

Durbanville



Durbanville is a semi-rural residential town, in the Western Cape Province, some 30 kilometres northeast of Cape Town, known for its picturesque beauty. In the mid-20th century, it was approached by driving from Bellville along Durbanville Avenue, a beautiful road with trees lining either side. Having been called Pampoenkraal, Durbanville became a farming centre and produced wine and wheat as well as farming animals.

Durbanville is one of the Northern Suburbs of Cape Town, together with Goodwood, Parow and Bellville. The Jewish community settled in Durbanville in the early 20th century and was at its peak until the mid-70's, after which it dwindled considerably. Many of the community made *Aliyah* while the remaining congregation joined the Bellville Community.

From this account, Durbanville from the early 1950's till 1980, when Vicky lived there, was clearly a vibrant, dynamic community of multi-generational immigrants to South Africa from Lithuania. They were active members of a country village just outside of Cape Town. Undoubtedly, their contribution to development and daily life in the town was significant.



Vicky Scher's personal memoir of living in Durbanville in the 1950's-1980's

Vicky Scher, aged 90, has been living in Israel since 1982. The community is presented as Vicky Scher lived and remembers it. She uses personal memories and artefacts she has saved and treasured. Vicky invites all those who would like to share their personal experience about Durbanville, to do so!



The Shul and the Hall

Vicky Scher (né Surovsky) was twenty-one years old in 1953, when she moved to Durbanville after growing up and attending high school in the Gardens in Cape Town. She went through the accepted lifestyle of Habonim, Cheder and sharing the Holidays at the Garden's Shul. She had many friends and was well connected socially.

For Vicky, it seemed perfectly natural to marry a farmer, since for her, the way of life in the 'country', was something she had always found attractive. Catching that first train from Cape Town to Bellville and then being met by her future partner, Nokkie Scher, was exciting and new and filled her with instant happiness.

Her father-in-law, Abie Scher had settled in the village in 1904 when, at the age of ten, he came with his widowed mother from Plungian, Lithuania, to join his three brothers, Nahum, Haim and Philip who had already settled in Durbanville.

Abie and Golda his wife, lived in a spacious home with their four children and when the maternal grandparents came in 1932, they joined the family. In addition, Reverend Dorogow, the spiritual leader of the community, lived with them and stayed there for eighteen years until he got married and left to serve a different community.

The Schers were a hospitable family whose house was open to all. This included family and friends from the city of Cape Town, some twenty-nine kms away. Vicky fondly remembers the atmosphere of warmth and particularly the table which groaned with food and treats prepared by Golda whenever they had guests. As it was, Nokkie's grandparents on Golda's side also shared



the home, enhancing the Jewish atmosphere of the family who observed a strict traditional life-style, adhering to the norms of the community in general.

Life at that time was simple when it came to commodities, where the family used a coal stove in the kitchen, a telephone service that depended on the public phone company setting up calls and being patient until they came through.

On the family farm, Spes Bona (Good Hope), there were grapes-vines, wheat as well as sheep and cows for milking. The children in the family, loved visiting the farm on Sundays and enjoyed the experience of being free to run around and get close to the animals.

Vicky recalls her life in Durbanville with nostalgia; there was a friendliness and warmth amongst the neighbours in the village and the twenty-eight families of the Jewish community, that didn't exist in Cape Town for her. Life in the country was relaxed. Her immediate family were close and supportive and shared their warm affection for one another openly and freely.

Respect between the farmers and Jews was mutual. They did business together over the years.

Vicky tells of how in 1972 when the Israeli athletes were murdered in Munich, her Afrikaans neighbour called on her at nine in the morning to tell her how shocked they were hearing the news and prayed for their souls.

In 1970, tragedy struck the family when a lorry, heavily loaded with gravel stones, crashed into the car Vicky was driving, while stationary, at the lights. The car was flung into the air, then hit an electrical pole, instantly caught alight as it hit the ground, went into flames, killing three passengers in the back seat. Luckily for Vicky and Abie, a policeman passing by on his way to the airport, saved their lives when he pulled Vicky and Abie out from the burning car. Vicky's mother-in-law, Golda, her daughter, Hanke, and daughter-in-law, Judith, were killed in the accident. Vicky views this event as her personal Holocaust and is forever grateful to her father-in-law for his consoling sentence right afterwards when he said: 'You mustn't shout; it's the will of God'....

Life was never the same after the accident. Vicky, Sox and the family rallied around the five surviving children and their fathers, helping them to deal with their tragic loss and lead normal lives. After the tragedy, the family donated a Torah to the Shul which has subsequently found its home in the Ramot neighbourhood of Jerusalem, where many members of the family live.



The Torah Dedication in Durbanville, 1971: Abie Scher with sons and grandsons

Front Row: L-R Leonard, Abie, Nokkie, Roy in front

Back Row: L-R Joe with the Torah, Herschel, Neil with glasses, Charles, Colin

The Journey of the Torah from Durbanville to Jerusalem:

During the 1990's, some twenty years after the accident, Neil Scher felt that since the majority of the Abie Scher family were living in Ramot, Israel, the Torah in the Durbanville Shul dedicated to Golda Scher, Hanke Raichlin and Judith Scher, should be transferred to Israel where it would be read by the descendants of the family. Neil spoke to someone in Cape Town before he went to S.A and was told he could take the Torah. When he arrived in Johannesburg, he was told he could not get it. Nevertheless, he flew to Cape Town, determined to fulfill that mission.

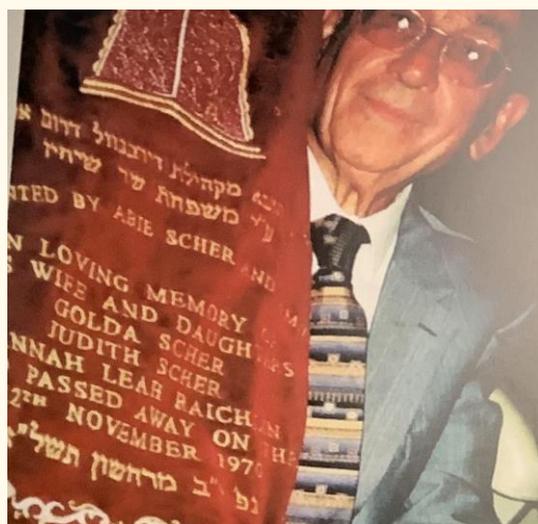
In Cape Town, he met with the custodian of the Shul and put his request before him. Since there wasn't anyone left in the community who knew him, they needed proof that he knew which Torah it was.

Neil offered to put his hand into the *Aron Kodesh* with the *perochet* drawn closed and identify it merely by touch. This he did instantly. However, he was still unable to take the Torah back with him to Israel until additional authorization was given to release it from the country.

Neil returned to Israel without the Torah. The approval was given soon after arrival back. A friend of Neil's who happened to be going to Johannesburg, agreed to take the Torah to Jerusalem on condition that it was brought from Cape Town. This was done and the Torah was delivered by a courier in Johannesburg. Before boarding the plane, the security officers of El-Al insisted that it be unrolled; after this was done, they sang and danced around the Torah. Passengers who saw the happy spectacle, gathered around the scene and clapped.

When it finally arrived in Ramot, Neil arranged with the Shul to have the *Hachnasat Torah* ceremony, as is customary on such occasions.

And so, happily, the mission was accomplished...



Nokkie Scher with the Torah at Shul in Ramot, Jerusalem.

The names of family to whom it is dedicated, embroidered on the mantle.

The Shul in Durbanville

The Shul was established in 1927 and for the laying of the Foundation Stone, dignitaries from Cape Town and the neighbouring districts were invited. Rev Dorogow was the spiritual leader. His tasks included being the *shochet*, Hebrew Teacher as well as conducting all the services in the Shul. He taught all the children in the community, but the three outstanding pupils for the *Gemmorah* and *Kriyat Hatorah* were Nokkie Scher, Norman Spiro and Gessie Borok. In years to come, Nokkie became the volunteer reader of the Torah till the day Vicky and he left Durbanville and made Aliyah in 1980.



The Bimah

The committee was comprised of Mr Borok who donated the land for the building, Abie Scher, Phillip Scher, Mr Shus, Solly Swerling and Mr Emdin.

The Shul was always well looked after and the children were very much a part of it, always looking for jobs to do and be helpful.

*Front Row: L-R
Mr. Emdin, Mr
Borok, Mr Schus
Back Row: L-R
Mr Phillip Scher,
Mr Swerling, Mr.
Abie Scher*



The *Neir Tamid* was made by hand by Vicky's father, Boris Surovsky when she and Nokkie were married in 1953. It was a replica of the one in the Gardens Shul. The doors of the *Aaron Kodesh* were also donated by him. In 1960 when Vicky's mother, Rebecca Surovsky passed away, Boris made *menoroth* in her memory. The blue metal stand was also made by him.

*Aharon
Kodesh, Neir
Tamid hanging
over from above
and Menoroth*



On Shabbat and the Chagim, an Israeli couple would come and stay in the house that belonged to the Shul. This afforded their young families, comfort and privacy. The husband would conduct the service and Nokkie would help him with the *shacharit*. The visitors were warmly received by the members of the community, who were hospitable towards them, making for a pleasant experience all round. Showing hospitality was a significant and meaningful aspect of the community's way of life.

The Shul was active and willingly organized a *minyán* for anyone who needed it. This was noticed by the *dominee* who lived in the house opposite. He would tell his congregants that they could take a leaf out of the book of Jewish people who could be seen at prayers early in the morning before sunrise. This comment was taken as a compliment!

There was always a small *succah* that was used on the Holiday of Succot.

All the Holidays were observed and the *gabai* at the time, would invite the entire community to his home on the first day of *Rosh Hashana* for afternoon tea. And so it was, that the community felt connected and united.

For *Simchat Torah*, the community would have a dinner the evening before. Everyone contributed towards the menu which was tasty and plentiful. On the day of the Holiday, the children would receive flags and each family was given slabs of chocolates, one for every member. The was a favourite for all!

As a community, *Yom Haazmaut* was celebrated with songs and dancing and tasty refreshments provided by the capable members. Likewise, *Yom Hashoah* was also commemorated. All these events were important since they showed the children both the joyous and tragic events in the history of our people.

Women in the Community:

The women of the community were active outside the framework of the shul. They formed the 'Durbanville Women's Society' and were active in fund-raising for Israel. In 1980, they put up a magnificent exhibition of both religious and Israeli items in the local library which lasted 3 days, attracting people from all the neighbouring districts. In addition, the ladies organized 'rummage sales', Candle Light Theatre, 'progressive dinners' and raffle sales.



Items on display: Torah, food and wine, history and home-made Judaica

Organizers of the exhibition:

L-R: Lies Rabinowitz, Vicky Scher, Miriam and Eta Scher



Community Life:

The Durbanville community was self-supporting and every year a *Braai* was held on farms belonging to members of the Shul. The Scher's farm was used several times. The Diamond family were hosts one year on their farm, Vissershok, which although outside Durbanville was used for the occasion.

This annual event was very popular and would draw a crowd of about 700 -750 from all over. On one occasion, an adjoining neighbour who was an Afrikaner, opened his farm to the community. The regulars waited for the date and always had a very jolly time. The owners of the 2 hotels mentioned, the Solomon and Borok families, would alternate every year and transfer their liquor license for the night to the venue of the event and that of course attracted many people.

A tombola stall was set up together with some form of entertainment.

'For a community of not more than 28 families, we were very successful at preserving our independence and togetherness at the same time', says Vicky.

Schooling of the Children in the Community:

The children in the community attended the local Primary Schools and on completion, went to either the neighbouring town, Bellville, or to Cape Town to complete High School. This was not an easy arrangement since daily transport to the big city needed to be provided.



The Opening of the Shul in 1927

Articles about the Community in the Newspapers

SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH TIMES, WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 21, 1979



EXHIBITION FEATURED ASPECTS OF LIFE IN ISRAEL

DURBANVILLE, CAPE: An exhibition of aspects of Israel and Jewish life was presented for three days by the Durbanville Women's Zionist Society in the cultural room of the Durbanville Library.

All the goods on display were obtained from the homes of the Jewish community. There was a good attendance and much interest was evoked in Israel and the Jewish religion.

Our picture shows left to right, the conveners, Mrs Lies Rabinowitz and Mrs Vicky Scher, Mrs Miriam Scher and the chairman, Mrs Eta Scher.

They are standing in front of a pictorial record of the Holocaust. On the table a display of Chanukiot is shown.

ZIONIST RECORD and S A JEWISH CHRONICLE, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 1979

Cape

Aspects of Israel and Jewish life were depicted in an exhibition organized by the Durbanville women's Zionist society in the Cultural Room of the Durbanville Library.

All goods on display were obtained from homes in the community. The exhibition featured a Bethlehem bridal dress similar to one housed in the British Museum, a display of Israeli jewellery, ornaments and household goods.

★



TORAH FOR DURBANVILLE SYNAGOGUE

CAPE TOWN:— At a recent ceremony at Durbanville Synagogue, a sefer torah was presented to the shul by Mr. A. Scher and his family in memory of his wife, Mrs. Golda Scher, daughter Mrs. H. Raichlin, and daughter-in-law, Mrs. Judith Scher, who lost their lives in a tragic accident in November, 1970. The service was conducted by Cantor Max Badash, of the Great Synagogue, the Gardens.

After the mincha service, Mr. Scher carried the sefer torah into the shul accompanied by his sons, Mr. Joseph Scher and Mr. Nokkie Scher, and his two sons-in-law. The maariv service and the completion of the torah then took place.

At a reception after the service, Mr. Harry Sacks, chairman of the Durbanville Hebrew Congregation, referred to the esteem in which the Scher family were held.

At the presentation of a Sefer Torah to the Durbanville Synagogue were (front row, from left):— Mr. Harry Sacks, chairman of the Durbanville Hebrew Congregation, Rabbi A.H. Lapin, Chief Minister and Senior Rabbi of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, Mr. A. Scher, Cantor M. Badash and (Back row) Mr. Joseph Scher and Mr. Nokkie Scher.

Mr. Scher and his late wife were foundation members of the shul and had at all times shown a keen interest in all communal activities, Rabbi A.H. Lapin, Chief Minister and Senior Rabbi of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, addressed the gathering and Mr. A. Miller, chairman of the Great Synagogue, brought a message of greetings.

OBITUARY

MR ABE SCHER, DURBANVILLE

Durbanville is a beautiful town nestling in the hills on the fringes of the Swartland and in the heart of cattle country. Its appeal is matched by that of its Jewish community which despite small numbers has regular Shabbat minyanim of Shomrei Shabbat.

The Shul founded fifty years ago suffered a great loss on Shabbat Shlach Lech (1st July) when the soul of Mr. Abe Scher returned to his Maker. Not only was Zeide Abe Scher the last of the founder members of the Shul and the scion of the Scher family, noted famers in the district, but he also personified everything that the Shul stood for.

His life revolved around the Shul and Torah. For many years the Rabbi of the community resided in his home. Tzaddakah was a corner stone of his life and no Rabbi or Meshulloch bypassed 1, Queen Street, Durbanville.

Despite suffering a great personal tragedy and loss 8 years ago Abe Scher's faith in Hashem never wavered. One can say of him that he walked humbly with God. His passing has left a great void but at the same time the example he set will remain as a treasured heritage to his community.

He is survived by his children Joe and Miriam, Nokkkie and Vikkie, Sox Herr and grandchildren.

Obituary

Abe Scher

DURBANVILLE — This beautiful town in the hills on the fringe of the Swartland suffered a great loss recently with the death of Mr Abe Scher, the last of the founder members of the shul.

A man of great piety, his life revolved around the shul and Torah. He is survived by his children, Joe and Miriam, Nokkie and Vikkie, Sox Herr and grandchildren.

The local community, though few in number, have regular Shabbat minyanim of Shomrei Shabbat. The shul dates back to 1927.

Family Members of the Community:

At the height of its activity, the Durbanville community consisted of 28 Jewish families. Many of the younger generation left the village after they became independent. The extended Scher family formed a large part of the community.

- **Scher, Sora Freyda widow of Josef** had 5 children
Nahum, Haim, Phillip, Abie, Rivka
- **Scher, Nahum and Temma** had 9 children, 8 sons and 1 daughter.
Joseph, Morris, Phillip, Abie, Louis, Sammy, Harry, Alec and Annie.
- **Scher, Morris married Millie Todes** (2nd marriage) had two children
Neville and Rita
- **Scher, Phillip married Chasa Ethel Srubis** had 6 children.
Hanna, Hilda, Alice, Bessie, Solly and Freda
- **Scher Hanna married Charles Berman** had 5 children
Aubrey, Sydney, Geta, Elaine, Sandra
- **Scher, Alice married Charlie Lipshitz** had 5 children
Jossel, Noel, Lesley, Philip, Glenda
- **Scher, Solly married Eta Tosefsky** had 4 children
Phillip, Rael, Janine, Lauren
- **Scher, Haim married Dora Schmulowitz** had 5 children
Leah, Hilda, Goldie, Joseph, Joey
- **Scher, Joseph married Zippora Shwartz** had 2 children
Gita and Selwyn
- **Scher Joey married Ada Sank** had 4 children
Elisha, Mervyn, Seymour and Marcelle
- **Scher, Abie married Golda Berman** (killed in accident) had 4 children
Joe, Nokkie, Sox and Hanke (killed in accident)
- **Scher, Joe married Judith Bruk** (killed in accident) had 3 children
Leonard, Charles, Hershel
- **Scher, Nokkie married Vicky Surovsky** had 4 children
Colin, Neil, Avra and Roy

- **Spiro, Harry married Jessie Swerling** had 3 children (They had a general dealer's shop and sold farm implements such as tractors and trailers)
Norman, Monty, and Theo
- **Solomon, Herschel married Sadie Goodman** had 3 children (They owned the Grange Hotel)
Ivan, Howard and Anthony.
- **Borok, Samuel married Sylvia** had 5 children (They owned the Oxford Hotel)
Sonny, Ida, Gessie, Dovid and Lib
- **Borok, Sonny married Mary Katz** had 3 children
Ruth, Adele and Irma
- **Emdin Mr and Mrs Hillel**
- **Swerling, Solly and Hilda**
- **Swerling, Louis and Sarah** had 2 children (They had a general dealer's shop)
Leoni and Beverly
- **Sacks, Shlomo and his wife** had 3 children. (They had a general dealer's shop and sold school uniforms)
Sonia, Solly, and Harry.
- **Sacks, Harry married Geta Mandelkorn** had 2 children
Ronnie and Denise
- **Sacks, Ronnie and Avril had 4 children**
Martin, Stephen, Karen and Jonathan
- **Lerer, Abie married Rebecca Falkoff** had 2 children
Basil and Cecil
- **Schus, Mr and Mrs** had 3 children (They owned a garage and sold farm implements)
Charley, Sammy and Sophie.
- **Gordon, Aaron and Betty** had 4 children (They had a general dealers store.)
Reeve, David, Selwyn and Julian.
- **Rabinowitz, Dubbie and Lies** had 3 children
Tamar, Gidon and Liat.
- **Lipshitz, Sam married Peggy Lipshitz** had 2 children (They were in partnership with

his brother, Charlie Lipshitz

Jeffrey and Hilary

- **Touyz, Harry and Tilly** had 2 children (They had a clothing and household store.)

Steven and Martin

- **Goldberg, Victor married Babsie Weintraub** had 3 children (Victor had a pharmacy)

Peter, Jeremy and Pamela

- **Righthouse, Mr and Mrs** had 2 children (They had a garage for car repairs)

- **Miller, Clifford and Joan** had 3 children (Owned a garage for car repairs)



A word about this presentation:

This personal narrative was compiled by Gail Loon-Lustig from personal interviews and correspondence in December 2022 and January 2023 for **CHOL-Community History On-Line**.

The footprint of this community will be preserved for future generations to read and marvel at.

www.chol.website

A special thanks to Vicky Scher for the time spent collecting and telling her story!

