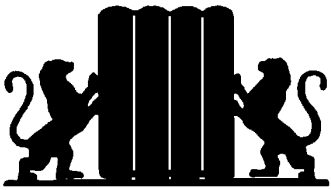

From Eastern Europe to South Africa
Memories of an Epic Journey
1880 – 1937

Gwynne Schrire

JACOB GITLIN LIBRARY SERIES No. 1

Published by
The Jacob Gitlin Library
Western Province Zionist Council
Cape Town

Series No 1

2007

ISBN 978-0-620-38587-9

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FOREWORD

In October 2006 the Jacob Gitlin Library in association with the South African Jewish Museum hosted a Library Week entitled "Jewish Cape Town 1841-1920" at the Albow Centre, Cape Town.

As part of the week, Gwynne Robins compiled and produced an audio presentation "Sharing memories – putting down roots in Cape Town". With fellow participants Dr Ute Ben Yosef, Clara Gersholowitz, Sara Pascall and John Simon, Gwynne and her team related the story of how our parents and forefathers arrived from foreign lands to carve out a new life at the foot of Africa. The panel read extracts from interviews – gleaned from the Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection, published memoirs, privately produced family reminiscences and newspaper articles.

It was a deeply moving experience as we followed the travails of the new immigrants to Cape Town between 1880 and 1930. The extracts were extraordinarily honest and searing in their depiction of the arduous journey to Cape Town and the often bewildering attempts by the greenhorns to establish themselves in the face of daunting challenges.

At the end of the evening, Prof. Howard Phillips of the University of Cape Town's History Department, an authority on early Jewish communal life in Cape Town, approached me with the urgent plea that the Gitlin Library undertake the publication of the readings. It would, he believed, constitute an invaluable source on Cape Town Jewish history.

With her usual grace and sense of responsibility, Gwynne accepted this challenge – and undertook to process, introduce and enlarge the extracts

with a view to publication. This publication, *From Eastern Europe to South Africa: memories of an epic journey 1880 – 1937*, is the fruit of her labours.

As a community, we are singularly fortunate to have a person of the calibre of Gwynne Robins in our midst. An accomplished and respected historian of South African Jewry, she is Deputy Director of the Jewish Board of Deputies (Cape Council). Prior to joining the Board, she worked for the Cape Jewish Seniors Association where she ran groups in the Southern Suburbs and Muizenberg.

A social worker by profession, she returned to university to do a major in Jewish Studies for which she received all three class medals. She is keenly interested in local Jewish history and has published two dozen articles, four books, a chapter in a book on *Jewish Writers of the Twentieth Century* and has edited books and shul publications.

She is passionate about the importance of preserving oral history and has interviewed many people, both on video and cassette, particularly Holocaust Survivors and was one of the South African interviewers for Steven Spielberg's Shoah Visual History Foundation.

The community is much in debt to Gwynne for producing this evocative and striking recollection of a bygone age. It gives us a "feel" for the period in a heartfelt and sensitive way.

It is with pleasure that I commend this volume as a notable contribution to the history of South African Jewry .

Dr David Scher
Chairman
Jacob Gitlin Library

From Eastern Europe to South Africa
Memories of an Epic Journey
1880 – 1937

Gwynne Schrire[1]

Most of South Africa's Jews come from Eastern Europe, the majority from Lithuania. It is estimated that 40 000 Jews arrived in the Cape between 1880 and 1914 and a further 30 000 between 1910 and 1948[2]. It was a major move between vastly different continents, countries, climates and cultures, a move not necessarily greeted with encouragement, at home or abroad.

"'Don't go', said rabbis and revolutionists, Chassidic rebbes and most Zionists. Each had his good reasons: the emigrants were going to religiously dissolute lands, the real struggle was in Russia and Jews would be in the galut wherever they settled. 'If you must emigrate,' said the Hafetz Haim, 'then leave your children behind if they are old enough to take care of themselves. Having emigrated, save money in your new land so that you may return in prosperity to Eastern Europe and 'walk there in the ways of the Lord.'"[3]

Having emigrated, few left records, documents, letters or reminiscences conveying an inkling of what the experience was like[4]. Using these scarce resources, this booklet tries to fill that gap and describe the emigrants' personal experiences on their journey and as newly arrived immigrants, utilising, wherever possible, their own words or the words of contemporaries.

Before examining their own descriptions of the momentous move, it is necessary to ask the question: why, after having lived in Europe for about one thousand years, did these daring souls decide to come to the land at the foot of Africa? What could be sufficiently compelling a reason to ignore the well-meaning advice of rabbis and friends, to leave the comfort and security of the familiar fireplace and to

uproot oneself? What could be sufficiently compelling a reason to move to a country where they could not speak the language, where they lacked appropriate educational qualifications, where they had few financial resources or family support systems?

Several reasons have been given. The need to avoid 25-year army service is one. But the 25-year military service stopped in 1857, leaving "an open wound in the heart of the martyred people which would not heal for many years to come."[5] Yet there was no emigration during the time that cruel conscription was taking place. The horror of the collective memory served a later generation as a rationale for the move.

During the Russo-Japanese war in 1904, on the other hand, it was a different matter, and a very powerful reason for families to send their sons away. In that war 30 000 Jewish soldiers were deliberately sent to the firing line in the Far East; with them were many Jewish doctors, thus depleting the Jewish settlements of their doctors. But this reason only applied during the war.

"My uncle paid someone to take my father across the border during the Russo-Japanese War as he could not get a passport because he was in the army reserves."[6]

M.B., Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies Oral History Collection

Antisemitism is another reason given for the move.

"There are approximately 650 discriminatory laws against the Jews in our code. About 90% of the entire Jewish population is an insecure mass living in poverty and misery."[7]

The Tsar's Palen Commission, 1886

"Russian people could not welcome Jews because Jews were more competent and educated than the Russians and were likely to force them out of economic life. One third of the Jews would die out, one third would leave the country and one third would be assimilated without a trace."[8]

Count Pobiedonostev to the Paris Council of the Jewish Colonization Association, 1898

Theodore Herzl learnt about this old prejudice first hand from the Russian Finance Minister, Count Serge Witte.

He received me at once, but was not amiable at all. A tall, ugly, coarse, serious person, about 60 years of age. A peculiar flattened nose, knock-knees, deformed feet which cause him to walk clumsily. He sat with his back to the window so that I sat there in full daylight.

"There are honest prejudices and dishonest prejudices," he said in his miserable French. "The Czar has honest prejudices against the Jews... mainly religious in nature. There are also prejudices that are materialistic in origin, caused by Jewish competition. Then there are people who are antisemites because it is fashionable to be. Finally there are those who are antisemitic for business reasons. Especially journalists are in this class. But it must be admitted that the Jews provide enough reasons for hostility. There is a characteristic arrogance about them. Yet most of them are poor, and because they are poor they are dirty and make an offensive impression. They also engage in all sorts of nasty pursuits, like pimping and usury. So that the friends of Jews find it hard to come to their defence. I myself am a friend of the Jews."

(I couldn't suppress the thought: how then do the enemies talk?)

"It is hard to stand up for the Jews, for then people immediately say that one has been bought. Lately another weighty factor has been added: the participation of the Jews in revolutionary movements. I believe it is the fault of our government. The Jews are too oppressed. I used to say to the late Tsar, Alexander III, "Majesty, if it is possible to drown the six or seven million Jews in the Black Sea, I have absolutely no objection to it. But if it is not possible, we must let them live."

Finally he asked me what I wanted from the Russian government?

"Certain encouragements", I said.

"But the Jews are being given encouragement to emigrate. Kicks in the behind, for example."[9]

Herzl's diaries, St Petersburg, 9.8.1903

In Russia these kicks in the behind often took the form of State-sponsored pogroms, with the slogan, **"**Beat the Jews and Save Russia!**"** These pogroms took place under the eyes of the police who made themselves scarce for three days until the rent-a-crowd mob from out of town had satisfied their greed and blood lust and disappeared. Little justice was dispersed and the few peasants arrested were let off with light sentences.

"There had been a pogrom the week before we left in 1907 in which all our possessions, including our clothes had been stolen. Our neighbour had hidden us in the cellar and had put us on a train."[10]

M.B., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

However, the country in Eastern Europe with the highest emigration rate was not antisemitic Russia with its 650 discriminatory laws and carefully planned pogroms. It was Galicia where the Jews were emancipated and there were virtually no pogroms. The Ukraine was the heartland of the pogroms but Ukraine had a low emigration rate before the First World War. Pogroms did not push the Ukrainian Jews to leave; emancipation and lack of pogroms did not keep the Galizianers at home[11]. There were very few pogroms in Lithuania yet Lithuania had a very high emigration rate[12].

One has to look for some other cause sufficient to persuade people to make the sacrifices necessary to save up enough money to buy tickets, uproot themselves and go on a long journey to the other end of the world, away from the security of their homeland, their synagogues and their support systems. Persecution, pogroms and conscription were not the major reasons for emigration. A far more persuasive cause is found in the economic conditions under which they lived.

"The Jews live in great congestion, very often several families in one small room. Lack of cleanliness is a marked sign of their dwellings.

The expenses of the Jew are small. His breakfast consists of radishes, onions, garlic, herring or bread. The more comfortable people take tea and soup, fish or meat for their midday meal. There are tradesmen whose families fast the whole day until the breadwinner comes home in the evenings and brings his earnings."[13]

Report from a Lithuanian village, 1858

"In 1911 two-thirds of the Jewish population of Lithuania earned their living by serving as 'hewers of wood and drawers of water', coachmen, brickmakers, and other servile capacities. Poverty was endemic, sanitary conditions extremely primitive. More than one third of the Jews depended on charity; money forwarded by relatives provided some with their sole income ."[14]

Julius Brutzkus (future Minister for Jewish Affairs, Independent Republic of Lithuania) 1921,

Conditions in Poland were much the same.

"Unfortunately, there were many poor children who never had anything to eat in the morning. The teachers knew that something had to be done and we were each told to bring one extra sandwich to school. The teachers used to go around with trays and tell the poor children to take one. I can tell you the children were just waiting for the sandwiches. The teachers would also eat one to show everybody that there was no need to be ashamed to take one. The government would provide a glass of milk.

"When I was a youngster, we lived in a five-storey apartment with a courtyard. There was no lift, we walked up all the steps to our home. Downstairs in the cellars, where the walls were wet, lived poor Jews! There were the poorest people. We used to go and visit them on Fridays to bring them food, everybody sent a kitka and some food for them. I remember seeing a man in a corner bending by candle light over a pair of shoes. In another corner was a big bag on which were three children with pale faces. Their faces were *white!* They got no vitamins in their diet. What did they live on? Potatoes the whole year! They couldn't go out because it was too cold. But they were not isolated cases

– there were thousands like this! The poverty of the Jewish masses in Poland was something unbelievable!

"Lots of people were sick and there were no antibiotics. People would die from silly things like colds. Thousands of Jewish children had TB. Many children had lice. We had to cut off our hair at school as a hygienic measure to stop us getting it."

Cantor Max Badash, interview, July 2006

Living under these circumstances, it is not surprising that when the Jews read in a special supplement to a Jewish newspaper *Rassviet* a statement authorised by the Russian Minister of the Interior, Count Ignatyev, that said: "The Western Frontier is open for the Jews... and the Jews have taken ample advantage of this right and their emigration has in no way been hampered", they rushed to take advantage before their emigration would be hampered.[15] The Minister's statement received wide-spread publicity and the phrase "the western frontier is open for the Jews" was widely quoted.

It was the pervasive poverty of the shtetls, not the persecution, pogroms and conscription, that was the major push factor. Despite pogroms, Jews could make a living in the Ukraine. In Galicia they could not. Lithuania had three times as many unskilled labourers, skilled workers and cottage industrialists than were needed to meet the population's needs. From 1808, when Jewish and governmental records became available, some 45% of the Jewish labour force was unemployed and more than 35% of Jewish families in the Pale appealed to Jewish welfare institutions for assistance at least once.[16]

There was thus a strong incentive to leave Eastern Europe to move to a place that offered better economic opportunities. Most of these immigrants, some 85-90%, moved to English-speaking countries.[17]

More than three million Jews crossed the borders, of whom about 80% went to America, 7% to Western Europe, the balance to Palestine, South Africa, Canada, Australia and Argentina.[18] A higher percentage of Jews crossed national borders than did any other people with the possible exception of the Irish.[19] Between 1881 and 1900 more

than 600 000 Jews went to the United States, another 500 000 between 1903 and 1907.

"We had strange fancies about South Africa. For most of us, living as we were in dire poverty and squalor, it was a fantastic world where the streets were paved with gold and we would live in marble halls with magnificent candelabra, dining at tables laden with viands of the most appetising variety and taste. But when I married… I became less enthusiastic about sailing for a foreign land where I would have to learn a new language, live in a different climate and among strangers… but my wife was not so pleased with my decision to remain on. Her people were in South Africa, and she was keen to rejoin the family."[20]

Moishe Levin

Having looked at the reasons for emigrating, let us now look at the records that describe the journey and its aftermath. The first phase of the journey was to leave their home town and cross Europe to the ocean.

Cape Town
January, 1900
To my well beloved wife Taube Kretzmar

I left (Birsz) on a Sunday Rosh Chodesh Elul and arrived in Ponovez on the Monday from where I took a train to Sadorah. In Sadorah I hired a car to go to town but at that moment I was approached by a man who looked very decent and asked me,

'Young man, where are you going?'

As an inexperienced traveller, I had a rule to be very careful, I gave him a good look, scratched my ear, and answered coldly,

'What difference does it make, I am going to town.'

He understood however that the transport was going further, so he said to me,

'You are going to an agent, please tell me to whom you are going because he is from our company. I am also going there.'

I told him that I was not a man to tell lies. I told him that I was going to Hirsch Katz, so he said,

'That's good as I am his brother and we can go together because we are leaving tonight by train so you can go immediately.'

That night we left by train. I was very afraid lest we should meet with a goy who would ask where we were going that night but the agent must have taught the goyim and replied with an excuse that they should not ask questions - so we travelled until Abbel where there were another two persons on "the other side" (of the border and we crossed) without any problems. From Thursday to Saturday night we were together in a house that was not very big and there were 200 men. There was no room to sit or stand or sleep and the noise was up to high heaven in a house without a ceiling and a draught from all the windows and doors so I caught a cold from which I suffered for the next three weeks until I arrived at the big boats in London. My heart was sore enough. Most of the travellers were going to America, the women and children, big and small. The father had gone to

America 5 or 6 or 7 or 8 years before and now they have sent tickets for the family and the children.

I saw there the true picture, children who grew up without a father and where the mother has such a face, like snow in mud, so the children grew up unmannered and knowing nothing of human kindness and G-dliness. I was very upset when I thought about it, that I have also left children at home and who is going to bring them up with character and good manners and belief in G -d?

Your ever loving husband,

Tevya Kretzmar[21]

Like Tevya, these immigrants would have consulted with agents, people who were able both legally and illegally to assist with the journey, provide information about trains, routes and costs. Within the shtetls there were networks of sub-agents responsible for initial contacts with would-be travellers.

"Tauroggen being a border town, a lot of smuggling went on both in goods and emigrants who could not obtain a *bilyet* or passport to cross the border because they did not reside within the border zone limits of about fifty miles. Therefore there were a lot of agents who used to bribe some of the border patrol officers, who, in turn, looked the other way, and smuggled the emigrants across, for which they used to charge a substantial sum of money, payable in advance, of course. Occasionally some passengers were caught due to some sudden change of patrol officers, then everybody was in a lot of trouble, especially the agents, and it meant tightening the border patrol. The agents who were more successful in smuggling passengers across the border were usually highly recommended, just like a doctor or lawyer, resulting in jealousy among each other and resorting to fights, often with knives."[22]

Having crossed the borders the immigrants would arrive at receiving stations. Many crossed Germany by train to get to Hamburg or Bremen and the next stage of the journey.[23]

"When I heard the good news that I was about to leave for South Africa I felt that at last has come the real opportunity for me to leave the persecution and freedom-denying Russia where we lived in constant fear of a pogrom and that now I would go to a free world with opportunities for all. I left Tauroggen the beginning of June 1909 and was accompanied by my whole family to Tilsit, East Prussia, where we stayed overnight. My father and sister cried constantly and were very much heart broken to see me leave, and I was feeling pretty bad as well. Early next morning Mother and I took the ferry boats on the River Nieman and along the Baltic Sea to Koenigsburg. We arrived late in the evening and after being examined by three doctors, my ticket was OK'd by the emigration authorities to proceed to South Africa. Mother saw me off the following morning at the station where I took the train to Hamburg and then I broke down at having to leave my parents, home and friends to go to a foreign country, and for the first time realised that I was completely on my own."[24]

"One day Father took me on one side, with a face more serious than usual and said that he must ask me to help him. He had decided to emigrate to South Africa and it would be necessary to raise the money in some way or other. Could I bear to sell my stamp collection? Though it came as a shock to me, I did feel a certain pride that, despite my youth, I was able to do something really important for the family. So I said good-bye to my beloved Cape three-corner stamps. Even so it turned out that there was not enough money for all of us to go, and to begin with, only Father and I set off for South Africa. Never will I forget the last few days at Kaiserslautern, the packing up and the taking down of pictures, the messages and pieces of advice thrown at me. Then came the sad sad drive to the station and the mounting excitement as I climbed into the train. The journey across Europe in a rattling third

class compartment, sitting up by day and night, the increasing grubbiness and the hasty meals on stations in the days before dining cars, the Customs at the frontier and the flat coastal lands before we went aboard a ship across the North Sea: all these remain in my mind in a kind of haze."[25]

Max Sonnenberg

"After a time we arrived at the small railway station, from where we would embark for Libau.

"'Be careful you don't trip over the signal-wires', my mother said, as we alighted from Berchik's wagon and crossed to the other side of the railway-line. I stepped over the glistening rails and wires. Hours passed; then with a mighty roar the engine bore down on us. We took our places in the coaches that had come to rest. The first mishap of the journey occurred early on: the train window through which I was watching the world unfold itself came crashing down on my fingers.

"'The Russian trains are as ramshackle as their empire', an elderly Jew standing next to me said. This empire tumbled into the dust a few years later."[26]

Bernard Sachs

"When we left we went by horse and cart to Djediek which had a railway station. By railway we went to Kovno to finish getting our papers. We stayed in what to me those days was like a palace. It was probably the cheapest boarding house. Kovno was already a sophisticated town. We discovered a toilet and while my brother was switching the electric light on and off I was flushing the toilet and while I was switching on the light my brother was flushing the toilet. Then we left by train to Genoa… It was an incredibly dramatic move from total poverty and total non-civilisation in a country like Lithuania to a country like Italy and from there to board an Italian boat where there was all this luxury."

Louis Karol, interview, 9.1.2007

The immigrants had been warned by their rabbis and by newspaper articles about the lax religious standards and problems of social isolation in Africa, but this had little effect on the push to leave.

"The day before I was due to leave for South Africa, I got a long awaited letter from my colleague there. My father had intercepted it and had kept it back from me. Had I received the letter when it arrived, I would never have come to South Africa.

15 February 1926

My dear friend Solomon

Now when you are making a living in Lithuania it has entered your mind to drop everything and seek a fortune in a Golden Land forgetting at the same time that not everything is gold that glitters!

Here I was confronted by a wall it is impossible to break through or climb over. The Typographical Union is very strong and a non-member has got no chance of getting a job anywhere. In addition, one must know English. There is no Yiddish or Hebrew work to be found. Eventually I had to give up all hopes of getting a job in a printing establishment and had to look for a job in a shop. Some people are lucky by getting a job in a Kaferite. This is a sort of restaurant for blacks. When they come out of the mines they have their meals and buy their essential products for their requirements. To work there is slavery indeed. The working hours are between 14 and 15 hours per day in an atmosphere of stinking workers and stinking food. Even such jobs are difficult to get now. The reasons are that many immigrants have arrived recently and the country is not developed yet. For those arriving now prospects are not bright.

The cultural and religious standards here are very low. The youth is assimilated and they don't know anything that concerns Jews and Judaism. Therefore I feel as a duty to write

to you all about it before you have left. I suggest you wait for a few more years.
Regards to all friends,
Sincerely,
your friend Zalman"[27]

Solomon Fedler

Hatzefira newspaper, 1891

"The religious state of Jews in South Africa is very bad. I am filled with shame to have to report publicly that our brethren have forgotten... their people, their religion and language. Their children grow wild in the absence of any schools to give them Jewish education so that when they grow up they will be completely ignorant of their people and their faith. Even the few Rabbis who occupy positions in a few towns... do nothing to improve the position of the children[28]."

N.D. Hoffman, 1891

Hamaggid newspaper, 1881

"In regard to the observance of our religion I can give the assurance that we are not guilty of all the things that are attributed to us. True, we do not observe all the commandments of the Torah as do our brothers who live in civilized countries. We have to realize that the nature of our work and the nature of the people with whom we are associated are an obstacle in regard to the observance of religion." [29]

Kimberley Jew, 1881

Raphael Senderowitz (back row right), Kimberley, 1880s
(In possession of the writer, his great grand-daughter)

"We arrived in Libau where we stayed about a week. I went to see relations but when I told them I was going to South Africa they were very upset and they told me that to go to South Africa was simply madness. They had heard from people that life was very hard there, that some of them even got married to the black women. There was no sense for such a young man like myself to go to South Africa and to work hard for years to make a few pounds when I could get a beautiful girl here with lots of money. All the stories were very depressing but I was determined to continue with my journey."[30]

Simon Leeman

"When I arrived at Hamburg, I was met along with other emigrants at the station and boarded a horse-drawn bus to an emigration camp where we had to wait for our boats. I stayed here for about four days and was treated very nicely. Every morning we were examined by

a doctor and allowed to leave the camp for a few hours every afternoon but had to be back by 5pm. On June 10 I got aboard the *Prinz Regent*, operated by the Deutsche Ost Afrika Linie, stopping a few hours at Bremerhaven, at Antwerp and at Southampton."[31]

Nathan Freedman

Going via Libau avoided the long train journey through Germany from Lithuania and the new immigrants could then take a cargo boat from Libau to London. The journey from Libau was shorter than that from Hamburg, but as Libau was outside the Pale of Settlement, there was a period when this could bring additional problems with the police. There were stories of people hiding in terror in coal berths in Libau while guards pierced the cargo with their bayonets, and of a victim who suffocated to death while hiding during a police raid.[32] The journey across the North Sea was the second phase of the journey.

"In the early hours of the morning, when it was still dark, the train slid into the Baltic port of Libau. We heard the strange, quiet voices of the men on the platform, and dressed hurriedly. The station-room in which we waited was packed with people sipping tea served from copper samovars. But what fascinated me most was the bright gaslight. We were met by the agent whose business it was to see us through all the intricacies of passports, train and ship-tickets, and other routine of the life of the immigrant. We were taken to a hospital where the doctor examined us for contagious disease, which would bar our entry into England, our first stopping-place.

"It was on a Friday night that we boarded the small Russian boat. Men, women, children and sucklings crouched on the cold stones or on the dirty bundles. They travelled with crates and packages – bedclothes, odd bits of furniture, tea kettles, baskets of food, samovars, phylacteries and prayer shawls. The Russian officers, leaning against the deck-rails, laughed derisively at the bedraggled mass of humanity."[33]

Bernard Sachs

Logbook, *SS Romeo*

"Left Riga, 18 August 1909
Left Libau, 19 August 1909
Loaded cargo and passengers: 20 tons pork, 35 horses, 41 migrants (including 29 adults, 8 children, 6 infants)."[34]

"1902. The passengers on the cattleship the *Baltic* with its antisemitic captain, took up their quarter on the floor of the hard, dung-covered, vast and gloomy stable among the hay racks and feeding troughs. A barrel of salt herring and half a barrel of boiled potatoes in their jackets would be lowered for their meals.

"Gradually they sorted themselves out according to their sex and the laws of propriety - the women taking the farthest corner. They grouped themselves according to their interests, places of birth and even classes, talked, argued politics and Zionism, played cards, knitted, read and sang, and passed the four days away." [35]

Victor Barwin

*"*Our neighbour had put us on a train. It was like travelling like cattle all in a row, my mother and five children, until we got to Libau and from there we were put on a ship that was also like a cattle truck."[36]

M.B., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

*"*My boat from Libau was like a cattleship - no cabins, all open and open decks... with pieces of sacking sort of separating. The food we had was just black bread, herring and cabbage."[37]

E.K., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"It was a small boat where we were treated like vilde chayas. They put a barrel of salt herrings on the deck, the cooked potatoes, boiled potatoes - "*FRESS!*" - we were treated like animals."[38]

S.F., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

*"*We travelled in a very small boat in which the passengers had to stand and catch the herrings themselves."[39]

I.S., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"My mother spoke to somebody who understood our Kashrut demands, so we got plenty bread and butter and potatoes and smoked fish and my mother cooked for us."[40]

R.I., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"The sleeping conditions were indescribable, with men, women and children having to lie huddled together on bare mattresses without any hygienic covering or sheets."[41]

P.S., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"We slept in some sort of bunk on the boat from Libau - my head against somebody's feet and my feet against somebody's head and my mother and her cousin could not take it down there - they slept on the decks. That smell! All humanity crowded together."[42]

M.I., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"The voyage through the Baltic was uninteresting as was also the undeviating menu of potatoes and herring against which even our plebeian appetites began to revolt after the second day. The North Sea was particularly stormy and choppy. Five days after we left Libau we could discern the outline of London on the horizon."[43]

Bernard Sachs

Logbook, *SS Romeo*

"Left Libau, 19 August, 1909.
Sailed via Kiel Canal.
Anchored off Gravesend, midnight, 23 August 1909
Cleared customs, Gravesend, 5:30 pm, 23 August 1909
Disembarked passengers, London Wharf, 11.25 am, 24 August 1909."[44]

The immigrants had finally reached London. One such disembarkation was observed by a social reformer and journalist, George Sims, in 1901.

"It is a pouring wet day. The rain is coming down in torrents, and one has to wade through small lakes and rivulets of mud to reach the narrow pathway… where the immigrant passengers of the vessel lying at anchor in the Thames are to land… The wretched immigrants are taken off in small boats and rowed to the steps.

"Look at them, the men, thin and hungry-eyed, the women with their heads bare and only a thin shawl over their shoulders, the children terrified by the swaying of the boat that lies off waiting to land when the other boats have discharged their load…

"When at last they land it is in a dark archway crowded with loafers and touts all busily trying to confuse them, to seize their luggage, almost fighting to get possession of it.

"Fortunately Mr Somper, the Superintendent of the Poor Jews' Temporary Shelter, is here also. As the scared and shivering foreigners step ashore he speaks to them either in Yiddish or Lettish, and finds out if they have an address to go to… For most of them have friends somewhere… In the shelter they are taken care of with their money and their baggage."[45]

Officials from the Poor Jews' Temporary Shelter would meet the newly arrived immigrants at the docks and march them to the shelter at 84 Leman Street, Whitechapel, where they would remain until they could be put on board boats going to South Africa.

Minute book, Poor Jews Temporary Shelter, London

"*24 August 1909, 28 passengers from Libau off* SS Romeo
26 August 1909, 28 passengers off SS Romeo *leaving from Southampton for South Africa on* Tintagel Castle."[46]

The Shelter received a subsidy from the Union and Castle lines of 7/6d a night for food and accommodation and 5/- for every passenger

met and seen off onto one of their ships to South Africa. Thus it was in the interest of the Shelter to persuade would-be immigrants to go to South Africa rather than to America, which was nearer. The Shelter also provided them with tickets, even with South African railway timetables. To the annoyance of competing agents and moneychangers, the Shelter refunded to the would-be traveller the commission and fees paid by the shipping company for the ticket.[47]

"From the secretary,
Poor Jews Temporary Shelter
To: North Atlantic shipping companies

Perhaps, I may be permitted to say that the Institution on whose behalf I am now writing is entirely a philanthropic organisation whose object is and has been for the last twenty-two years to look after and protect the interests of the large number of continental Jewish transmigrants who annually pass through this country for the United States, Canada, Argentina, South Africa and all parts of the world.

Our officers meet all the boats arriving in any part of the docks in London and we have also made arrangements whereby we are advised of the arrival of travellers at the various railway stations.

For the reception of such, we have just built a new and commodious building registered by the London County Council complete with every sanitary detail, lavatories, bathrooms, disinfecting chambers etc.

I may perhaps be permitted to add that although the Institution is mainly intended for Jewish transmigrants we make no distinction in the matter of creeds...

For many years we have acted as the receiving institution of the Union-Castle Line, meeting, housing and feeding their passengers till the time comes for them to leave when we see them off either at the steamer at Blackwall or at Waterloo, our representative at Southampton conducting them to the steamer[48]."

At the docks in front of their boat. (Shmuel Nakoff, the writer's great-uncle, is the short man in centre.)
With acknowledgements, South African Jewish Museum

The ships that plied the route from England to Cape Town were mainly from the two rival British companies - the Union fleet and Currie's Castle fleet, with the heavily subsidised German East Africa Company, the D.O.A.L. in competition after 1892.[49] The ships were powered both by sails and steam power. It was not till the twentieth century that steam power alone was trusted. There were two kinds of voyages to the Cape - by the smaller, slower intermediate service or by mail service. In 1901 the Cape Times advertised first class fares on the Union Castle line from 30 guineas, 23 guineas for second and 10 guineas for third class.

UNION-CASTLE LINE.

MAIL STEAMERS FOR SOUTHAMPTON, CALLING AT MADEIRA.

Oct. 9—	DUNOTTAR CASTLE,	Captain Rigby
Oct. 16—	BRITON,	Captain Creaghe.
Oct. 23—	NORHAM CASTLE,	Captain Becher.
Oct. 30—	CARISBROOK CASTLE,	Captain Tyson.
Nov. 6—	SAXON,	Captain Morton.

EXTRA INTERMEDIATE STEAMER FOR LONDON.

GALICIAN, Captain Le Sueur, about 9th October, calling at Las Palmas and Plymouth

FARES:

From 30 Guineas first; 23 Guineas second, and 10 Guineas third.

Cape Times, 8. 10.1901

"I travelled the cheapest way - if there was a tenth class, I would have travelled tenth."[50]

M. J., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection.

Stowing away was even cheaper, but it had its disadvantages.

"My father was a shoemaker from Ponedel. He would have been conscripted into the army for five years when he turned 21 and he didn't fancy that at all. He decided to follow his brother to South Africa. Because he didn't have the money to pay the fare across, he packed up his goods and chattels and climbed onto a small boat and stowed away. He got as far as Holland but his hiding place was discovered and he was kicked off the boat. He then had to walk through Holland. He looked for work in Holland but was told there was no work available for shoemakers. So he said, 'Well I had better go on', and stowed away on another boat. He arrived in Southampton, and went to a huge shelter in

the East End where he met Jews from all over. They said, 'There is no point in you staying over here. There is no work here! We advise you to go on with your travels.' So he stowed away on a boat to South Africa. This time he was discovered when they were out at sea and was returned to Southampton. Then he had to work in order to pay his fare to South Africa."

Jean Ginsberg and Anne Flax, interviewed, 26.9. 2006

Intense competition between the Union and the Castle lines for the mail service to the Cape reduced the time for the journey from 26 days in 1883 to 19 days by 1894.[51] The record set by the Union steamship *Scot* in 1893 for 14 days stood till 1936.[52]

"When we got to London, my friend asked me to go shopping with her. She was going to Cape Town where she was going to marry someone she did not know. She was rather nervous. She wanted me to help her choose a smart London hat so that she could make a good impression on her husband-to-be. But when we got back to the Shelter we found that my family and the others in our group had already left to board the ship and we had missed the boat. So we had to stay in the Shelter by ourselves. The officials put us onto the next ship to Cape Town but we did not have any clothes to wear - my family had taken our cases down to the boat in the hope that we would manage to board on time. So we only had the clothes that we had been shopping in. Our ship was called the S*S Scot."*[53]

As told to Sarah Oblowitz by her mother

"The *SS Scot* had 307 passengers. We slept eight in a cabin... four too many. The cabins opened into the dining room. The electric light was splendid. No matches and hence no danger. There was a laundry and a barber, who charged sixpence. One night the sea flooded some of the cabins and a man was washed out of his bunk. Another night we were invited to a concert in the first class saloon, which was like a palace with a fine piano, palms, revolving chairs and carved woodwork."[54]

"We did not realise that this voyage on the *SS Scot* was a record breaking run, so when we got to Cape Town my family were still at sea. So was our luggage. We were still wearing the clothes we left London in. I hope my friend's husband-to-be noticed her new hat, not her old clothes."[55]

As told to Sarah Oblowitz by her mother

The Union-Castle Line.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE "CAPE TIMES."

Sir,—In your issue of yesterday's date you give a short account of the trip of the Raglan Castle, which arrived here on Wednesday last. For some reason or other you have omitted to mention the fact of the ship carrying, in addition to the few first and second class passengers, some 300 third (steerage) class passengers, of whom a goodly proportion were foreigners. There was much discontent amongst the crowd in regard to the filthy habits these encourage amongst themselves during the journey to Cape Town, especially when partaking of their meals, when large quantities of good and wholesome food were indiscriminately wasted. It is high time the company decided upon providing special steamers, once or twice monthly say, at a reduced rate for these people. I have made inquiries amongst them, and find that if this idea was carried into effect the people themselves would like it, especially if they could cook their own meals aboard. I would also like to draw the attention of the company to the scant accommodation of baths for the use of third class passengers. Some 260 passengers had the use of one single bath on the Raglan Castle, and a request to be permitted to have the use of a second class bath during certain hours was refused. The ship took over 24 days to reach Cape Town, and at the London office I was assured that there would be no delay, and that the journey would be accomplished in the usual 20 or 21 days at the most. To me it has been a serious loss, and I can assure the company that if it wishes to successfully compete with the great lines which shortly are about to run their large steamers to South Africa it must "buck up," to use a vulgar phrase, and still improve upon their system.—I am, etc.,

A PASSENGER.

8 October, 1901

TO THE EDITOR OF THE " CAPE TIMES"

Sir, There was much discontent amongst the crowd in regard to the filthy habits (of the foreign passengers)... especially when partaking of their meals... I would also like to draw the attention of the company to the scant accommodation of baths for the use of third class passengers. Some 260 passengers had the use of one single bath on the *Raglan Castle* and a request to be permitted to have the use of a second class bath during certain hours was refused. The ship took over 24 days to reach Cape Town.

A PASSENGER

Cape Times, 8 October 1901

"I travelled steerage on the *Tintagel Castle.* The men and women all slept in the centre and there were bugs all on the deck. You got beans, potatoes, black bread and there was no knife. Packed together, men, women and children - and people were so sick."[56]

R.O., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"We travelled third class in the *Dover Castle* in 1908. I was put in a sort of a barn. They had three-tier beds, one slept on the bottom, one in the middle and one on top. My younger brother aged 4 stayed with my mother and sister in a cabin, which was much superior to mine. For meals we used to sit down at long tables, ten or twelve of us. I used to watch the waiters unroll the tablecloth for the long tables."[57]

Rev S.W., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"The 2nd and 3rd class passengers used to throw oranges at us and the children used to scramble to catch them."[58]

I.W., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"The food was not so bad, but the people! We were sitting down at the table to eat - herring, potatoes,- and a man took a herring, tore it in half and started eating it. I was ashamed to be Jewish the way they behaved at table. If you did not grab quickly, you did not get. One woman would take all the oranges. I asked the steward for a boiled egg for a sick friend, another woman grabbed it and said,

'Why must he have an egg, my husband is sick.'"[59]

R.A., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"The food would come around in bulk and those Jews who were gamblers would bribe the officials and get in first and take the best."[60]

A.R., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"Bread and tea we got on the boat, but the other food mother took along, in pecklach and bundles - we only lived on bread and potatoes. Six weeks on the water and a terrible boat and my mother took along food for the whole time."[61]

A.A., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"Being so religious mad, we lived on black bread dipped in sugar water and dried out, which we had with tea and eggs."[62]

M.J., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"After leaving the Bay of Biscay on the *Prinz Regent* I started getting seasick and could not even look at food, but soon got over it and

enjoyed whatever they served on board ship. Of course, since nothing was Kosher, I did not eat any meat but there was plenty of fish and dairy dishes. Out of about 600 passengers I was the only Jewish boy and the youngest travelling all alone, but knowing how to speak German, I did not feel too lonesome though the Germans kept on teasing me. On one occasion, when they served a supper consisting of boiled potatoes and what looked like chipped beef, I asked what it was. A German sitting next to me said it was chipped herring, so I took a good helping, which tasted rather salty and good, but after supper they had a lot of fun with me, by telling me it was chipped bacon and therefore I was no longer a Jew. It did not bother me much as long as I had not known what I was eating and therefore committed no sin."[63]

Nathan Freedman

"My mother brought with her a sugar pocket of dry fish and on deck we would boil up one of these fish and eat it. Bread we had every day."[64]

A.R.. Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"At Southampton another Jewish young man got on board the *Prinz Regent*. He brought along with him cases of tea, cookies and Nestles milk and we had our own tea parties. All the foodstuffs which Mother had packed up for me to take along (a whole sack full) soon spoiled and I had to throw it overboard."[65]

Nathan Freedman

"The Jewish women used to come up to do the cooking, My mother took a turn, so did my Aunts but we had kosher cooking."[66]

M.I., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"My mother cooked her meals somewhere near the cabin. They did not have kosher meat so they gave her fish."[67]

R.I., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"We travelled third class on the *Dover Castle* in 1908 during Pesach. My older brother hid behind a tarpaulin while laying tefillin.

The Jewish passengers were given a section of the third class kitchen as well as new pots, new plates and new utensils. We also got matzos and kosher meat with the stamp of Dr. Adler, the Chief Rabbi of England. They gave us trestle tables in a certain part of the hold of the ship, which was empty, and we celebrated two Seders. There were about seventy Jews, men, women and children. On Friday night all the Jewish women lit candles. My mother lit hers in the basin, as the ship was unsteady. The steward came and blew them all out. The following Shabbat only a few women tried to light candles. These were also blown out. The last Shabbat on board my mother was the only one who lit her candles."[68]

S.W., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

Apart from religious problems, the Jewish immigrants also had cultural problems caused by ignorance of the language and the way of life around them.

"I was terrified during the 21-day journey. We were the only Jewish family on the ship, my mother and five children, and we could not understand anything. We were too frightened to come down and my mother would send me, because I was small, with a basin to get food for us - I would slip down the pole...wherever I could get in with my basin to get food for us - they used to dish up the food in big cartons, boiled potatoes, herring and all sorts of things. Fortunately there was a Jewish person in the ship's orchestra and he heard about us and he would visit us every day and bring us nice things."[69]

M.B., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"In the mornings the waiter would ask me if I had finished. I thought `finish' meant `fish' so I would sit and wait for the fish. When we got to Madeira I was given grapes and bananas. I ate the grapes, but I threw the bananas overboard. They tasted awful. I did not know you had to peel them first."[70]

J.T., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"We knew no English. When we went to the *Athlone Castle* saloon to eat, we met an unpleasant man who said to us in Yiddish,

‘When the waiter comes with the menu, reply “Nothing”’. So we said ‘Nothing’. Everybody was eating but we got no food. Each time the waiter came, the man said to us, “Say ‘Nothing!’”

“Another man came up to us and said, ‘I can see you people are not eating. Why are you not ordering?’

“I realised that the other man had clearly been a very bad person. The second man called the waiter who gave us beautiful food and fruit - oranges, bananas and grapes. We asked for herring – gentiles don’t eat herring. What we could not get over was that early in the morning, the steward would knock on the door, ‘Tea? Coffee?’. We were not used to being woken up with tea and coffee.”[71]

Cantor Max Badash, personal memoirs

“I was 12 and I was travelling alone, I could not read or understand English. At the table I sat opposite a Yiddishe man who was making his second journey to the Cape. I would watch him carefully at meal times, and when the waiter came to me, I would point to the identical item on the menu that the man had pointed to.

“Years later, I was travelling on a train to Kroonstad and I sat opposite an Englishman at breakfast. That was the first time I realised that for breakfast each morning on the ship I had ordered and eaten bacon and eggs.”[72]

P.S., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

“On the boat there were a few South Africans Jews coming back from business trips. One spoke a good Yiddish and was a great help to us because we could discuss our future in South Africa. One day he told me that he was very worried about me because he had noticed that I was the only one who did not play cards, I did not smoke and I never went to the bar for a drink. He said I would never make a success in South Africa if I continued like this: cards was an accepted game throughout South Africa; it was most important to play cards to get to know people, it was good for getting a job and good for business; there was nothing wrong either with smoking a cigarette and sometimes having a drink.

"This upset me very much. I had been brought up in a house where card playing was regarded as a crime and immoral. I decided that I would try to learn the game of cards. I tried for weeks but it did not work. It did not appeal to me at all. I decided that under no circumstances would I change my way of life or give up my principles."[73]

Simon Leeman

"After several weeks we entered Cape Town harbour. It was a difficult sea trip as the boat was tossed by the stormy waters most of the way and we were all seasick. We were more than pleased when our wandering had come to an end. The ship now lay peacefully in the harbour and our wonder grew as we looked at Table Mountain with its tremendous tablecloth of cloud. It was one of the most magnificent sights I had ever seen in my life. As wonderful was the sight of the houses on the slopes of the mountain as if they had been built into its haunches. And it was even more wonderful when night fell and the illumined dwellings ringed the slopes higher and higher, curving this way, then that. It was truly a city of magic."[74]

Moishe Levin

"Here were these passengers from the Northern hemisphere where we had lots of fruit, but not oranges and grapes which were rare and expensive. We had suddenly come onto a boat that was full of grapes and full of oranges. I did not know my father and I decided to save some oranges for him as a treat. I remember coming into Table Bay early in the morning and you could not imagine the spectacle. It was still a bit dark and I was shouting to my mother, 'Come and see the stars on the mountain!' Of course the stars were the street lights in Camps Bay and Sea Point. The sight of that mountain was such an awe inspiring experience. Then the *Dulio* came into the docks and my mother said, 'That's your father!' She pointed to a man down below and I took the oranges that I had been collecting for him as a present and I started throwing them to him. My father kicked them into the water. All he needed was a customs officer to come and say, 'Hey! What is going

on over here? These people have not gone through customs yet!' It took me a long time to overcome that disappointment."

Louis Karol, interview, 9.1.2007

"We had to go down a rope ladder from the boat when we landed in Cape Town."[75]

A.A., Kaplan Centre Oral History Collection

"My father, Harry Stodel, walked down a gangplank when he arrived in Cape Town in 1889. A strong south easter was blowing so he put his hand up to protect his eyes and a £5 note blew into it!"[76]

Jack Stodel

Not all were so lucky. Of 32 immigrants on the *SS Goth* from Libau via England, which docked in Cape Town on 1st July 1902, six were completely penniless, the other 26 had £61/17/6d of which £30 belonged to four, thus the remaining 22 passengers had approximately thirty shillings apiece.[77] The arrival of these poverty-stricken new immigrants was not greeted with unalloyed delight by the wider society.

28 January 1904
TO THE EDITOR OF THE CAPE TIMES
Sir. How is it that week after week so many alien paupers are allowed to land in our colony? Russian, Poles, Greeks, Italians and men of almost every nationality under the sun, who will work for starvation wages, come here without any means and with no employment.

DISGUSTED ENGLISHMAN[78]

3 February 1904
TO THE EDITOR OF THE CAPE TIMES
Sir. Well may he be disgusted when hundreds of these foreign Jews and aliens - for the most part paupers - are allowed to flow into the country each week bringing with them their attendant evils. Can one wonder that there are so many British workmen unemployed in

this town when these Jews, who by their mode of living, or rather existence, are able to compete with them at lower wages.

MARK TAPLEY[79]

Soon the Jewish community had developed a network of organisations and individuals to assist these new immigrants.

Hamelitz newspaper, 1884

"Most of our brothers who come there by the skin of their teeth, naked as on the day of their birth, are being shown mercy by the existing Jewish settlers the moment they put their foot on the shores of Africa."[80]

N.D. Hoffman

Hatzefira newspaper, 1891

"Almost every boat that comes from Europe brings a number of Jews. These immigrants arrive in a pitiful plight, without any possessions and the charitable organisations here are unable to provide all of them with the necessary means to establish themselves... the majority load a pack of cheap goods on their back and peddle wheresoever they may among the farmers of the colony." [81]

N.D. Hoffman,

Laws were brought in to limit immigration and after the Cape Immigration Restriction Act of 1902 was passed, the immigrants needed to possess £5 before being allowed to land. This was increased to £20 in 1904.

"My family arrived on a Saturday in 1894 and had to walk the whole way from the docks to the town because it was Shabbas. Our own home became a home for strays off the boats. The poor folk arrived at the docks penniless. They had to show £5 (to land), which some of them did not possess. This is where the trio of champion schnorrers came into the picture. These three musketeers Mother - Gela Schrire - Mrs Bloch and tiny Mrs Zuckerman visited the Jewish commercial houses

for donations, and were never refused, nor were questions asked. Gradner, who kept the books for the little shopkeepers, was given the necessary amounts and smoothed the way for the aforementioned unfortunates to land.

Gela Schrire, one of the musketeers,
Photograph in possession of the author

"Quite a few (now high up and well away) were palmed off on to us, where they were fed and lodged. Ultimately they were put on a train to relations in Johannesburg or Oudtshoorn. The rest were given handcarts and sold herrings and cucumbers. When they amassed enough money not forgetting a small pittance sent home they bought a horse and cart, and started smousing in the small country dorps, and further

afield. These people founded many great commercial enterprises in this country." [82]

Harry Schrire, personal memoirs

"My father, Rabbi Mirvish, arrived in South Africa with his family in October 1908. Those years were difficult years for Jewish immigrants from Russia. The feelings amongst the Jews at that time were that the immigration laws were carried out harshly by officials who were antisemitic. My father arrived on erev Yom Kippur and there were the usual immigration difficulties. Eventually we were allowed off the boat but my father had to remain on board for some time until a certain amount of money was deposited as security. He came ashore late in the afternoon in time to change and attend the Kol Nidre services in the Beth Hamidrash in Constitution Street where he was appointed as the minister.

"In the years following our arrival immigration difficulties seemed to increase. Every case had its hazards and I witnessed many serious disappointments and hardships among the would-be immigrants. I remember very well the hullabaloo there was every time a boat came in and news reached my father's house or the Beth Hamidrash community that Jews had been declared prohibited immigrants and were to be sent back - sometimes more than half a dozen out of one shipload were detained. They were taken off the boat and housed in a galvanised iron room in the old Docks area, somewhere near to the dock gates at Portswood Road. At this there was a terrible crying out and a feeling of great tragedy on the part of the families and "landsleit" of the people concerned. I often went there with my father to interview these desperate people; they stared hopelessly and seemed to be overwhelmed by the whims of a fate, which they could not understand. There was always a strange scene, identically repeated each time whenever my father wanted to try to get some immigrant off.

"My father would go to visit Reverend Bender at his house. Often I went along. Reverend Bender was excitable and impatient but had the softest and kindest heart. My father spoke to him in Yiddish and Bender spoke in German. Hardly had my father begun to state the

purpose of his visit when Bender would go off into a terrific temper. Walking up and down his overfilled and over-carpeted room, he would fume and splutter like a string of fireworks, stopping every now and then, confronting my father with 'Now, what do you say to that?' or 'Hey, what, hey what!' These were only rhetorical questions because he was immediately off again. It was a diatribe against all Jews generally and Russian Jews in particular and the poor wretch in question was debited with all the faults and misfortunes of Jewry.

'Why can't they wash? Is water so expensive?'

'Why can't they wear a clean suit? Must their "arba kanfoth" hang a mile out of their shirts? Even the Talmud does not say so.'

"'Look at the Englishman.' Why only yesterday Lady X had said this to him, and last week, at dinner with the Governor-General, he said that to him... and so on... a gushing torrent. My father never interrupted with a word while this outburst lasted. Then at a certain moment he would get up and say 'Mr Bender, you may be quite right, but he is a poor man with a wife and five children at home. Don't you think it is time that we were going?' And gently and casually he would take Bender's coat off the hook and help him on with it, and gradually they would move towards the door with Bender still expostulating and protesting.

"They walked down to the lower end of Parliament Street where the old Immigration Department was. As soon as Mr Bender sent in his name, he was immediately received by the Chief Immigration Officer. It was evident to me that Reverend Bender did not like the man, maybe on account of his reputed antisemitism, maybe only because he considered him socially inferior. As soon as he entered, after the briefest greetings and introductions, he plunged in to the same hasty excitable talk, criticising and complaining, hardly coming to the point at all; but there was no trace of begging, no servility. The immigration officer sat through it listening with the patient attitude of a schoolboy at the outpourings of an enraged teacher. Then at an opportune moment, he would slip in with:

"'I suppose Mr Bender, it is about Mr So-and-so that you have

come, well if you say it is all right this time, I will see to it'... And that is how things were done in those days."[83]

Dr Louis Mirvish

Having landed safely, the new immigrant then needed to find accommodation and employment.

"In Cape Town I leased a room for myself and went around looking for some job of work. I only had a few pounds and times were very bad. Every other day new boats were arriving with new immigrants and all of them were looking for jobs and work. I met one of my shipboard friends who told me that a certain matzo factory was looking for Jewish boys to pack the matzo. I went to the factory and started work immediately. My salary was very small but it was enough to keep me going for the time being. For three months I worked there and still managed to save some money."[84]

Simon Leeman

"Our home consisted of three undersized rooms. There was also a kitchen, but no bathroom, and no electric light. I asked my mother if this was going to be our new home, and where were the streets paved with gold, as they had told us in Lithuania. She said that it was our home, and that we were going to be very happy there. I vigorously wiped my nose on my sleeve and implored my mother to start on our way back to Lithuania."[85]

Bernard Sachs

Ignorance of the language was a major stumbling block in finding employment and integrating into the new land.

"I went to a second hand shop. My aunt gave me a packet of sandwiches - I did not know what that means, sandwiches, and I walked. The bus was two pence bus fare. I walked to Salt River from Caledon Street, District Six. I came there and I saw an elderly woman sitting there - there was enough *schmatters* in the shop there - and she says: '*Yongerman, kenst du English*?'

I said '*Neyn*.'.

'Kenst Afrikaans?'

'Neyn.'

"So she said '*Vol zol eech ton met eich?*' (What will I do with you?) You see that black man? He can sew. He speaks Afrikaans. He speaks English. He gets £4 a month and he cleans the shop. I don't know what to do with you. Go back home.'"[86]

"Then we had to face up to this terrible experience – you come into a country and you don't know the language, you can't speak to anybody, it is a terrible experience. These were very very tough times, and there was a gulf between you and your parents because your English was improving and their English wasn't improving and the whole social thing was very difficult."

Louis Karol, interview, 9.1.2007

To my dearest wife Taube Kretzmar

Your letters marked number 1 and number 2 I have duly received and I have read with pleasure, particularly about your well being. May G-d grant that our letters to each other should always be so, as long as I am destined to be separated from you. I'm pleased to hear that you enjoyed Purim and that the custom of making a party in "Zerildovve" is still in existence. May G-d grant that we should start living properly and here we also had a happy occasion.

In the beginning the position was as follows. The outlook was dark but TG I did not give up hope. We arrived in Cape Town on Shemini Atzereth on the Tuesday. Thursday was Simchat Torah. I was

lodging with a Rakeshiker Jew who has a bag business. He advised me to buy bags and he would buy them from me and give me a profit. At Simchas Torah they gave me an aliyah at the minyan and had a brochah afterwards in a proper glass, and also to eat.

The next morning I went out to do business. He told me how to call out "BAGS" in English and how I should ask, I started going to the shops from one to the other but in the meantime I had forgotten the English name for bags, but I met a Jew and again I was taught and learned the language for the bags.

The next week I started buying bottles but these were too heavy for one man to carry on his shoulders, so I went to the docks and the boats daily as a stevedore. There I worked for three weeks. In the first week I earned 8 roubles (16/-) the second week 16 roubles and the third week 20 roubles but I saw it would be the end of my health before that of my money and I could not carry on any more. I was advised to become a glazier because in Johannesburg Jews made good money out of it. I had also tried a spell of trading in eggs, buying in the market and carrying it to town and made a good living.

We live in one room - me and Meishe and Mendel. (Mendel is a son of the schochet of "Poplar" and the shammas of Shmuel Ghaseis of Birz.) Other dispersed good friends also came there and we all

had a drink together. We sang songs although at the beginning we were afraid that our voices should not be heard outside. Meishe says that if Krass (the landlord) should hear the noise he would increase the rent by 7 groschen. However I am scared as we are living in the country we should be careful with this kind of rascal. We decided that it was only a fantasy and that we are not afraid of landlords. We drank a cup for the health of the wife and children, parents and all friends and all friends who think about us and we all enjoyed ourselves.

Pesach we were at Lipman Rubin; we sat at the Seder with heavy hearts but Liepe Rubin comforted us with the following words: "If you cannot make a living in Russia, then you should be happy to be in this country, because then (at least) your wives will be able to (get money from you so that they can) make Pesach in Russia." Although these are short words, but alas, they are true and so we conducted the sedorim. So now I must close my writing - as the time does not allow me to write more. Be well and stay well - as is the wish of your ever-loving husband

Tevya Kretzmar[87]

"The first day, (actually) the first month I spent (it was like being) at home because where I went to live was District Six and there was only Jewish. Wherever you went around, you speak Jewish and you

meet Jewish. We went for a walk - all Jewish, Jewish, Jewish. That's why I can't talk English."[88]

M.G. Quoted in Kay McCormick

"The first few days it was all strange - the language. But Afrikaans was a language that I could understand already a little bit. So my brother decided the best for me would be to go to Hanover Street where there are Coloured people. With Coloured customers it would be quicker to learn than with the English. The English don't like foreigners. So they decided to send me to Hanover Street in the shop to look after. But even there the language I couldn't understand."[89]

"The first and most important thing was to learn the English and Afrikaans languages and to get to know the country better. I met a Jewish man who wanted to open a new business and was looking for a young man. He would pay me £2 a month with free board and lodging, He told me the work was very easy, and that I would be able to learn the language and also the business. I decided to accept the job and so I came to Stellenbosch. Here I was able to concentrate upon learning some English and Afrikaans, and also to get a deeper understanding of the business structure of this country. After about six months I managed to save a few pounds and opened my own business."[90]

Simon Leeman

"Soon the other traders filed in - men of all work - egg-distributors, poultry dealers, fruit vendors. The conference started immediately. The main speaker was the old man with the long white beard. He alone had asked everyone to come to the meeting and he now outlined its whole purpose. The stranger is his countryman. The stranger spent a long time in the Cape Colony dealing in ostrich feathers and made a living. Now that the feather trade has collapsed, he has come to Johannesburg to make a living by trying. But since he is a stranger here and does not know what to start with, he relies on the old man for advice. And the old man himself is at a loss and cannot take such a heavy responsibility upon himself. It concerns the livelihood of a

countryman who has a wife and children at home. He therefore puts the problem to the gathering and asks them to deliberate together on this man's future. The problem aroused keen interest among those assembled and after a great deal of thought and lengthy deliberation, the following conclusion was reached. To try with bags and bottles, or with bread and meat, or with fowls, one needs a horse and cart, and since the countryman who formerly dealt in feathers has no money, there is nothing to discuss here. As for fruit dealers, there are too many of them, and the competition is too keen. To try with cigarettes is suitable for someone younger. It is undignified for an elderly man with a beard to go around with a board against his chest. So there is the only and best occupation left - to try with old clothes ... one does not need a horse and cart, it does not require a large capital, and the competition is not too keen. For a Jew who has dealt a long while in feathers is conversant with the language and knows where to buy goods, old clothes are highly suitable. Dogs will not be set against him, and he will make a living."[91]

Hyman Polsky.

"My father soon contracted lead poisoning from the soldering of all the articles they manufactured and had to give up his profession. The problem arose what to do for a living to support his family. With the few pennies they had saved he bought a horse and cart… and drove to the early morning market and bought £2 or £3 worth of assorted fruit.. and drove out to some of the other residential suburbs to... sell the fruit at a profit. I used to help him shout:

APRICOTS - SHILLING A HUNDRED!

BANANAS - FIFTY FOR A SHILLING!

"He sold his horse and cart and got a job as a van man for a bakery owned by the Adelson brothers for £15 a month. He was lucky to get the job. In 1915 my mother opened a sort of cafe selling tea or coffee for two pence a cup, scones at one penny and.... soda water."[92]

Jack Bloch, personal memoirs

CAPE TOWN
27.2.1900

To my well beloved wife Taube Kretzmar

Be well and in best spirits and to my dear and precious children be well in much good fortune. My dearest wife - I can inform with joy that I find myself thank G-d well. May G-d give me the same news from you - and that my writing shall find you also well.

This week I have not yet received your letter because the boat with the mail has not yet arrived in the harbour because the docks are occupied by other boats who must unload their cargo for the military. Hopefully I shall receive your letter tomorrow. Waiting so for a letter one gets excited, so that one has no patience to write. Seeing that this letter has to be posted on Wednesday and if not it will remain over for another week, so I must force my patience to write as much as possible. In general there cannot be a big letter today because I have a feeling your letter is already there and I am not wasting time trying to go to fetch it. Therefore please excuse this time.

I have no news to write you now but this I can inform you. The siege of Kimberley was lifted from the Boers and when the telegram came to Cape Town, it was Yom Tov! On all the houses they brought out the British flag and everyone who drove into town, from the most expensive coaches to the carts that carried stones, each one carried flags on high and music was played in the streets.

And again when the news arrived (a telegram) that General Cronje had surrendered with all his forces it was Yom Tov again.

May the Lord grant that some good will come to us too and to be able to enjoy Peace. I close my writing. Be well and don't worry and look after yourself and the children in health and schooling and wishing you good luck

From your loving husband,

Tevya Kretzmar[93]

In the days before medical aid, poor health was a major disaster for the new immigrant without family or financial umbrella. The Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society, the Ladies Association and the Bikkur Cholim Society helped. Certain doctors and pharmacies gave special rates and arrangements were made with hospitals like the Somerset Hospital. Sometimes funds had to be raised to return them to Europe.

'There was a large Jewish section in Cape Town... My knowledge of German was useful as many of the Jewish families had more or less recently arrived in South Africa and quite a number... could only speak freely in German or Yiddish. Before I came to South Africa I had hardly ever met a Jew, but I had read in medical journals that in Whitechapel Jewish children age for age were usually about one pound heavier than the other inhabitants, under conditions of life which were far from favourable.

"The Jews were very careful in health matters. Many had a profound trust in medical advice but no confidence whatever in upstart cults. They believed in medicines, but advice, on hygiene or anything else, without definite drugs did not usually appeal to them. They have always shown a justifiable pride in the health measures prescribed in the early chapters of the Bible, and many followed these rigidly... There

were few Jewish practitioners... I was amused when one old lady called me the 'foreign doctor'"[94]

From the diary of Dr Alexander Wells

Annual report, New Somerset Hospital, 1903

"The shortage of beds is so acute that patients are almost daily turned away, however extreme may be the case, in consequence of the sheer inability to find room, even when, as was the case, patients were placed on the floors... outpatients compelled to stand or sit at all seasons of the year in the entrance hall and passages of the Hospital ... to their own detriment and to that of the sick in the wards."[95]

Board of Management, New Somerset Hospital

South African Jewish Chronicle, 1903

Dear Ruth,

After all that has been said and written about the New Somerset Hospital... I was afraid that the void interest hitherto shown in these special collections would decrease. Hospital Sunday was observed (in the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation) by a fully choral evening service but the attendance was a very poor one. Some ladies told me that their servants were going to church at the time our service was fixed for and that it was impossible for them to leave their children alone, while a good number had been at the Roeland Street Temple at 4:30 p.m. which was a more convenient hour.[96]

The Jewish Ladies Association is very low in funds and requires immediate support. It is planning a June ball - dancing is more enjoyable in the first half of winter when the young people have not got tired of it yet. Last year's President, is anxious to secure the services of the same working committee and I am sure that not one of us will refuse to help again. The Ball is to be carried out on the same lines as the Hospital Ball, that is, that the married ladies would have to provide the refreshments while the unmarried ladies would be requested to sell the tickets and to amuse the

children on the following day. The July Ball held to raise funds for the New Somerset Hospital... by general agreement, will henceforth be an annual affair, as this most beneficent institution for our homeless sick requires constant monetary assistance.

Yours,
Naomi. [97]

Not all unmarried ladies – or gentlemen - were respectable. Some of the new immigrants sought shortcuts to wealth through gambling, prostitution and other forms of criminal behaviour. The Salvation Army reckoned that there were 600 "houses of ill-fame" in Cape Town in 1902, most were situated in District Six.

"Charteris (a crooked policeman and pimp) said he would not have Jewish girls because they would not keep their places so quiet as the French girls and could not pay as much for protection as the French girls"[98]

Hatzefira newspaper, 1891

"I am ashamed to have to report that in the Breakwater Gaol in Cape Town there are at present 18 Jewish prisoners, most of them were caught… buying stolen diamonds… (and) are compelled to endure agonising hard labour on the beach from morning to night breaking stone from the adjacent quarry and dumping it in the sea to lay the foundation of the breakwater."[99]

N.D. Hoffman, 1891

Attorney General Office
Cape Town
22nd August 1888
Jewish Privileges
Sir,

With reference to your letter… requesting that Jewish Prisoners may be allowed to abstain from work on the Sabbath day and receive special food on holy days, I am directed by attorney general to acquaint that he is unable to vary the decisions previously arrived at on this subject, that is to say exempt Jewish prisoners from work and allow them to receive special food on certain holy days…

Little good can be done by keeping the men in barracks doing nothing and as he is informed by the police authorities the 'Jewish places of business are kept open on Saturdays almost without exception' he thinks that there can be no ground for feeling that any violence done to the moral feelings of Jewish Convicts performing coerced labour on that day at the same time… on Saturday afternoons…

Your obedient servant,

Secretary to the law department.[100]

Breakwater Convict Station
Cape Town 7th of June 1903
Name of Convict: B. Marcus
Number (with initial letter) B6219

Dear Sir

I write to ask you a kindness in regards to the Jewish novel books which you promised to send to the convict station what few are up here as all been read by the Jewish prisoners I thank you very much to send some up as there is most of them cannon read English we are all longing to see you.

I beg to remain your humble servant,

Barnet Marcus

Alexander Papers, UCT Archives

Minute book, Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society

8.6.1903 Mr Shoolman authorised to buy books for prisoners at Breakwater.

22.6.1903 For purchase of Yiddish books, £1.1.11d.

Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society [101]

South African Jewish Chronicle, 1903

"Thanks to the public spirit of Mr L Jacobs those who are suffering in body at the hospital are regularly visited and their lives thereby brightened. Is it too much to ask that those of our brethren who are diseased in mind, and consequently suffering from the criminal outcome of such illness, should receive some little consideration and perchance the result of this occasional intercourse with the outer world would create the desire to improve their own moral character and to adopt the determination that when their sentences are ended they would 'depart and sin no more'?"[102]

Editorial on visiting prisoners in the Breakwater and Roeland Street gaols

Zionist activity formed part of the cultural baggage of the East European immigrant, particularly those from Lithuania, and it did not take long before Zionist societies had been set up, the first, started in 1897 by Gela Schrire's husband, Reb Yehuda Leib, only lasted a few months. In 1899 the Dorshei Zion Society was established for the men. Moses Zuckerman, the husband of another of the "musketeers", started the Bnoth Zion Society for the women in 1901. This society is still active.

South African Jewish Chronicle, 1904

"On Tuesday afternoon the Bnoth Zion Association held their annual meeting in the Zionist Hall, Hope Street, for the purpose of

electing a new committee and adopting the Balance Sheet. The meeting was timed to start at 3 'o clock and in my ignorance of the punctuality or unpunctuality of the starting of such meetings, I arrived to time only to find that I had come about an hour and a half too early, that is allowing for the usual grace as I was told for such meetings.

"The President, Mrs Zuckerman[103], occupied the chair and in declaring the meeting open, thanked those present for attending as the meeting was of considerable importance. The secretary then read the report and balance sheet in English while another young lady read the one printed in Yiddish so as to give all the opportunity for understanding it.

"One lady got up and said that a reduction in the expenditure could be made by dispensing with a paid collector so that the wages for same could be forwarded to the National Fund. The president immediately offered her services, providing any of the ladies present would be willing to assist, but as no one appeared willing to help, not even the one that suggested it, it was agreed that the collector be retained.

"As no other objections were forthcoming, the report and balance sheet was unanimously adopted and the business of electing committee and officers proceeded with...

"After this two of the gentlemen present addressed the meeting at some length, one in English and one in Yiddish, but said practically the same thing. In the course of their remarks they commented strongly upon the apathy that existed amongst local Jewish girls in matters pertaining to Zionism and Judaism generally, and concluded by urging their hearers to work hard for the good of the cause, through which they hoped to find a home for our persecuted brothers and sisters in Russia. A vote of thanks being proposed... the singing of the "Dort wo die Zeder" and "God save the King" concluded the meeting." [104]

And finally, some managed to establish themselves in the new country, to learn a new language, to establish themselves in

employment, to build a home for themselves and bring out their families to join them.

Malmesbury
27.10.1903
To my well beloved wife Taube Kretzmar

I have sent a lot of money. In the meantime you can exchange this cheque and avoid applications for loans until you have made your travel arrangements because one usually does a mitzvah or a favour before leaving home. Please be careful and don't waste your roubles. Prepare yourself and travel with good luck and G-d will help.

I have bought the most important things - a good wardrobe and a few chairs and I'll buy other necessary things in Cape Town. You must see to everything exactly as I have asked you - all the books that I mentioned.

Further I ask you, my dear parents, to be so kind as to assist Taube in her departure and if she runs short of funds that you will help

Tevya Kretzmar and his family in South Africa, circa 1908
Noel, Tevya with Arnold on his lap, David, Leah, Taube, Freda with Julius on the table.

Acknowlegements, David Kretzmar, Julius' son

her. I hope that I will repay you all for all the trouble that you have taken all the time.

At present farmers are harvesting the summer crops and everybody is busy. I hope that soon business will improve and my sales get better.

I close my writing I greet you and kiss you from me, your faithful husband who expects to see you soon,

Tevya Kretzmar[105]

These extracts give some idea of the difficulties and problems that the new immigrants had to face in coming to South Africa. They did not face them alone. The Talmud states that acts of charity and compassion are equal in importance to all the commandments in the Torah.

The small Jewish community assisted the new arrivals to the best of its ability. The boats were met, lodging and jobs found. As well as friends, support groups and landsleit groups, Jewish organisations were established to help the new immigrant become independent. English classes were run both for children and adults. Loans were provided, the sick were cared for. Care was even extended to those Jews serving prison sentences.

The Rambam wrote that he never saw or heard of a city in which there lived ten Jews that did not have a charity fund. Cape Town was no exception.

The 1908 Classified Directory of Cape Town and Suburban Charities listed eight Jewish welfare organisations.[106] If social and educational organisations were included there were over twenty Jewish organisations in Cape Town that provided assistance to the new immigrants 100 years ago.[107]

The result was a very successful immigration in which the immigrants and their children have made contributions in all fields to the development of South Africa far in excess of their demographic numbers.

What became of some of the people mentioned here?

The sons of Tevya Kretzmar and Rabbi Mirvish became doctors.

Harry Stodel opened the Tivoli Theatre and his descendants still entertain senior citizens as “The Tivoli Girls”.

The matzah packer's son became a professor.

The grandson of the girl who missed the boat served on the Jewish Board of Deputies.

The grandson of the only Jew among 600 passengers on a German vessel, who was the target of teasing, became the Director of the Cape Town Holocaust Centre.

The granddaughter of the man who helped sell bananas and apricots worked as a social worker helping clients at Cape Town Jewish welfare organisations.

The boy who threw oranges onto the docks revitalised the docks when he developed the Waterfront.

The boy who brought sandwiches to school for poor children has sung as cantor in most of the great synagogues in South Africa.

The great-grand daughter of the champion schnorrer whose son wrote her memoirs, wrote these memoirs

and the man who sold his stamp collection went on to sell many other things in the business he started. It is called Woolworths.

As for the others, they have become immortal; because 100 years, 80 years, 60 years later, their words are recalled in this publication and their descriptions of their experiences remain vivid because they were prepared to share their memories with us.

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I I want to thank the Jacob Gitlin Library, in particular its chairman Dr David Scher and its director Dr Ute Ben Yosef for giving me the opportunity to share my passion for recording the past with others, and Prof Howard Phillips for suggesting that this talk become a publication. Thank you all for your confidence in me.

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