. Everything that could be possibly made at home filled the pantries; jams – strawberry, plum, grape, apricot peach to name a few were always available. Lokshen, biscuits, pickled cucumbers, herring, beetroot. Before sunset on

Friday a cholent was put into the oven to cook slowly overnight and a hot Sabbath meal was available.

Havdalah, the ceremony to bid the Sabbath farewell was special to the Jewish children of District Six. Fathers and Grandfathers tested the children on what they had learned at Cheder and according to results were awarded a couple of pennies – our weekly spending money which we spent on Wednesday afternoons at the British Bioscope (not Cinema) in Caledon Street where we breathlessly watched the weekly cowboy series, cheering the good fellow and booing the bad.



## The Jewish Festivals

Before the Yomtovim especially Rosh Hashanah and Pesach, poultry was selected from the hokkie and the Schochet came round to do the slaughtering. We all had to help pluck the feathers. The poultry was then singed and kashered – no supermarket where you could buy your chickens kashered and ready for the pot. The fat from the poultry was melted down with onions and the result “ gribenes “ was used for our sandwiches on home made challah and on matzah during Pesach. According to the medical profession this is unhealthy however we seemed to survive.

My mother was an expert *taigle* maker who made large quantities not only for family and friends but also for the residents of the old-aged home then situated in a little street off Hope Street. The syrup from the taiglech was used to bake Lrkach and the aroma of ginger and cinnamon spread not only through the house, but the street as well. And the pots of chicken soup – Jewish Penicillin – always available and often distributed amongst the ill and those women who had given birth. I remember helping my Bobba carry the food in enamel containers all over the area to those in need.



We children survived **Pesach** without sweets and chocolates Kosher Le Pesach. Instead, we had homemade Eingemachs (a sweet made from beetroot) Ingbelech, Pletzlech (pictured left) and Pomeranzen. Weeks before Pesach we children assisted in trampling the grapes in preparation of the wine making. And who remembers Med, which we bought from

Nikoles Mineral Factory, owned by the Bloch family, in Chapel Street.

I remember a special Saturday night before **Rosh Hashanah** we were spending the weekend with my grandparents. We were in bed listening for my Zayde's footsteps on the stairs. We waited and waited – it never came. Worried, we crept to the top of the stairs and saw Bobba sitting on her own in the sitting room. We wrapped ourselves in blankets sat at the top of the stairs, dozing and awakening and saw Bobba doing the same in her chair but no sign of Zayde. We became very worried, when suddenly the front door opened and there was Zayde. We rushed downstairs and hugged him and told him how worried we had been. He sat us around him and explained about Slichot, and to this day even if I do not attend Shul comes the hour of midnight on the Sabbath before Rosh Hashanah I remember his words – 'When the stillness of the hour creates an atmosphere of solemnity, prayers for forgiveness are recited '.



On the first night of **Rosh Hashanah**, it was usual to have 40 people to partake of the meal at my grandparent's home – family, extended family, landsleit who as yet not established a proper home and lonely immigrants were all welcome. The candles kindled transformed the home into a haven of love and warmth. Centuries of tradition

followed. All the symbolic foods in rounded form – traditional food did much to drive home to the children the lessons of the Yomtov.

On the first day of **Rosh Hashanah**, we accompanied our grandparents to the **Chassidic Shul in Buitenkant Street**. The Shul was plain, small and unadorned. Wooden benches were arranged on either side of the men's section.



A cupboard at the end of the room housed the Torahs. Neither a Rabbi or Chazan graced this Shul. The entry to the women's section was a door in a narrow lane. A wall with a small opening at the top dividing the women from the men and only faint sounds from the men's section penetrated the women's section.

My Bobba was one of the few women of her generation who was educated. She could read and write Russian, German, Yiddish and could read Hebrew, only the Holy texts. She used to daven for those women in the Chassidic Shul who did not know how. She was known as a 'zoggerke' a woman who reads Holy texts to other women. She sat in a corner with women gathered round her and read the service to them and they all cried – I do not know if it was because the service reminded them of the life and families they had left behind in Europe or because of the hard life as immigrants in Cape Town.



The second day of **Rosh Hashanah** found us at the Gardens Synagogue with my father's family. What a contrast between the two Shuls. The physical magnificence of the Gardens Synagogue with lovely stained-glass windows and the glittering mosaics surrounding the Ark, its size compared to the Chassidic Shul and even the Constitution Street Shul, the wardens in their top hats were awe inspiring and the Chazan and choir transported one to another planet. There was a dignified air. In the Shuls of District Six children ran around freely and were encouraged to attend – as my Zayde often said 'Each Holy letter is a song in itself. Every time you hear or learn one Holy letter you are praising Hashem'.

At the Shuls attended by immigrants nobody noticed each other's clothes. Most worshipers were struggling to make a living and could not afford new clothes for themselves or their wives or children. At the **Gardens Shul** things were different. You were subjected to scrutiny even if you were a four-year-old. I was fortunate, I had doting aunts – one a dress designer, the other in smocking and my mother was an expert at embroidery, so I was always well dressed. My immigrant friends in District Six could not believe what I had to tell them about the 'Anglisese Shul' (the Gardens Shul). To them it was if I had attended 'G-d forbid' a Cathedral Service.

Above all in my memory never to be forgotten was a **Chasidic Simchat Torah**. As there was no Hakafot at the Gardens Synagogue on Shemini Atzeret, my father was instrumental in getting the Chazan and choir to come to the Chasidic Shul. The Hakafot in that night is difficult to describe. A state of joyousness was achieved. Song and dance

reigned supreme. The Chasidim used their limbs and bodies with much grace and danced as if they were elevated to another plane. I was allowed into the men's section, as I was under ten years old.

## **The chasm between the immigrants and existing community**

At this stage I would like to describe the chasm that existed between the Yiddish-speaking immigrants and the German and English-speaking members of the Gardens Synagogue. The German and English Jews stood on a rung higher on the social ladder than the eastern European immigrants. The one section lived in the good areas of Cape Town, Tamboers Kloof and Oranjezicht, worlds away from the crowded boarding houses, dreary rooms and cheerless surroundings of District Six. The immigrants disliked the English Jew. They had contempt for their superficial knowledge of Judaism and their peculiar pronunciation of Hebrew.



The **Gardens Synagogue (the English Shul)** and their spiritual head, Rev. Bender, maintained the closest links with Anglo Jewry. Rev. Bender was known to the Jews of District Six as 'Der Galach' (the priest). He knew no Yiddish, the language of the immigrants, he wore garb, which was hateful to the immigrants, reminding them of the similar apparel worn by the loathsome anti-Semitic priests of Eastern Europe.

Rev. Bender had an MA degree from Cambridge University, and was a fine Hebrew scholar, however he was not a Talmudist and that was not overlooked by the District Sixers. Not only was there a difference in language, but also in cultural background and to some extent religious traditions. In their

baggage the eastern European immigrants carried a deep Jewish consciousness rooted in their culture, a deep respect for Jewish learning and the Yiddish spoken was that of Jewish community association. Cape Town Jewry was a divided community.

Because of the division in the community, my brother had two Barmitzvahs on the same Saturday. My Zayde refused to enter the Gardens Synagogue, both my father and brother were members of the Gardens Shul choir, and this Barmitzvah was something special. My brother's rendering of his Haphtarah became a musical conversation between choir and Barmitzvah boy, and the women of the family could see and hear. As soon as the service was over, the family trooped down from the Gardens Synagogue to the **Chassidic Shul**, where my brother gave a repeat Barmitzvah performance, delighting my Zayde and the Chassidic congregation. We in the women's section strained to hear.

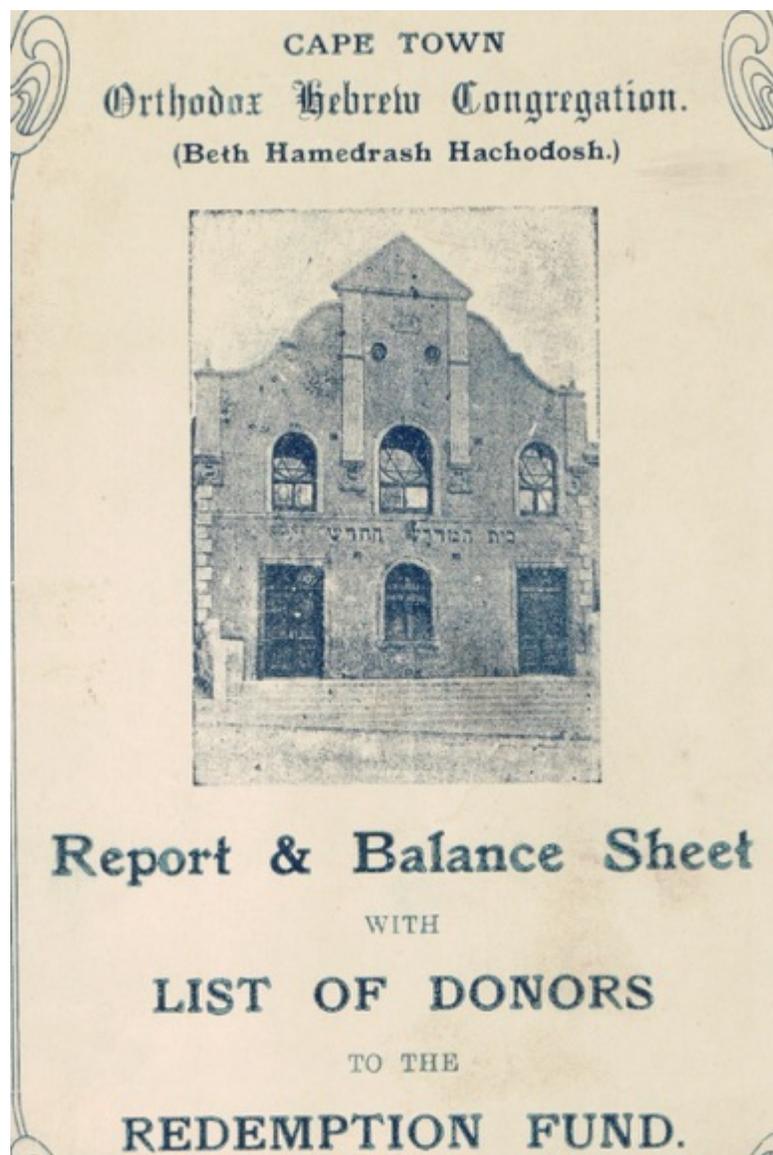
District Six was situated between Tollgate, Sir Lowry Rd, towards the mountain to Roeland St., some wide streets, some narrow streets, some lanes and some terraces, the most well-known, Vernon Terrace. Opposite the District Six side of Roeland St., was the Gardens area where many English Jews settled. They came to South Africa because of the appalling economic situation prevailing in Britain at that time. Many of them were first and second generation of the main Polish and Latvian Jewish immigrants who had settled in Britain during the 1880's. These people joined the Gardens Synagogue, my father's family amongst them. They were later joined by immigrants from District Six. However, the immigrants continued to attend the **Shuls of District Six**, which enjoyed good attendances on the Sabbath and the Yomtovim. Kashrut was strictly observed by the vast majority.



Roeland St. Shul (Roeland Street)

The **Roeland St. Shul**, (known as the New Hebrew Congregation) was the largest in the area (later relocated to **Schoonder Street**). It had no Rabbi at the time, as most of the congregants were Zionist orientated and Rabbonim of the 1920's were anti-Zionist. Adv. Morris Alexander occasionally acted as lay preacher. Despite his Zionist affiliation he was venerated by the immigrants as he was instrumental in leading a delegation of representatives of Congregations (excepting the Gardens Synagogue) together with

leaders of the Jewish community, which prevailed on the Government to have Yiddish recognised as a European language, and in 1906 a law was passed recognising Yiddish, enabling a stream of immigrants to come to South Africa. Morris Alexander became the undisputed head of Cape Town Jewry.



**Beth Hamidrash Hachodesh** (the New House of Study) in Constitution St. (later the Vredehoek Shul) represented the ultra-orthodox element of the community. Rabbi M.Ch. Mirvish, a very learned and pious Rabbi from Lithuania, became spiritual head of this congregation and gained the respect of the members of his Shul as well as the **Chasidim** and the **Ponevez Shul** congregants, then in van der Luer St., now in Maynard St.

### **Zionism**

These congregations were against Zionism for different reasons than those of Rev. Bender. They considered Zionism atheistic and they strongly opposed the modernisation of Hebrew education at the Talmud Torah, as debasing the Holy tongue. Another bone of contention between the ultra-orthodox and Rev. Bender was that

he initiated Saturday afternoon services for both girls and boys and introduced confirmation services for girls (it was not the Reform who started these services).

There were very few motor cars in those days – my father owned one – a model T Ford. To start the car, levers on the steering wheel were put into place. My father left the driver's seat and with a handle cranked and cranked until the engine started and then very hurriedly returned to the car, and quickly depressed the levers before the engine died and the cranking had to start all over again. My mother and I hated travelling in the car, especially when it reached 20 miles an hour.

## **Outings to Muizenberg and Sea Point**

Our Sunday summer outings to Muizenberg were highlights. Excepting for the boys and my uncles who went with my father in the car, the rest of the family preferred the wagon drawn by two horses and driven by my Zayde. We left home at 6am, the wagon loaded with family and food. On the outskirts of Wynberg, where today runs a very busy Main Street, was a place to outspan horses and where water was obtainable. My Zayde attended to the horses' needs, the wagon load of family members settled on the grass to eat breakfast and after about half an hour later continued our journey to Muizenberg, which we reached 3 ½ hours after leaving home.

We usually found a spot between the sand dunes. The horses were taken for a trot in the sea. We swam, we played ball games, built sandcastles and ate a hearty lunch seasoned with Muizenberg sand. Many of our neighbours were also enjoying Muizenberg, having come by steam train. We returned home about 7pm – a hectic day for everyone. We also went to Sea Point on summer weekdays taking the steam train from Monument Station, travelling through the docks, the common and along the sea front, where I now take walks on the promenade, until the Sea Point Pavilion. Woodstock beach, which is now part of the docks, was in easy reach of Chapel St. and we often swam in the icy water and watched the fishing boats arrive with their catch of the day.

## **Our schools**

The children of District Six were all great walkers. We walked to friends in various parts of the area, we walked through Trafalgar Park to visit friends in Woodstock and we walked a long distance to school.

There was a Government school in de Villiers St., the Principal Mr. Kloot was Jewish, as were a few of the teachers, but when I reached school-going age, de Villiers St. school became a school for Coloured children and co-education for white children at primary level came to an end. The boys' school built in Roeland Street became known as Hope Lodge, the principal being Mr. Kloot. The girls went to the old normal college in Buitenkant Street renamed Girls Central School, the Jewish principal Rosa van Gelderen, formerly a teacher at De Villiers Street School, the English teacher Hilda Purwitzky, the Afrikaans teacher Sarah Goldblatt and two Cohen sisters for other subjects. 95% of both the boys' and girls' schools were Jewish pupils.

In our midst in District 6 were coloured and Malay families. I became friends with a number of girls. In some cases, the fathers were white and the mothers coloured and in a few isolated cases the fathers Jewish and the mothers coloured. The fathers of some of these girls were Remittance men. They were in the main Blacksheep members of the British Aristocracy sent to the colonies and money was remitted to them on a monthly

basis – enough to live on but not enough for a ticket back to Britain. My Malay friends - the Gadidas', Chalimas', Mymonmas', Fatimas' and Asas' were amongst those many years later who had to leave District 6 because of the Group Areas Act.

The girls in those families who passed for white became my classmates, their dark-skinned brothers and sisters had to go to the De Villiers Street school. So, a group of us aged between 6 and 11 years walked from the Chapel Street area to Buitenkant Street where the William Fehr Museum is located. Our route to school took us down Wicht Street and it was here that we Jewish children had our first taste of anti-Semitism. A poor white Afrikaans speaking family lived in a dilapidated terraced house in the street. The children pelted us with rotten fruit and other garbage when we passed their house calling out – 'Bloody Jews, Christ killers, Kaffir lovers' and made our lives a misery. Help, however, was at hand. At the end of Wicht Street, corner Mount Street, lived the daughters of Dr. Abduraman with his Scottish ex-wife. The sisters saw what was happening to us and became our escorts. Whether the Van Wyk's had respect for Warradak's uniform (she was the district nurse) or Cissie's threats, the harassment ceased. Cissie subsequently married Dr. Gool and became a town councilor, always ready to help the underdog. From those early days of my life a friendship developed between the much older Cissie and myself which lasted until she died.

## Shopping

Hanover and Caledon streets (which my grandmother always referred to as Kaladonskiya



Ulitzka (Russian), were the main shopping areas – the Kosher butchers, the Kosher bakers, the grocers, the dairies, outfitters,

furniture stores, everything one required was to be found on those streets. As the Jewish shops were closed on Saturday, they opened on Sunday. Barbers, tailors, shoemakers worked in the front rooms of their homes if they were fortunate in having a home, otherwise they worked wherever they could, even from a disused stable. I remember that crowds walked up and down these streets, shopping and window shopping, jostling each other on the narrow pavements.

Fixed in my memory is a Sunday morning and a family looking for a suit for a Barmitzvah boy. This would be the first pair of long trousers the boy would possess, and it had to last a good many years and in many cases handed down to younger siblings when they had a Barmitzvah. The whole family accompanied the boy on this special shopping expedition. They went from outfitter to outfitter comparing prices and quality. Shopkeepers or their wives or a relative used to be on the lookout for prospective customers and they tried with every means in their power to entice them into their shop. They shouted out the wonderful bargains obtainable from them and ran down their competitors' wares – it became a war of words between one store and the other and in the end the one who usually got the customer was either a relative, a relative of a relative or a landsman – and so the inevitable navy-blue serge suit was purchased.

Hanover Street was a long narrow street, with trams running to and from Adderley Street. The street was always, except for Saturdays, thronged with people of all races and colours. Many of the shopkeepers lived with their families in apartments above the shop. Excepting for Friday night, if one needed anything, all you did was go to the shop, knock on the door and the shopkeeper came down the stairs and sold you what was required. No doors were locked or windows shuttered in District 6 and no shopkeeper barred his windows. On summer nights everyone slept with doors and windows wide open. The thieves of District 6 protected the inhabitants, their crimes were committed elsewhere. The residents of Wells Square, the most notorious area of District 6 where even the police were afraid to enter, the homes of thieves, murderers and pimps became my grandparents' protectors.

My grandparents were amongst the last of the Europeans to leave the area, yet were protected by these criminals. They considered 'Die Oubaas' a holy man and escorted him to and from Shul daily and also acted as Shabbas Goyim, they switched off the lights on Friday nights and during Yom Tovim whilst my grandparents were in bed. Nothing was ever stolen from their house.

### **Moving out to the Gardens**

Our move from Chapel Street to Maynard Street went smoothly despite the fact that our remover had one horse to draw his wagon and one coloured man to help carry the

worldly possessions from one place to the other. Our mover was a well-known character – a huge coarse man, with an extensive vocabulary of Yiddish swear words. He referred to his horse and his wife as ‘Klatche’ (mare) and as he approached his house after a day’s work, he shouted out ‘Klatche’ and children never knew whether he was referring to his horse or wife.

When you see photographs of the houses in District 6, do not look at the faded, peeling outside walls – look into the houses and there you will see the love in the family, the friendship amongst neighbours, there was a giving atmosphere; joys and sorrows were shared, there was an unforgettable spirit and above all a vibrant Jewish life.

With energy and determination, these immigrants with no capital, without profession made a valuable contribution to the South African economy. Their sons and grandsons became doctors, lawyers, accountants, merchants, engineers and subsequently became leaders of our community.

Our move to Maynard Street brought us right into the depression years and another chasm in the Jewish community + ‘The Red Flag’ and that leads to another story.

Esther Wilkin.