

THE HIDDEN LIFE OF A SMOUS

By

LORNA LEVY

CHAPTER ONE

“He was a short thick-set man of about forty, quite muscular,” said the District Surgeon as he identified the body in Britstown in January 1906. Yes, he said, “this was *the Jew trader named Borkum.*”

That is all I have in the way of a description of Philip Borkum, my paternal grandfather who was found dead close to the level crossing of the De Aar railway line near Britstown in the Northern Cape. The District Surgeon said he found the deceased lying on his back, partly covered with ground and a sack, one hand was visible. When the sack was removed it revealed two ropes tied tightly around his neck.

The last six days of his life as told in the Court Record is all I know about this grandfather whose untimely and violent death clearly impacted on the life of his wife, children and grandchildren. Yet not much more is known about him nor more than a hundred years later, can be found. Neither his life nor his death formed part of our family narrative.

All in all Philip Borkum spent about seven years in Kimberley and its surrounds until his death. Born in Riga, he was naturalised as a South African citizen in 1905 and the evidence of nineteen witnesses in the Court trial case of his murderers gives a picture of his life as he plied his trade near Britstown early in 1906. He must have been a more affluent hawker, locally known as *smous*, who traded from his wagon full of goods that included some livestock along the farms near de Aar. Among the more exotic items that appeared on that sale roll in July 1906 when his Estate was wound up were knives and forks, 6 silk handkerchiefs, field glasses and alarm clocks, a portmanteau, a saddle bag, table covers, a corset, 2 flutes, a cigarette holder and 8 mirrors. There were also 8 donkeys, 2 goats and kids, 8 lambs and ewes. I assume items like the flutes had been specially ordered; indeed it was quite surprising to discover that among the farming folk of the barren Northern Cape, there were people who played the flute! ⁱ

In the Circuit Court for the District of Victoria West, part of His Majesty's Cape Colony, was the wagon that was found besides the body. It was labelled Exhibit A and I expect it resembles the one on display in the Jewish Museum in Cape Town.

The Colonial Administration of that time certainly attended to this case in an impressive way, with swift and meticulous attention to detail.

The testimony of the nineteen witnesses describe the last four days of trading that Philip Borkum spent on his wagon, trading his wares from farm to farm in the Northern Cape. I have tried to present the Court Room testimony in the exact words of the record to re-create that far-away narrative. ⁱⁱ

The case

Gabriel **Myburg** who farmed at 'Polbaart,' on Ganskuil Road in the district of Britstown was the first witness and he set the scene. He told the Court that on Sunday 21 January 1906 a Jewish hawker arrived on his farm with eight donkeys, a wagon loaded with merchandise, also six small stock and two servants, the accused, a white and a coloured boy.

“I heard the Jew always call the white man Nicolas and the Coloured boy Frikkie. I didn't know the Jew's name but heard him addressed as Philip.”

Because four donkeys had strayed they remained on his farm until Thursday morning, 25th January and the accused spent Monday and Tuesday looking for them.

On that Monday morning Myburg heard Nicolas tell Frikkie that the tracks (or spoor) of the donkeys showed around the hill and he would go out and search for them. But he returned with only two donkeys and four were still missing. Both servants then went out searching for them. By Tuesday Borkum offered him, Gabriel Myburg, a reward of merchandise to the value of £1 if he found the missing animals which he duly did.

Myburg told the Court that the deceased seemed annoyed and said his servants could not have taken much trouble to find the donkeys. At Borkum's request he signed a receipt for these goods; perhaps he speculated, the smous wanted this as evidence if he planned to deduct that amount from Nicolas' wages.

At that time Frikkie was not around either as he was with the sheep. The farmer told the Court there appeared to be bad feeling between the deceased

and Nicolas Loggerenberg and that Philip Borkum said he intended to dismiss them when he got back to the village as they were untrustworthy and not doing their work. Myburg agreed with that assessment.

On the following Saturday morning Myburg passed the wagon elsewhere in the area while he was on his way to the village. He gave the smous the promised receipt for the goods he had received as a reward for finding the missing donkeys.

The next witness, also a farmer at Ganskuil, **Johannes Christoffel Lodivus Pretorius**, told the Court that he knew the deceased and corroborated much of what Myburg had said when the smous Borkum arrived on his farm a few days later on Thursday 25th January.

"I knew a Jew hawker named Philip Borkum who arrived at my farm on Thursday evening with a wagon, eight donkeys and ten small stock and two servants, a colonial Dutch and a kaffir. His wagon was well stocked with merchandise. He remained until Friday because his donkeys had strayed. I did notice that his servants were disobedient and would not listen to what he said and were most impudent. When I left at about sunrise on the Saturday, Borkum and his servants were still at the farm because the servants wouldn't get up. I noticed too that they were still under their thin blankets".

Gert Johannes Jurgens Pretorius, the son of farmer Pretorius testified that he and his cousin went to the wagon while the Jew was at their house. Frikkie said:

"The Jew just gives us a few sticks of tea and small lump of sugar. I will sleep tomorrow and if the Jew calls me early I will shove his head into the wagon."

He was not sure whether that meant he wanted to kill him.

Andries Gerhardus Pretorius, a resident at Ganskuil corroborated what the others said: he also knew the two accused and the hawker named Philip. Yes, they arrived on the 25th and stayed over on Friday as their donkeys had strayed and the boys were persistently unwilling to do what the smous asked them. The Jew came to their house a little after sunrise on the Saturday to get help to couple the two goats as his servants said they didn't know how to do it.

Pretorius agreed and accompanied the Jew to the wagon where he found the two accused.

“The Jew handed Frikkie a piece of bread and a tin of fish and Frikkie said he would eat it there and then. The Jew turned to me and said they pretend I don’t feed them but I give them as much as they require. Nicolas said he wasn’t the one who complained about the food and a little later he took the sheep to the dam for water.”

When he returned later between 8 and 9 o’clock to help with the harnessing, Nicolas and the Jew were at the wagon and Frikkie was a little distance away with the stock. After harnessing the stock they moved off with Nicolas leading. He, Pretorius helped with the driving for about forty yards and then stood watching them for about 200 yards as they disappeared over the rise. The Jew got onto the wagon and Nicolas let go of the leading rein while Frikkie walked about 20 yards from the wagon as they disappeared from view.

At that stage Pretorius noticed nothing untoward. Brakfontein Gate is about a half an hour back from his farm. Later his brother told him he had found a knife which he identified before the Court (exhibit marked E), the one he had borrowed from the Jew on the Friday morning because it was sharper than his own.

Jacomina Hendriks lived on the property of Mr van Wyk and her hut was not far from the road. While she did not know the accused, she told the Court that on Saturday, 27th January she was at her hut after midday when a spring wagon with donkeys passed. There was a white man sitting on the wagon in front and a coloured boy was driving a small number of sheep behind the wagon. She pointed to the wagon exhibited before the Court.

Johanna van der Westhuizen lived with her father at Blouwputs and testified that she was at home on that Saturday afternoon between one and two o’clock in the afternoon when she saw a small tent wagon appear over the rise on her side of the crossing and it stopped close to the railway cottage and the donkeys were unharnessed but they did not graze. Then a cart stopped at their wagon. At about sunset the wagon was again harnessed and turned around to go back in the direction of the crossing; as it disappeared over the rise she could only see one person at the wagon.

Roman Horma said he was 'a hand' in the service of Barend van der Merwe of Ganskuil. He knew Nicholas but not Frikkie. On that Saturday before *Nachtmaal*, which is a quarterly celebration of the Dutch Reformed Church, he had trekked with his flock from the homestead to his outpost, crossing the road running from the Pretorius' farm to Braakfontein Gate. As he approached this road he noticed a wagon advancing from the Pretorius side of Ganskuil.

"I was ahead of my flock and I thought the wagon was a smouse wagon as it had a small number of sheep with it. These sheep passed in front of his and the man in charge had a white jacket on. As the wagon came towards me the accused Loggerenberg left the wagon to assist the man driving the sheep and get them past his sheep. There was a Jew at the wagon with a black beard and I asked him whether he had any watches for sale. He didn't, but he had small round clocks and I bargained a price, 5/6 or 8/6. The Jew put the money in his trouser pocket but I didn't notice a purse. As they moved off, the accused Loggerenberg and the Jew walked behind the wagon a little distance apart and then got onto the wagon.

I followed my sheep and turned them in a right direction and sat down and could see the wagon as it moved along. The two remained seated on the wagon and the road was visible for quite a distance and at no time did I see it stop. The man with the stock remained in front of the wagon. Eventually the boy with the sheep got through the gate first putting his stock through and I saw the wagon for the last time when it was about 200 yards on the other side of the gate. The wagon before the Court is the same one."

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The next three witnesses described the scene later on the Saturday afternoon.

JAN BENSON lived at Brakfontein with his father and said that he went into the village at about 7 o'clock on that morning and returned the same afternoon. In the morning he saw a tent wagon unharnessed alongside the road, close to the railway cottage. There were eight donkeys tied to a pole. The wagon was facing the village. The two accused were at the wagon and he shook hands with Loggerenberg who told him this was the Jew's *smous'* wagon and the Jew was in De Aar and expected at any moment. As he drove off he could

bags lying towards the front and appeared loosely thrown....sufficient to have covered a human body. On his return later in the afternoon the wagon was in the same place but the donkeys had been harnessed. It was raining lightly as he stopped and asked whether their master had returned. The white boy replied that he had come back but returned to the village, this time to arrange a room. He had directed that the wagon slowly follow on. Benson explained that he asked this question because he had not seen a 'live' spoor print in the sand and so he did not think anyone had passed. The sacking in the wagon was undisturbed, it looked as he had seen it earlier. He then drove off as the sun set.

SARAH LOUW lived with her husband at Brakfontein and knew the two accused. Just before nachtmaal on Saturday, she explained, while she was washing at the dam she saw a wagon as it turned around at the fountains. She couldn't see in as the front flap was down. It was the wagon before the Court. The white man, and here she pointed to the accused Loggerenberg, he was sitting in front and the boy, pointing here to the accused, Frikkie, he was driving a group of sheep behind the wagon. No one else was around. Frikkie came over and asked her for water and for directions to the road to Britstown and she told him. She did'nt notice anything wrong.

JACOBUT WILLEM, VAN HEERDEN, another farmer in the Brakfontein area was in his bedroom that Saturday at about 12.45pm when he saw a wagon approach, a spring tent one with eight donkeys. It drew up opposite his bedroom window. The white man, here indicating Loggerenberg, he was driving and there was a small amount of stock in front. He saw Frikkie take a bucket and get some water which he gave to the white man to drink. There was no one else around.

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The evidence moves on to the following morning, Sunday 28th January and the next witness was **JACOBUS SMIT** of Britstown. He told the Court that he did not know the accused but while he was herding his horses in the veld that Sunday he noticed a wagon unharnessed on the other side of the railway line. It was close to the level crossing of the De Aar railway line. He walked over to the wagon for water but there were no people or animals about and as he was

the wagon for water but there were no people or animals about and as he was leaving he noticed a spade lying on the line and close by, the body of a dead man. The upper part of the body was covered with hay and soil, the feet protruded. The ground was quite loose as slight rain had fallen the night before. There were no human footprints around, only a few donkey ones. He did not touch anything but reported this immediately.

The next witness was the police constable of Britstown, **LUCIEN PAUL VAN HENSDEN** who when contacted at 1.30pm that Sunday by the previous witness asked the magistrate to accompany him to the site. And there they found the wagon, a small spring tent wagon, next to the railway line.

“The wagon in the Court is the one I saw standing close to the crossing. Because it had rained there were no visible human footprints but we could still make out donkey foot prints. Under the wagon there were two bundles of blankets and a bag of forage. The wagon was loaded with merchandise but it had been pulled about. There were no signs that a struggle had taken place on the wagon but 30 yards from the wagon and on the inside of the railway fence they identified a human body partly covered by a bag and earth. “

The magistrate removed the bag and recognised the body as that of Borkum, whom he described as a *Jewish hawker trading about those parts*. The dead man’s head was very swollen and discoloured and around his neck there was a thin rope, as thick as his little finger. In his opinion the body was placed there before the rain the night before, nor did he think that one man alone could have lifted the body over the fence.

The next witness was **HERMAN BLUMBERG**, a shopkeeper of Britstown who had known Philip Borkum for some years. He told this to the Court and that lately the deceased had been trading in the Britstown district. On that Sunday he went to the site to identify Philip Borkum and afterwards, accompanied the District Surgeon to the post mortem. He examined the clothes worn by the deceased and made an inventory of the deceased’s effects and no money was found. As a trader himself, he said that it was impossible for Philip Borkum to have been away from home five or six days without having any money on him. He would have, in any case sold goods for cash. He recalled that the deceased always wore a purse tied to a chain that

buttoned to his trousers. He had noticed that purse when Philip Borkum made purchases in his shop but it was now missing, as though it had been wrenched off.

The District Surgeon, **ARTHUR HENRY HOPKINS** was with Herman Blumberg and he identified the body as that of a white man in his forties who was *the Jew trader named Borkum*. He was lying on his back and partly covered with ground and a sack, one hand was visible. When the sack was removed they saw two ropes tied tightly around his neck, about half an inch apart. Surgeon Hopkins could not distinguish any fingerprints as the decomposition of the body was far advanced. In his opinion, death was from strangulation. It was difficult to say whether the ropes were placed around the neck before or after Borkum was strangled. He thought they had been placed around the neck afterwards, when he stopped struggling because the knots were at the back, one behind the ear and the other at the back of the head. In his opinion Borkum had been dead for about twenty-four hours. He described him as a short thick set man of about forty, quite muscular who could have easily been overcome by either of the accused. There was no evidence of poisoning.

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The next set of witnesses describe the scene in Britstown jail after the accused were detained.

KLAAS VAN TUNA, the police constable, arrested Frikkie hiding in a hut in de Aar on the Sunday morning. He was called to the scene of the murder and he knew the accused to be in the service of the Jew hawker, named Borkum.

"I received a report that a man was hiding in a hut and that he had worked for the Jew hawker, named Borkum, who was murdered that day. So I arrested him. Later when taking him to the jail he admitted it and said there was another man, a European, who was with Borkum when there was a row and the European man throttled Borkum. He made this statement voluntarily and said he was called to assist in killing Borkum but had run away."

On the morning of 1 February 1906 Nicholas Loggerenberg, a European labourer, also wanted in this case, was arrested in De Aar and taken into

custody. He was informed of the charge against him and his name added to the record.

WILLIAM JOHAN WALTERS was in charge of Britstown Jail. He testified that he knew both the accused. Frikkie Brown was admitted personally by him on Sunday night, 28 January at about 11.30pm. He searched him at that point and found two gold sovereigns in his waistcoat pocket. The only clothes he had was what he stood in – this included a new shirt which was produced in Court. Frikkie had to remove the shirt as possible evidence and it was then he described what had happened and the jailer wrote it down. He told Frikkie this could be treated as a written statement and used as evidence against him. The following day this confession was also made to the Magistrate in the jailer's presence when Frikkie was warned that he need not say anything that would incriminate him.

The accused Loggerenberg was admitted on 2 February on a removal warrant from de Aar. He had the following private effects with him a few pounds sterling in cash, one pocket knife, a third class railway ticket Potfontein to Bloemfontein. He wore the suit produced in the court as 'B'. The jailer was told by the escort that Loggerenberg had made a statement and when asked he acknowledged this was true and he agreed to repeat it. He was then cautioned and told that it would be used against him. Accordingly, that statement was read to the Court. There were some more private effects belonging to this accused which were sent to the Court marked 'I', coat and vest which had marks on them which were suspicious.

The Chief Constable of Britstown was **ALFRED EDWARD HOY**. He was not on duty on Sunday 28 January when the dead body of the Jew Borkum was found. In his capacity as Chief Constable he made an inventory of the deceased's effects that had been handed to him by H. Blumberg. No cash was found and all the worn clothing was searched. He made a plan of the surroundings of the murder and although the distances are not to scale, some are measured. He accompanied the accused Frikkie Brown to a spot on the far side of the Brakfontein Gate where he pointed out the spot where the deed was supposed to have been committed. Owing to the heavy rain the previous night no signs of a struggle could be detected. En route Frikkie told the Chief Constable that he had thrown away a tin of jam in the vicinity of the murder scene and they

found the tin. There were no human footprints around, only a few donkey ones. He did not touch anything but reported this immediately.

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No bail was granted to the accused and van Loggerenberg was initially represented by an attorney. The case was before the Circuit Court for the District of Victoria West together with the Districts of Carnarvon, Prieska, Kenhardt, Gordonia, Richmond and Britstown.

TESTIMONY OF ACCUSED NUMBER 1: Frikkie or Fred Brown: (aged 21, Coloured)

"I was in the employ of Philip Borkum a Jewish Trader. I have been in his employ from January 7th 1906. I know Nicholas, the white man. He was engaged at De Aar the same day as I was.

On Friday night the 26 January 1906 we stayed at a farm Ganskuil and I left there at about 7am with the sheep, as my master and Nicolas were just about to inspan. About three-quarters of an hour after, the wagon caught up to me, and my master sent Nicolas to help me get my sheep past this flock that was passing us. Nicolas said to me. "The Jew is trading with the sheep herdsman and selling him a watch for 7/6" When we had got our sheep well past the others I heard the Jew shouting "Nicolas Nicolas come back. Frikkie can see how to get along by himself now." I then proceeded with my sheep. Shortly after that I heard Nicolas shouting "Frick, Frick Frick". I replied "what is it now?" and when I came up to the wagon Nicolas said "Give me some water out of your bag." My master held the cup and I filled it. My master handed it to Nicolas who drank it. My master asked me if I had my days' food and I replied yes but baas can give me something to put on it. He asked me for a knife. I had no knife, so he said "give me your bread" which I did and he cut the bread in half putting some jam on it and giving me some in a tin also, either peach or apricot. I walked along with the wagon eating the jam out of the tin. I ate a little of it but threw it away as it was too sweet. My master came to tell me that he was going to the village (meaning Britstown). I was not to hurry but stay at the farm Brakfontein that night and leave for Britstown the next

morning, grazing the sheep as I came along. He would put my blankets down at the farm and also leave some food there for me. I replied "all right old baas." I left the wagon then to go to the sheep and when I had gone about 100 yards I heard my master shouting "Frederick come help, Frederick come help." I looked round and saw Nicolas had hold of my master by his throat on the wagon. They were struggling too much. I rushed up to stop the donkeys and when I got up to the front donkeys, they both fell off the wagon. I stopped the wagon and rushed up to where they were. Nicolas was on top of my master who was lying on his back. Nicolas had his one knee on my master's stomach and the other on his chest; his fingers were around the Jew's throat. I said "Man let the man be." Nicolas replied "He must die, the bugger must die." I was bewildered and hardly knew what to do. I remember going to pick the food basket up and placed it back on the wagon. It must have fallen off in the struggle. Nicolas then picked the Jew up and placed him on the foot board of the wagon, turned and cut a piece or two of strand rope which was hanging from it. This was usually kept to tie the bags of forage. He got onto the wagon and then moved the body back resting the head on the wagon box, took the rope and tied it round the Jew's throat, saying "perhaps the bugger is still living". He then lifted the body right into the wagon and covered it with Jew's own jackets, took the Jew's bundle of rugs and placed them at the feet. He told me to go to the sheep again. I left for the sheep, driving them towards the gates. When I got near to it, Nicolas came to me and said "here is two pounds – take it and say nothing that I killed the man, they can find it out themselves". I did not want to take it. He said take it and I did and placed it in the top pocket in my waistcoat where the Gaoler found it on me. We had then come to the gate when Nicolas said "We must run away to Johannesburg, keep together and when once we cross the border they can do nothing to us. My father has a farm there." He then helped drive the sheep through the gate and also to close it. When we got onto the first rise from the gate he said "where shall we water the donkeys?" I replied I don't know this country. We walked on along with the wagon and after a bit he saw the dam at Brakfontein No. 2. I drove the sheep to the water and let them drink. He stopped the wagon in the road at the fountain and outspanned there. I helped him. He drove them to the water and returned to the wagon where I helped him inspan. We proceeded and when we got opposite the dwelling house, he again stopped the

wagon and told me to get a bucket of water which I did. He drank out of the bucket and turned round and filled it with the cash which was locked to the side of the wagon. When this was done we proceeded on our way to Britstown. There was a coloured woman with a girl and a few children washing clothes at the place where I got the water. We saw two other people along the way; one was a coloured woman and white man at the van Wijks place. They did not speak to us.

When we got to the Commonage gate Nicolas shouted to me "leave the bloody things" (meaning the sheep)"you have walked enough now so get onto the wagon." I left the sheep and came to the wagon, got on and rode until we got to the Wit dam where I got off to ease myself. I walked along with the wagon until we crossed the line and a little further, about half mile along the road, we outspanned – just below the Railway Cottage.

We did not let the donkeys graze but at Nicolas' suggestion we tied them to the wagon pole and gave them chaff as Nicolas said that we might need the donkeys at any time so had better not let them graze. I sat in the shade at the back of the wagon and Nicholas sat on the half bag of chaff at the front wheel. After a bit he asked me if I was hungry. I replied "yes". "What will you eat?" and he produced a tin of beef and one of jam. We sat and ate and when we had finished I placed the remains in a box at the back of the wagon and we lit our pipes and smoked. I asked him what his plan was. He replied that "I told you we will go to Johannesburg and stay there. I will procure tickets for both of us when we get to De Aar." We sat talking about this for a long while and then saw a covered cart with two brown ponies coming from Britstown. When the cart came up to us the man stopped and Nicolas went over and shook hands. The man asked Nicholas where the Jew was and Nicolas replied that he was expecting him at any moment. After a bit of talking the man drove on. Nicolas came to me and I said I was so afraid while the cart was there. I could smell a stink and was afraid the driver would smell it also. We conversed about various things, he about dances and things which he would give when we got to Johannesburg.

A little while after a cart approached us from de Aar side and it was an open cart and contained a man, boy, woman and child and they drove right past. Shortly after the cart had passed us Nicolas said we should inspan in a bit,

had nearly finished when the first man who passed us in the cart came up to us again on a bicycle. He dismounted at the wagon in the road, at the same time a coloured man also passed us. I do not know him. I asked Nicolas where the awl was to repair the bridle of the front donkey. The man with the cycle said that he felt tired from cycling and asked if the Jew had gone into the village. Nicolas replied he has gone to look for a place for us and we would now follow. The cyclist left and we waited until he had got over the rise. The sun was nearly down. We started off. I took the leading rope and turned the donkeys towards De Aar. Nicolas told me to do this and directed me to keep along the wire fence after we came to the crossing until he found a place to bury the body. We did this and got a little way down when Nicolas said "Whoa Stop." He got through the wire and saw a hole there. He returned to the wagon and got up, took the bundle of blankets at the Jew's feet and threw them on the ground, took the coat from the corpse and covered the face with a sack. He then took hold of the body and worked it onto the dash board of the wagon. He said I must help him but I pretended to be busy with something. He slid the body down and jumped off the wagon and put his one arm under the legs and one round the body and lifted it up and carried it to the wire fence. He put the body part through first by laying it on the ground with the legs between the wires. He then got through himself, lifted the body and carried it to the hole, placed it and returned for a shovel which was tied to the side of the wagon. He went back to the hole and commenced covering the body with earth. When he had half covered the body I heard a train coming along. I looked round saw the light approaching. Nicolas flung the shovel from him and ran. I also ran. He ran along the line until he came to the crossing and turned across the veldt on the same side as the wagon but not towards the wagon. I crossed the road and kept all along the fence. The train passed me near the first culvert from the crossing on the Britstown side. That is the last I saw of Nicolas. It began to rain so I got through the wire fence and took shelter under the culvert. I stayed there until near daylight. I heard a cart pass on the road and I walked along the line until I came near the CD Hospital where I crossed to the road. I must have been about 5.15am when I got into the town. I went down to the house of a coloured person named Steyn. They were still asleep when I got there. I sat down outside and waited until they got up. Steyn asked me how things were and if I had returned with the Jew. I

answered yes but there is a great fault with that. He said how is that? I answered and told him all about the murder. This was about 6a.m. By afternoon I heard people talking about it but I said nothing. About the time the church service finished a constable came with another man and apprehended me. I was taken to the Magistrate and afterwards lodged in Goal."

Before he made a cross instead of a signature, Fred ended his testimony by saying "the Jew and Nicholas were always quarrelling."

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TESTIMONY OF ACCUSED NUMBER 2: Nicolas Loggerenberg or Chrstian Smit (aged 18, white)

After being cautioned he stated:

"I was engaged by the Jew Borkum for four pounds five shillings a month in De Aar over fourteen days ago. We went away then, were gone from here for ten days and a Nigger named Frederick had a row with the Jew every day and then after that last row told the Jew he would break his neck,. The Jew replied that as soon as they got to Britstown he would put him in jail. At 8 o'clock the same evening the Nigger asked me if I was willing to help him kill the Jew. I told him "no I didn't want to go in a thing like that." Just then he said that if I would only keep quiet and help him bury the Jew he would give me half of everything he gets. I said yes, so long as I don't help kill him, I don't mind. I then went away about fifty yards to where the donkeys were. I saw the Jew come up from the farm house to the wagon and when he got there the Nigger Frederick caught hold of him threw him to the ground and choked him dead. He had his knees on the Jew's hands. I went up to the wagon and the Jew was dead. I helped to pick him up and put him on the wagon and covered him over. Before covering him the nigger Frederick searched the Jew and gave me two pounds fifteen shillings and promised me more. He said that we must bury him as soon as it would get dark. When it got dark I helped him and we took the dead body to the railway line. We were starting to cover it over with sand when we saw a man coming towards us. The Nigger ran away and I ran away too. Next morning I came round to the wagon again and took these clothes (pointing to the clothes he was wearing) and came to De Aar on Sunday

night and left straight away for Houtkraal on foot. I took a ticket at the next station for Bloemfontein but was caught on the train at De Aar. I go by the name of Nicolas Loggerenberg but my name is Christian Smit.

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These statements of the accused were preceded by a preliminary investigation. There was no bail granted to the accused and initially van Loggerenberg was represented by an attorney.

The charge of murder was upheld and the accused were sentenced to death by the Circuit Court held at Victoria West on 27 March 1906. The charge was that on or about 27 January and or near Ganskuil in the District of Britstown, both and each wrongfully, unlawfully and maliciously killed and murdered Philip Borkum, in his lifetime, a trader carrying on his business in Britstown.

Papers were then filed in the name of the King that both Frikkie and Nicolas *“would be hanged by the neck until they be dead at such place of execution and at such time as His Excellency the Governor should be pleased to appoint.”* The Attorney General’s Office in Cape Town then signed the necessary papers on 29 May 1906 for the High Sheriff to prepare the execution of the prisoners as soon as possible. They were both executed on 2nd June 1906.

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This record is nearly all I know about my paternal grandfather who just slipped away in 1906 near Kimberley, not spoken of nor honoured in my lifetime. Now that I have discovered this past, as perhaps the last survivor of my generation of his grandchildren, I have set out to record this missing link.

From this story of a trial, with few other details, in its emptiness and sadness, I have tried to peel away the layers from that corpse found in the northern Cape. He had been the breadwinner and father of five children, the youngest David was my father, three years old at the time of the death.

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It was this murder story in the family that stimulated my interest to explore further. As a youngster in Johannesburg little was said about our history although success was highlighted. Success was usually equated with money.

I knew which members of my family were rich, even extending to their English branch but other matters were not discussed. To this day I do not know the name of my maternal grandmother's birth place nor her maiden name.

So I had a patchy knowledge about my family, bits and pieces, here and there, but I definitely knew nothing about that paternal grandfather. I just accepted that he had died when my father was a boy in Kimberley and there were no other members of his family in South Africa.

Until she died when I was thirteen years old, my paternal grandmother Ella was an important part of my childhood, a larger than life character at the centre of her large family, they called her the matriarch.

I still remember her birthdays in Johannesburg when all the Heydenreichs, for that was her maiden name, would gather at her house to celebrate. It was Christmas Day and her large family of three sisters and three brothers with their families would visit during the day and evening. These were large gatherings of three generations, all meeting together and there could have been nearly a hundred visitors over the day.

The Heydenreichs came from Courland in the 1890s. That exotic sounding name would be tossed around as though it was some superior place and it was only later that I discovered it was a part of Latvia. What of course was special about it as far as my story is concerned is that it was not part of the Pale of Settlement and the status of Jews was a far more privileged one from the 18th century onwards when they obtained legal status. Because there was an influx of German speakers with skills at that time the German way of life dominated their life. This of course impacted on me when that older generation spoke German together and heavily accented but fluent English to the rest of us. It contrasted with my other very orthodox grandmother, who mostly spoke Yiddish and would sip a cold drink from the bottle because Ella did not keep kosher and she refused to eat or drink anything else in her house. This embarrassed me. Early on, from then, I was aware of the division between the Lithuanian and 'German' sides of my family, culturally and socially.

The Heydenreichs changed their name to Hayden or Hyde or Haden at the outbreak of the First World War and even in my childhood the two brothers,

Sydney and David were prominent business men involved in many enterprises from minerals, entertainment and chemicals. As the manufacturers of DDT products, Flymos and Flyex,(commonly used pesticides of those times) we children called them Uncle Flymos and Uncle Flyex.

A generation later when I lived in London my cousin Beryl Stone, daughter of my grandmother's cousin Alexander Bernstein, gave me a copy of *The Heydenreich Saga*. It was the unpublished chronicle of our family through the generations and in different countries written by my Grandmother Ella's sister, great aunt Anna Hoffman . She began this work in the 1930s and it ended during the 1950s when she got too old and then died.

What a revelation it turned out to be when I read in the Saga that my paternal grandfather had a *tragic death*. I remember the occasion so clearly when I asked my father about this. I was driving along in London in our black Anglia car and he was on a visit. Oh, he said, I thought you knew that his father had been murdered by his employees who were tried and sentenced to death. Quite casual and cool. He had not been able to find out any more and once upon a time he had tried. Now it was another era.....and he had not established whether we had any other relations from that side of the family in South Africa.....and we dropped the subject.

While Aunt Anna wrote much about her sister Ella she only mentioned in a sentence that Ella's husband had a tragic death and nothing more about him other than he had a hat factory in Riga. From her crisp way of dealing with this one could have assumed his death to be the result of an accident of sorts, tragic because he was such a young man who left behind a widow and five young children. Nothing more was said about it.

I was shocked to discover that my grandfather had been murdered and told all my friends. Finding out about a murder in England with its low murder rate in the 1970s was a greater shock than in the present South African context. Whatever.....that event still remains something so far away from my present, so far away from where I locate myself now and given the family history passed onto me during my life.

From then my interest in 'murder' took another turn. As far as we know Abel was the first murder victim in the biblical story, Cain and Abel in which Cain

treacherously murdered his brother Abel and lied about the murder to God. As a result he was cursed and marked for life.

Over the ages important assassinations of political figures have taken place. When the bullet that was fired at Archduke Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo in June 1914 it was considered to be the trigger that started the First World War.

In his entertaining essay on murder, de Quinceyⁱⁱⁱ considered murder as a fine art where the victim is always someone in good health, with a family of young children wholly dependent on his exertions, by way of deepening the pathos of the event.

Twenty years later in 1997 we relocated to Cape Town, returned to our home country from an extended exile in the United Kingdom. I turned then to that missing link, now able to find out more about this unaccounted grandfather, even though two generations had passed and it was more than a hundred years since his death.

Philip Borkum, my grandfather was born in Riga in 1861and had a hat factory. I wonder whether they made homburgs for Jews to wear to synagogue on Rosh Hashana or a daughter's wedding. Or were these beautiful pieces of millinery for women with ribbons and bows like the hat my maternal grandmother wore in this enlarged framed portrait I have of her on the wall behind where I am now sitting. Having been born and reared in Riga, not in the pale of settlement where most Jews lived in that time, Philip Borkum would have been exposed to a more sophisticated environment.....so that it continues to puzzle me over the years how this man adjusted to a life of such changed circumstances, murdered hawking on a wagon in the veld of the Cape Colony.

FOOTNOTES:

ⁱ Full inventory follows in Appendix 1

ⁱⁱ Full Court Case in Appendix 2
The manuscript and the route map

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas de Quincey (Penguin Classics No. 4, 2015) "On murder considered"

New Chapter 2. The family secret

I found that trial record in the State Archives in Cape Town 1998. I first searched through newspapers of the time certain this murder, 'that most foul, strange and unnatural act' (Hamlet) would be headline news. But it was not a main story and if it was reported in the 'smalls section' of the "Cape Times" or "Kimberley Diamond Gazette", their present poor condition on microfilm made it impossible to read. It did occur to me that perhaps the murder of a new Jewish immigrant was not that newsworthy. Their status was 'unusual' in those times and they were considered 'exceptionally foreign', a people with peculiar habits and languages, not quite white, just a notch above the Coloureds.¹

What I then discovered was that my grandfather had been a hawker or smous. Perhaps I had not asked what he did but certainly, at no time was smousing mentioned, something I would have remembered.. What a shock that I didn't have this information and Auntie Anna's history of her family did not mention this - that in one life her brother-in-law was the owner of a hat factory in Riga that she recorded but by the age of forty-five he was found dead near his wagon in the veld near de Aar in the Cape. What happened in the latter part of his life was never mentioned..

Silence, call it the skeleton of bad luck in the cupboard of the Borkum side of the family who definitely came off worst in The Heydenrich Saga. They were the branch of the family that always struggled in the context of that prosperity and *haute bourgeois* I witnessed as I grew up not far from the dominating presence of my grandmother Ella, the family matriarch who lived until she was 86 years.

Great Aunt Anna Hoffman was a snob; her Saga drips with elitism as she describes the successes of different generations of family. In that context I am certain she would not have wanted to mention that there had been a smous in her family, such a demeaning occupation. So she only referred to her brother in law as having died tragically.

¹ Claudia Broude (2001) "Contemporary Jewish Writing in South Africa" (David Phillips)

And silence was how this was handled. To speculate: a murder trial in the family was perhaps the reason to keep this a secret. Bad news was not something to communicate, especially then, when it might bring disgrace on them.. It is also a long time from our times where society is more open but I also have the view that my parents and grandparents would never have said anything about a father/husband/ brother-in law, that might attach something lesser to them? Could that be the reason for the secret? On the other hand, theirs was a century of two world wars and tremendous personal changes in the family itself from 1906 when Philip Borkum died so that his absence may have just faded in a more natural way.

This is my opportunity to resurrect this person.

While I am critical of Auntie Anna's memoirs I am grateful to have her Saga to locate our family some where in the scheme of things. This is quite different from the writer JM Coetzee who when asked to supply some personal details of himself in 1974 for the jacket of his first novel, said:

*The information you suggest suggests that I settle for a particular identity that I should feel most uneasy in. A few words about my schooling, for example, made by a player in the English-South African game of social typing, and could be read as a compliment to those monsters of sadism who ruled over my life for 11 years. As for my family background, I am one of the 10,000 Coetzees, and what is there to be said about them except that Jacobus Coetzee begat them all."*²

I feel fortunate to have Anna Hoffman's account of her sisters in their youth :

Ella was my eldest sister and with some friends opened a class in Goldingen for Jewish girls, to teach them the three R's as education was then very expensive and the poor could not afford it for their daughters. Jewish boys received their education at the Talmud Torah School. After Ella married I took over the school.

² Christopher Taylor, "Tables and chairs", a review of JM Coetzee "A life in writing" by JC Kanemayer, (London Review of Books, 21 March 2013)

Meanwhile a younger sister Regina obtained a teacher's diploma and the school was then registered in her name. Later the school buildings were enlarged by a bequest of a house and stand. The stand was sold to the Talmud Torah and with the proceeds of the sale six teachers were engaged to help Regina as the school then had six classes. When she was old enough our youngest sister Fanny taught there as an honorary instructor together with the paid teachers. Some instruction in music was given and the girls were allowed to practise on the piano in our home. The school developed into a large institution eventually, taken over by the government and hundreds of Jewish girls received their education there. Regina taught there voluntarily for years and took a prominent part in the school's affairs. When years later she died in South Africa, out of gratitude the school established a perpetual Kaddish.³

Ella's story continues with her move to Kimberley in the 1890s. I assume from the birth dates of their children that she came together with her husband Philip Meyer Borkum and three children. They emigrated to be near to Ella's parents, Celine and Samuel Heydenreich⁴, and at least one brother Herman who had arrived in 1892. Ella and Philip Borkum had two more children, my father being the last born and his circumcision details (known as a brit) are registered in the Kimberley Shul records in August 1902 with their address in Fergusson Lane.

It was his brother -in-law Herman Heydenreich, a shop keeper who witnessed Philip's naturalization. To back up that application the Senior Inspector for Hope Town wrote:

Philip Borkum has been a resident of Hope Town for several years and as far as I can ascertain always been quiet and law abiding. The police have never received any complaints about this man nor have we any knowledge that he has been convicted for any crime and therefore know nothing against his character. Borkum carries on the business of hawker in this and surrounding districts.

³Kaddish : a Jewish prayer recited on the anniversary of death

⁴ Samuel Heydenreich died in Kimberley in 1897 and Celine Heydenreich in 1907. They are both buried in the Stead Street Cemetery, Kimberley.

Among the family 'legends 'I have collected over the years one suggests that Ella and Philip Borkum were about to open a boarding house.

All in all Philip Borkum spent about seven years in Kimberley and its surrounds until his death in 1906. I have no ideas of what bonds he formed but he arrived at the start of the Boer War and in that period my father was born. The war including the Siege of Kimberley from October 1899 to February 1900 must have made his adjustment from Riga even more difficult.

I guess he had little alternative but become a hawker or *smous*. In Afrikaans the term *smous* was used to describe a low-class trader, usually a Jew, who moved from farm to farm, selling his wide range of household goods and clothing. Quite a contrast for the German speaking owner of a hat factory in Riga to establish himself in Kimberley in the un auspicious time of a warWith a large family to support perhaps his brother-in law Hermann Heydenrich, who was a shop keeper, set him up with some inexpensive wares, taught him some of their names and prices in Afrikaans and he went around from door to door with his goods on his back. He may have started to trade in the streets in Kimberley during the Boer War and only later acquired his wagon when it was safe for him to move around the countryside to Britstown and do his selling on farms.

His services seemed to have been appreciated by the isolated farmers whose evidence at the trial showed sympathy for him and kindness as they helped him inspan his wagon.

.....

More than a hundred years later it would still be hopeless for a young widow in Ella Borkum's circumstances to manage without skills and/or financial backing. But in 1906 in Kimberley, she was left a young widow with five young children to support (the eldest Benno was 12 1/2 and my father, the youngest was 3) after the tragic death of her young husband.

In Philip Borkum's Estate papers of May 1906, Ella received the amount of £86.16.11 from the sale of the wagon and its contents⁵ after various merchants were paid as creditors. Interestingly, her brother Hermann Heydenreich was at that time a declared insolvent and the promissory note signed by Philip was also deducted. Hermann was one of his suppliers.

Her 'dire distress' was described by the Executor of the Estate when he arranged to have the £3.6.2 found in the pocket of the one murderer, paid over to her. The creditors were willing to forego any claim to this small amount.

What I did know is that after she was widowed Ella and her children went to England and spent two years there staying with her first cousin Alexander and his wife, Jane Bernstein in Ilford. Knowing now about the murder and its circumstances gives new meaning to this monumental journey she made. I used to wonder why she did this and why she came back.

In a biography of the television tycoon, Sydney Bernstein⁶ he says his father Alexander migrated to England in the 1880s while his other brothers went to the US. Sydney makes the point that neither of his parents ever spoke to their children about their past so he was surprised to discover after his father's death, an old passport that showed he was a naturalised Swedish subject.

However by the time my father went to stay with them in Ilford, Alexander Bernstein was already a comfortable business man, a rising man of property, buying properties in Ilford and about to enter the music hall business. I construct the scene in my mind of Alexander taking pity on a favourite cousin's catastrophe and paying for Ella and her children's trip when he heard her awful news.

But Ella returned and - she married again, seemingly one of the few options open to her. After an interval she married Abraham Glatt, himself a widower

⁵ list of goods on the wagon, and the wagon were sold in Britstown for the Estate of Philip Borkum attached. The sale took place in Britstown on 7 July 1906 and realised the sum of £116.16.6.

⁶ Caroline Moorhead (1984) Sydney Bernstein (Jonathan Cape)

with certain conditions attached. My father always referred to him as Alte Glatt and he ran a hotel in Vrede, Orange Free State where my father spent most of his youth. Only the younger three of the Borkum children were part of the package and the two older sons, Benno and Joe were excluded and left to their own devices and the care of Ella's siblings. She had agreed to oversee the Jewish upbringing of Glatt's three daughters and find Jewish husbands for them as their mother Dina de Jager was not Jewish and had died in 1898.

The hotel scene was a popular Jewish occupation at the time and there were many across the rural landscape in South Africa. Many hotelier's background had been hawkingperhaps Alte Glatt also started out as a smous ?

My father, reticent about his own father, had a fund of stories for me about that life in Vrede. They fascinated me as a child to hear about his early schooling in Afrikaans and the fascinating stories about his older step-sisters whom he clearly did not like. Glatt spent most of his time running his hotel and bar and I think their house adjoined that property. At aged 15 my father was sent to boarding school in Pietermaritzburg, to Marists Brothers, to complete his schooling in English. He never returned to Vrede but went to Johannesburg, and to Witwatersrand University. By that time Ella had separated from Alte Glatt and also moved to Johannesburg to live with her second son, Joe, an arrangement that continued until her death in 1953.

Ella and her children suffered. That tragic death of Philip Borkum clearly impacted on their lives; the family was split up and the two eldest were left to largely fend for themselves. With hindsight, it was my father who coped best, perhaps as the youngest but their upbringing contrasted sharply with their cousins who grew up in different circumstances.

CHAPTER 3 : MASS MIGRATION OF JEWS , THE SMOUS PHENOMENON

Philip Borkum's journey was part of that period of a massive migration of Jews during the 19th century from the Russian Empire , a significant chapter in the story of the 'wondering Jew' to the 'new world'. This was principally to the United States and permanently changed Jewish life for that generation and their descendents.

More than three million Jews, about one third of world Jewry arrived in their new countries not knowing the language, the customs or much about the settled populations they found there. They looked strange too with their beards, long coats and hats.

As Diner¹ points out the journeys from Eastern Europe taken at that time altered the map of world Jewry and the peddler experience proved remarkably consistent around the world.

Now in the 21st century, their descendents in many parts of the world are the beneficiaries today of that generations' courageous migration when hawking, peddling or smousing was the only work the majority of those immigrants could undertake.

G. Gasler(1955) writing about the movement of Lithuanians to South Africa in 1955 said:

"The Jewish community as it exists today was largely fashioned by the immigration of E European Jews between 1881-1910.....Some 40,000 immigrated to South Africa and changed South African Jewry from a few weak congregations into a firmly established community .

One of the main factors for this great migration was the increasingly restrictive living abode in the Russian Empire where Jews could only live in a demarcated territory, known as the 'Pale of Settlement' andonly a few could venture further afield. By 1880 , 94% of the Jewish population were restricted to the Pale.

¹ Hasia R Diner (2015) Roads taken: The Great Jewish migration to the new world (Yale University Press)

The Pale of Settlement was situated in territories belonging in the subjugated minority populations of the Russian Empire – Poles, Byelorussians, Lithuanians and others. The central Russian government showed little concern for the welfare of these minorities and ruthlessly oppressed them.

Time and again in the Pale there were new edicts issued which could involve expulsion of a whole Jewish village. Added to this the general law of military service introduced in 1874 imposed a complicated conscription system on Jews and many historians think this a prime reason for the migration of Jews at that time.

.....The climax in 1881 came when a wave of pogroms spread in the south of Russia, a consequence of the general reaction and repressive policy adopted by the Russian government. After the assassination of Tsar Alexander II and the accession to the throne of Alexander III the government carried out a programme of oppression against the Jews causing panic so that the flight of Jews from 1881 onwards became a general exodus.

A publication called "Rassviet", the Russian Jewish weekly carried a special government supplement at the time saying "the western frontier is open for the Jews."²

In spite of the hardships involved they seized the opportunity as emigration offered them the chance of a better life.

The migration of such large numbers had a far-reaching effect on the course of subsequent Jewish history, particularly in the US. The South African Jewish population mainly came from Lithuania and referred to themselves as *Litvaks*. Shimoni³ explained in the broad sense, the term *Litvak* describes a Jew who stemmed from anywhere within the pre 1917 Czarist Russian provinces of Kovno, Vilna and included Riga and Eastern Poland. This group retained a certain homogeneity, held to the present of certain Lithuanian traditions, such as

² C. Gasler "From Lithuania to South Africa" in Saraon & Hotz (1955) *The Jews In South Africa, a history.* (OUP)

³ Simon Gideon (1980) *Jews and Zionism* (OUP)

culinary favourites like kichel and tagel that have been lost in other countries. Although considered uneducated in the traditional sense, the Litvak had been educated in a Talmudic college for generations and many had a good knowledge of the Bible in the original Hebrew. Many were also skilled artisans.

They all travelled by sea mostly organised through Libau in small ships to England where they were helped by the Jewish Board of Guardians, a philanthropic organisation to migrate elsewhere, and in this case South Africa. The next part of their journey could take between three to four weeks.

“My boat from Libau was like a cattle ship – 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.

*“....The filthy habits of the foreign passengers especially when partaking of their meals....I would like to draw attention to the fact that there was only one bath on the Raglan Castle and a request to make a second bath available for third class passengers was refused. The ship took twenty-four days to reach Cape Town.”
(from letter to the Cape Times, October 1901)⁴*

This type of experience was common to all Jewish migration at the time, wherever they went, and there exist thousands of local stories and histories. My examples of the South African journey helps to flesh out my story.

Of course there are individual features in each story but there is also a prevailing thread to them. Most of these accounts, according to Marcus Arkin⁵ belong in the category of oral history and in his view are subjective, *“often coloured and distorted by time.”* Many accounts emphasize the success of the pioneering family, and correspondingly, any hardships and failures are played down. An example from an account of a family in Bloemfontein from the 1880s, describes how *“they integrated into the fabric of the country and became excellent citizens and a great asset in the making of the South African nation.”* These words could

⁴ Gwynne Schrire (2007) *“From Eastern Europe to South Africa, memories of an epic journey (Gitlin Library Series No. 1 ---from Oral History Collection, Kaplan Centre, Cape Town.*

⁵ Arkin Marcus (1986) *“Jewish entrepreneurship and SA economic development” (Jewish Affairs, Oct 1986)*

have come from Great Aunt Anna Hoffmann⁶ who preferred to highlight the successful and play down anything else. This could be a significant leitmotif in the history of the period, and I return to it later in this account.

Curious now, but in that wave of movement of people from 1881-1914, besides persisting dark mutterings there appeared to be few restrictions to entry across the new world. It was the time too when South Africa had its first enormous influx of people. Several decades of discussion passed before legislation was introduced from one country to another to keep out 'the alien.' In the parliament in Cape Town demands were heard to limit the 'pedlar Jew'.⁷ The pattern of controlling immigration has continued and nowadays the modern world world imposes strict controls and prohibitions on the entry of so-called economic asylum seekers.

D Hoffman was the founder of the Yiddish language paper, a weekly *Der Afrola er Israelit*⁸ in 1890. One of his many vivid descriptions of the smous of the time:

When a greener landed in Cape Town he would go to his distant relatives whose addresses he had brought with him. He was welcomed and initiated into his new life. He would first be taken to the bath house where he was deloused, then taken to the barber. Later he was given a new suit of clothes. A few weeks of recuperation from the long journey and his hosts would take him to a wholesale merchant where he could get credit with his host standing as surety. He would be advised on what sort of merchandise to buy and helped to pack his wares, pricing each article with its cost price and its selling price. The new smous with his wares strapped on his back would then set off for the country with a mazel broche (blessing) –ready to do business with the Boers."

Hoffman described how he went into business with his brother-in-law in 1890 after saving £100 . They became smouse, bought a cart with two horses and packed it with merchandise and went into the Cape Colony from Cape Town to

⁶ Anna Hoffmann (1953) "The Heydenreich Saga" (unpublished family chronicle)

⁷ Guy Saron (1955) 'Jewish Immigration' from Saron & Hotz (op cit)

⁸ ND Hoffman, "Reminiscences of South African Jews" (Kaplan Centre publication, 1996) translated by Dubb & Barkunsky

trade among the Boers. They spent two years wondering about the countryside and sold their wares. Eventually Hoffman opened a general dealer's store and brought out his family from Russia.....later he went to Cape Town and started to publish.

Jews had been involved in 'petty commerce' for centuries, that is, hawking and peddling their wares to Jews and non-Jews on the road so that in a sense they continued to follow their trade. I know that Philip Borkum was not a peddler in Latvia but once in Kimberley he would have had little alternative but peddle to make some money to feed his growing family; he would have known about peddling from Latvia as an ordinary part of Jewish life of his times. I have assumed from the dates of the birth of their children that Philip Borkum, his wife and three children arrived where there was already a settled family in Kimberley, as his brother-in-law was by then a shopkeeper who would assist him with goods to sell and routes to take. As Philip Borkum's arrival coincided with the outbreak of the South African War in 1898, his initial *smousing* might have been restricted to the streets of Kimberley. It was the time of the Siege of Kimberley, in that period when it was blockaded by the Boers for four months in 1899.

Perhaps what he did then was to set out in the streets of Kimberley with some inexpensive household goods in a basket on his back and go from house to house having learned some names of the merchandise in Dutch/Afrikaans from his brother-in-law.

JM Sherman⁹ described trading in old clothes as one of the occupations of the newcomers (known colloquially as *greeners*).

"All day from early in the morning until late,

You'll find him always on the street,

On his back he carries a large sack, Full of old clothes

⁹ JM Sherman (...) "The Thorny path of Jewish immigration to South Africa" (translated by Ray Meltzer)

You'll find him always on the street,
 On his back he carries a large sack,
 Full of old clothes.

He goes from house to house
 And knocks on every door

And as with all humility for charity :
 "Can you help me with something?"

Later.....Philip Borkum acquired a wagon; this must have been after the Boer War when he loaded up at Britstown for trips to farms to sell his goods. The isolated farmer may have appreciated his trips and the goods he brought to sell. They seemed friendly disposed to him as their evidence in the trial of his murder indicates, helping him to inspan and sympathetically describing to the Court the problems he had with his employees.

The goods he had for sale were bought from two merchants. H. Goldschneider of Britstown provided different types of cloth for dressmaking such as linen, gingham , muslin. Items of clothing were for men , women and children- shoes, trousers, hats, mufflers. There was foodstuff as well - coffee, sugar, wheat, sweets and meat. There were pipes, tobacco, hammer and screw driver, paint and a plank.

His other supplier of goods was P. Salkinder, a General Merchant of de Aar who also gave him credit. This merchandise was much the same as the above but included quilts, candles, yards of embroidery, boxes of paper, sunlight soap and fuel.

Shain and Mendelsohn¹⁰ provide an interesting word picture of a smous, my grandfather perhaps, unpacking and displaying his merchandise on the *stoep* of a

¹⁰ Shain & Mendelsohn (2008) "The Jews in South Africa"(Jonathan Ball)

farm house for the buyer to select. By the time he was murdered I have the impression that he had a well stocked wagon of various goodsbut he was ready then to move onto a new enterprise. Perhaps he made a good living smousing and his expenses would have little and he slept, as we know from the trial, in his wagon.

That stock could have provided the farmer with everything he needed, and ranged from a needle to a shirt, sometimes introducing a new- fangled trinket . He acted as a sort of village storekeeper and it is also suggested that the smous may have given the farmer long term credit as well as being a source of information bringing news and gossip from the world further afield.

Sarah Gertrude Millin¹¹, a writer of note in her day, summed up the travels of the smous in what she called *the old days*:

"...he came to lonely farmhouses offering in a broken tongue, to sell the goods he carried . He was less of a stranger when his loneliness and poverty matched the Boer loneliness and poverty than when he prospered and grew numerous."

.....

Later the smous found more stable work. The 'greener' was advised to try different things. Those who came with skills, such as butchers, tailors, shoemakers made it much quicker and set themselves up in small towns with shops. But the majority had to try different things peddling or smousing; perhaps it was bread and vegetables or kosher meat or even a basket of eggs and a few chickens.

The smous in South Africa arrived at the *right* moment in history, at the time of the discovery of diamonds and then gold. This unleashed new economic and social conditions to give him a 'push' forward. And throughout the world at the time all Jewish peddlers/smouse had one thing in common: they arrived completely unknown, the exotic stranger in places that had never had

¹¹ Sarah Gertrude Millin (1951) "The People of South Africa" (Constable & Co.) p 216

involvement with Jews in the past or indeed the present. It was at a time of great economic expansion everywhere in which they could contributeand benefit. And they did.

JM Sherman¹² describes how the smous became a “*boser-kosher*”, that is, a kosher butcher. His first task was to get customers to buy his meat and he needed to enlist his friends and *landsleit* to buy their meat from him, to become his customers. He would in turn buy his meat from an established butcher at a lower price; he first placed his order and then wrapped up the portions to carry in his sack. If he had customers for bread he would do the same thing at the bakery and then carry two bags over his shoulder – one bag with the meat and the other with the bread, going from customer to customer with their orders.

Pauline Smith, a writer in the period described the life of the smous turned shop keeper:

The Jew-woman’s store on the bank of the river was a small whitewashed building with the single word ‘winkel’ printed over the half door. It stood back from the road in an unenclosed yard which went down to the drift by which the river crossed.

She was simply called ‘The Jew woman’ though her name was Esther Shokolowsky and seemed to remain to the end of her days a stranger among Aangenaam people. Terrible things had happened to her in her own country before she fled from it with her grandson, and from the memory of her sufferings even in old age she found no escape..

It was to Zandthaaï- a little port which lay halfway between Cape Town and Port Elisabeth that their wanderings had first brought the old Jewess and her grandson in South Africa, and from there, by way of Princes town, the young man had tramped one summer down the Aangenaam valley with a pack of patent medicines for men and beasts on his back. In the valley he had done good business and, when he came again some months later in a dilapidated buggy drawn by two ancient mules, he brought with him a little box of cheap jewellery,

¹² JM Sherman “{The Path of Jewish Immigration” from Jewish Gen.com

some rolls of coloured print, reels of cotton, tapes, buttons, gaily coloured handkerchiefs, as well as those patent medicines upon which his fortune was founded. With the buggy his business had steadily increased and finally, hiring a bit of ground from Mnr. Van der Merwe he had built for himself and his grandmother the little 'winkel' (shop) in which they now lived. Here they sold ...the goods described above. Money was short in the valley and in payment for their goods, the Jew-woman and her grandson took such produce that the bijwoners brought from their lands – mealies, pumpkins, dried fruit, forage and tobacco, pigs and poultry. These in turn the young man took to Platkopsdorp, exchanged them at the market or at the stores, for such goods needed to replenish his stock.

At the end of the previous month of July young Shokolowsky bought part of the bankrupt stock of a Platkops storekeeper, and his little shop was now overflowing with such an assortment of goods as had never been seen in the Aangenaam valley. With these the young man expected to do much trade at the coming Sacrament, as their fame had spread abroad, and round about the talk for some weeks had been of the coloured prints, ribbons and laces, cheap gay jewellery, and the little mirrors, rimmed with pink and white shells, to be seen at the Jew-woman's store."¹³

A letter written from Cape Town by a smous in Cape Town to his wife in Lithuania in 1900 describes his activity like this:

"I was lodging with a Rakshiker Jew who has a bag business. He advised me to buy bags and he would buy them from me and give me a profit. 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 bags. The next week I started buying bottles but these were too heavy for one man to carry on his shoulders so I went

¹³ Pauline Smith (1926) "The Beadle" (Jonathan Cape)

to the docks and worked there for three weeks....I also tried a spell of trading in eggs, buying in the market and carrying it to town and making a good living.¹⁴

....And so with time the smous expanded, particularly those with a wagon, who could use his commercial energy to build up a clientele and was able in time to turn his back pack into a village shop. Peddling was a temporary stage and means by which many Jewish traders became a commercial asset in the country towns where they settled bringing trade and development.

Sadly, Philip Borkum did not travel so far but was a casualty of peddling in that far off time in 1906, the epitome of the wondering Jew of his time, killed on a lonely Saturday night by his two employees near de Aar.

Another case described by Steve Lunderstedt¹⁵ is a similar murder of a smous that took place at Olifantsfontein in 1877:

“ Jacob Gamler was a well known Jewish trader around the diamond fields who packed his wagon for a smousing trip to the Orange Free State on 19 January 1877 . It was drawn by four mules and filled with goodies popular with the local farming community Among them was a photographic equipment and apparatus, as Gamler had become a keen photographer and hoped to take some stills of scenery, even perhaps some farmhouses and family pictures to sell back to the farmers themselves. He was assisted by Nana named Gert whom he employed on that day as his regular employee had decided to remain in Kimberley.

On that first evening Mr. Gamler decided to outspan early because he was tired; the mules were tied to trees close by. A light meal was eaten and then the trader turned into his blanket for the night. Gert did the same.

The following morning two passing traveller heading eastwards saw in the distance a long wagon, seemingly overturned. When they arrived at the scene the wagon was disturbed and its owner and mules were nowhere to be seen. They thought this was strange and a search of the wagon exposed marks of blood

¹⁴ Gwynne Schrire (Jewish Affairs, Autumn 2000) “Mostly smouse? – South African Jews and their occupations a century ago.

¹⁵ Steve Lunderstedt (2001) “ Kimberley murders most foul: 1870-1950 (Kimberley Marketing and Promotions

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in the vicinity of the wagon. They decided to look further afield and came across Gamler's body with his skull smashed in. The first pool of blood had been close to the wagon and Gamler's body had been dragged off into the bushes some twenty metres away from where an obvious crime had been committed. Neither Gert nor the mules were anywhere to be seen. The two men immediately returned to Kimberley and reported what seemed to have been a murder to the Resident Magistrate who in turn contacted the police.

Much of this is similar in detail to Philip Borkum's murder but there were problems in establishing the district of the crime because Olifantstuin was within the Orange Free State, a sovereign state at the time.

A neighbouring farmer eventually turned in the attacker after it transpired that Gert had killed Gamler while he was sleeping by hitting his head with a rock three times. Then he removed a ring, three watches and money and left the scene and went to Adriaan Rothman's farm and asked how he could escape from the police. He gave Rothman a version of the murder but admitted destroying the paper money and said that three white men had stolen all three watches from him. Rothman made a citizen's arrest, tied him up and took him to Kimberley and handed him over to the police. Two 'coloured' persons were arrested by the Kimberley police for complicity in the murder but released after admitting they had only taken the watches from a black man along the road.

Gert was soon handed over to the Sheriff of the Orange Free State to stand trial for the murder of Jacob Gamler. This took place on 2 July and lasted two days.

The Court was packed with locals of all races who heard from Gert that soon after Gamler had unharnessed that night, another African had joined him. Gert told this man that Gamler had 'lots of money' and 'other goods' so they decided to kill him while he slept. Gert threw a large stone at Gamler's head and then another stone was thrown by the second murderer and the trader died immediately. The two killers then upset the cart, chased away the mules and spread the wares and goods around the cart to make it look as there had been a terrible and tragic cart accident. Then they went off to Kimberley, shared out the loot and parted

company. But when Gert was off in the direction of the Vaal River he met Adriaan Rothman, the man who arrested him.

Gert's companion was never found but his voluntary confession led the jury to return a verdict of guilty after seven minutes deliberation and Gert was sentenced to death and executed within a month."

There were probably other murders or acts of violence on the road for the lonely smous. Mendelsohn and Shain¹⁶ do say, however that the collective South African Jewish memory has romanticized the smous in his wonderings but he was also not always welcome, and often a figure of derision.

A surprising example of this is to be found in the writings of Olive Schriener, who displayed somewhat ambiguous views of Jews. While she was a person ahead of her times in much of her writing and attitudes, this did not extend to the smous. She described him as "snivelling weasel-like creatures who come out third class and as soon as they land supply themselves with a couple of mules and become smouses, hawking false jewellery and damaged clothing among the Dutch farmers and growing rich on it."¹⁷

¹⁶ Mendelsohn & Shain (2008) "The Jews in South Africa" (Jonathan Ball)

¹⁷ Schriener Olive (1870) "Undine"

CHAPTER 4: PLACESKIMBERLEY and others

Through the writings of others I have tried to create some context as to how Philip Borkum may have lived his very short time in South Africa.

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Kimberley was an obvious choice for Jews as news of the discovery of diamonds in 1870 travelled around the world and led to a rush of fortune hunters to the diggings from all over the world. The original mine was owned by the de Beer Brothers and it all began in the place now known as The Big Hole. It was the largest hand-dug excavation in the world – they dug with picks, shovels, hands and determination.

N.D. Hoffman¹ described a group of strangers, all fortune hunters, who travelled by wagon to try their luck at the diggings:

“We were under the supervision of a government official whose job it was to allocate to each of us an area which we were permitted to dig and for which we paid an arranged fee. The farmers who saw our wagons pass by shook their heads in amazement. They were impassive and indifferent to the diamond fever raging at the time. We arrived in Kimberley worn out and tired. The sun was beating down and an open piece of land which seemed to be marked was abuzz and bustling with many people of many races and nationalities. The bars and hotels were filled to capacity with gamblers, drunkards and tricksters. As far as the eye could see there were untidy rows of tens.....the diamond mines of Kimberley descended thousands of feet into the earth. Here in the depths of the earth the blacks are to be found gasping for breath as they push and pull the trolleys filled with earth. “

Families like the Heydenreichs must have seen it as a place where they could join a flourishing economy and prosper. By 1914 diamond mining ceased but Kimberley remains engraved as the place of diamonds and entwined with the names of de Beers and Cecil Rhodes.

¹ N.D. Hoffman (1996) “Reminiscences of South African Jews” (Kaplan Centre Publications)

Bill Nasson² says that prior to the discovery of diamonds in 1870 Kimberley was an agricultural area rapidly transformed with the development of the diamond fields. By the time of the Anglo Boer War 1898,(now known as the South African War), Kimberley was the headquarters of de Beers Mines and blockaded by encircling Boer forces. This was eventually overcome by the British.

The writer Anthony Trollope³ on a visit to Kimberley in 1877 complained of the heat, the dust, the flies, the food, the living conditions and the high prices in the barren landscape. He said:

Its most notable feature was Market Square, mentioned by local residents with pride, but which boasted only one building higher than one storey. This is its only magnificence. There is no pavement. The roadway is all dust and holes.... a market place in the midst which certainly is not magnificent. Around are the corrugated iron shops of the ordinary dealers in provisions. An uglier place I do not know how to imagine.....The mean looking corrugated houses, in which rich and poor alike lived were bereft of comfort. The temperature was 97 degrees in the shade and there was not a tree within five miles or a blade of grass nor a house of anything but of corrugated iron, nor food fit to eat. The atmosphere was of dust and flies.....I was soon sick of looking at diamonds."

And significantly, he wrote:

There are places to which men are attracted by the desire of gain which seem to be so repulsive that no gain can compensate the miseries incidental to such habitation.

The town developed in a most haphazard way, streets in higgledy- piggledy fashion corresponding to the diggings. There were some grand suburbs named after posh English centres like Belgravia and Kenilworth and they are still there. Vooruitzicht was Kimberley's original name after the farm where diamonds were discovered but re-named after the Colonial Secretary, the Earl of Kimberley.

² Bill Nasson (2010) "The War for South Africa" (Tafelberg)

³ Anthony Trollope (1878) "South Africa"

Nearly a hundred years later, the writer Dan Jacobson'⁴ who grew up in Kimberley said it remained an *“isolated, iconic monument to the past, a symbol of a defunct imperialism and exhausted money-greed, in the middle of the silence and indifference of the veld.”*

He offers a persuasive reason why Jews like the Heydenreichs chose South Africa in the first place and Kimberley in particular. He believed the publicity given to Sammy Marks' sensational financial success made public in Lithuania and elsewhere had the effect of making South Africa a desirable destination in the 1890s and beyond. And this particularly applied to Kimberley where the diamond fields were flourishing. Reports of gold, diamonds and wealth reached the far-flung Russian Empire and gradually the number of Jews who emigrated increased.

“In 1884 the Hebrew newspaper from the town where Marks came from in Lithuania “Hameliz” was able to report how the majority of Jews who had immigrated from nearby towns to Cape Town and Kimberley had prospered, some becoming wealthy and respected merchants. Further, those emigrants who returned from South Africa to their home towns also popularised the country among Lithuanian Jews. They looked prosperous and had a new way about them and sometimes boasted about their experiences and adventures.”⁵

Sammy Marks stands out very prominently in this era. He left the *shtetl* in Lithuania before his 18th birthday for Sheffield in England where he made a living by peddling before emigrating to South Africa in 1868. At first he stayed in Cape Town and formed a partnership with his cousin Isaac Lewis peddling goods on the Grade Parade in Cape Town. They arrived in Kimberley in 1871 and set up in business as general goods dealers, a shrewd move as there was a scarcity of goods and essentials at the timeand payment for those goods was usually made in diamonds and they found that dealing this way was even more profitable way of trading. Within a short time the firm of Lewis and Marks established itself as one of the leading diamond traders that acted as an intermediary between Kimberley and the great diamond centres of Europe. From diamonds, he moved onto coal, to gold

⁴ Dan Jacobson (1985) “Time and again” (Andre Deutsch)

⁵ C Gersheter (1955) op cit. in Saron and Hotz.

Another colourful character of the times was Barney Barnato, born in Petticoat Lane London in 1852, the son of a Jewish rags and old clothes' trader. His first job in London was as part of a juggling act in music halls. When he heard of the diamond rush from his cousins already in Kimberley, he arrived in the Cape in 1873. He had £30 and 40 boxes of bad cigars. It took him about two months on foot to get there from Cape Town but he finally arrived in Kimberley, very grubby and his clothes in tatters.

Barnato would do anything for money. First he unloaded sacks for farmers in the market and box by box he peddled his cigars. When someone complained about the quality of the cigar Barnato offered to split the profit if the man went round the town praising the cigars. Every penny he earned went into trade goods. He bought cloth, and combs and penknives -whatever he could turn over quickly. He even joined the circus as a prize fighter and when the circus left he set up his own boxing ring and took on anyone for a bet. But when he had scraped together enough for a diamond stake, he began to deal in diamonds.

Every morning at dawn Barnato headed out of town with his diamond scale and his lens. He plodded for hours through the red mud of the diggings. He thrived on the haggling of the camps and soon he could distinguish a lesser gem from the others.

Early in 1876 Barnato bought claims in central Kimberley for £3000, the entire sum he and his brother Harry had saved in 3 years. They brought in diggers and set about penetrating the blue ground. It took some time but eventually they found some large stones that enabled them to buy more claims. Within a few years the Barnato Mining Company was formed.

By 1887 there were two huge companies that dominated the mining scene in Kimberley - Cecil Rhodes' de Beers Co. owned one pit on the east side of Kimberley and the Kimberley Central Mining Co. controlled the Big Hole. Barnato had merged his own company into Kimberley Central and became the largest shareholder. Rhodes then started buying up shares on the open market of other small shareholders and he eventually out-witted Barnato. But in his time Barnato was a life director of de Beers and one of the richest men in the British Empire. It seemed in the long run that the sheer complexity

of his huge business began to tell, and his mental health declined. While sailing back to England in June 1897 he either jumped or fell overboard. He was only 54.

Legend has it that Rhodes believed that every man had his price and for Barnato the price was to be a member of the Kimberley Club that excluded Jews from membership. Rhodes secured membership for Barnato.

Solly Joel was Barnato's nephew and heir. He took over his share in de Beers and after Rhodes was a most important figure in the De Beers Company until the arrival on the scene of Ernest Oppenheimer.

From relative obscurity, with their origins in a *shtetl*, and from humble *smousing* in Kimberley, Sammy Marks and Barney Barnato became mining magnates in a relatively short period in the diamond fields of Kimberley.

.....

By my grandparents' time of arrival in Cape Town it is possible they used the newly constructed railway to travel to Kimberley. This was still a considerable journey given that the diamond diggings were located some 1,000km from Cape Town and would have been tedious and lengthy. Many like Barnato had plodded there on foot taking two months to arrive; another way was by ox-wagon, drawn by a number of oxen. Prior to the discovery of diamonds there was little incentive to develop a railway connection and it was only by 1891 that the South African coal industry had sufficient coal to make this a viable operation.

A description of that journey:

*"The impression left on my mind was that we were travelling all day and every day through a waterless and treeless country. We had to carry our water supply in small casks and our fuel, which consisted of dry cow dung, had to be collected at the outspans. The roads were mere wheel tracks and the dust was appalling. The heat was terrible and the discomfort almost unendurable. The roadside was strewn with the bodies of dead-horses, mules and oxen that had perished by the wayside; the stench was offensive."*⁶

⁶ Davenport Jade (2013) "Digging Deep" (Jonathan Ball) from an extract p46

The political scene was fluid...the discovery of diamonds in Griqualand precipitated a tussle between Britain through the Cape, the autonomous Transvaal and the Orange Free State for control of the territory and eventually Britain won. Before that its status and borders were ill defined and of little interest. The wealth from diamonds transformed Britain's interest in the Kimberley region when they realised the financial benefits that could be derived.

Jade Davenport⁷ describes the advent of diamond mining as the point at which the country was dragged into the nineteenth century with the incentive to modernise the means of transportation and communication. From the beginning, the diamond rush was dependent on unskilled labour on a large scale. It was at this time that the labour system of the country were codified; the early digger would need three or four unskilled (or black workers) to do the hard labour of digging, sifting and hauling out the gravel in which the stones were embedded. These labourers would work from sunrise to sunset for a pittance and their encampments were kept totally separate and quite inadequate in facilities.

Milton Shain⁸ says that one of the stereotypes of Jews in South Africa emanated from Kimberley that they were associated with illicit diamond dealing. I thought my grandfather could have been involved in diamonds, something quite outlandish, when I first heard of his death.

.....

It is now two generations later but a thread still connects me to that time and Philip Borkum's personal tragedy.....

.....

The hawker migration saga to South Africa did not end with the Jews.

From then to now and with the social and economic changes that have taken place in the world, there still exists similarities in the business methods of the current wave of migrants from Somalia to South Africa as those early Jews.

⁷ Davenport Jade: op cit.

⁸ Milton Shain (1994) The Roots of Anti Semitism ((Wits Press)

The Somali movement of refugees started after the civil war in Mogadishu in 1991 when vast numbers of people fled. Many moved southwards; perhaps they believed that at the end of their trek they would also find gold! They arrived in South Africa as peddlers and *modus operandi* resonates with the experience of the Jewish *smous* a century earlier. They too developed ethnic networks and seek help and solidarity from their kinsmen and hardly ever work for anyone. Like the Jews they aimed to establish ownership of a business and to trade at all hours, if necessary.

Jonny Steinberg⁹ describes the life of one trader, Assad, his principal character, a Somali trader who needed to live on his wits and take immense gambles to survive. He fled Somalia after a civil war erupted in 1991 and joined thousands of others who moved southwards to eventually arrive in Cape Town. Violence or murder could be just one step away but there was also the chance that if he survived he had a reasonable chance of earning some money, perhaps even becoming wealthy. Certainly that was the ambition of the Jewish *smous* and while they encountered some anti-Semitism there was nothing reminiscent of the outbursts of xenophobia seen in South Africa in 2009.

The Somali story does reinforce that the pattern of migration to South Africa did not begin or end with the Jewish *smous*, nor it seems will it end with the Somali trader. Given the trend of economic asylum seekers throughout the world the hawker experiences in South Africa seem unlikely to end with the Somali traders.

⁹ Jonny Steinberg (2015) *Time of Good hope* (Jonathan Ball)

Chapter 5 The smous makes a good living

My smous story could end here. But I have decided to continue the smous narrativeand, to speculate how it may have been.

That small group of fairly homogeneous Askenhazy Jews, peddlers from Eastern Europe and largely uneducated, went on to produce a talented and enterprising Jewish population with a bigger inprint on their new country than their numbers would suggest.

There was a certain existential advantage that gave the Jewish smous a headstart. It was a time that the economy of South Africa had taken off with the discovery of diamonds, coal and gold. Importantly, the itinerant Jew was white and their customers increasingly became black so they were fully able to take advantage of the cheap black labour system and enjoy the benefits 'whiteness' conferred in the South African set-up.

If I continue from when Philip Borkum died in early 1906, having already acquired a wagon, his next step could have been to amass sufficient money to open a shop somewhere. Perhaps in his case he may have ended up in Britstown where he was known or de Aar and moved his family with him. I have already mentioned elsewhere that there were plans to start a boarding house but equally, it could have been a shop.

Initially the smous' contact with the Boer farmers on their isolated farms was quite good and they learned to communicate in Afrikaans. They were respected, part of God's chosen people. But increasingly over the years the Jews came to value British rule as their role changed and they brought trade to their country towns that helped develop the economy. Their loyalty and language gradually moved to English and especially after the British success in the South African War of 1898-1902. The smous concentrated his energy in setting up his village shop, transferring his pack of goods into the "the general dealer" that sold everything; often with his wife to help him in the shop.

The new railway links spread out everywhere and enabled the farmers to change their shopping patterns and go out to do their shopping rather than have the

wares brought to them. These new shops were often established at the station or at a cross-road that led to the farms to meet the needs of these emerging rural consumers. The farmers often bartered their farm produce for goods from the shop so that the shop keeper also became a middleman and creative in trading. From this, the country hotel started as providing a stay-over for food and drink for travellers. The hotelier¹ had been an occupation the Litvak was licenced to do in the Pale of Settlement by Russian noblemen where they ran canteens and taverns in the rural areas. Many Jews became hoteliers.

These are countless family success stories but there was something exotic about those 'feather dealers' of Oudtshoorn in the Cape hinterland and the migration of those who took an opposite direction, along the north west coast of South Africa as far as Springbok in Namaqualand where copper had been discovered. Both were quite a distance from Cape Town where the journeys began. There are overtones of that earlier chapter of South Africa history, the Great Trek, when the Dutch settlers moved inland away from British rule at the Cape, but of course the scale and rationale was not the same for the adventurous journeys of the Jews. John Simon² suggests a chain migration was at work so when one family member found something promising that may secure a future for his family, he would alert other family membersand a trail would then begin.

Along the route various groups would settle when they found some niche or other for trading so that those heading for Springbok Namaqualand settled in towns like Malmsbury, Piketberg and Garies while those travelling eastwards established themselves in places like Stellenbosch, Caledon, Riversdale and George before reaching Oudtshoorn. And small Jewish communities were established. The successful entrepreneurship in Namaqualand and Oudtshoorn were based on minerals in Namaqualand and agriculture in Oudtshoorn. The considerable development of these areas and the pioneering families too became very wealthy as a result.

¹ Phyllis Jowell & Adrienne Folb (2004) "Into Kokerboom country" (Fernwood Press)

² John Simon (2009) Jewish identity in two remote areas of the Cape Province in " Place and displacement in Jewish history and memory" Ed by Caeserani, Kushner & Shain (Valentine Mitchell)

Namaqualand, semi-desert in terrain, was bounded by the Atlantic Ocean and Orange River where copper was found in quantity in the mid 19th century. This must have been the rationale for the large Jewish migration in that direction with eventually some Jewish presence in every little town as far as Springbok in the north. The poor Jewish new-comers were not involved in the mining industry, more in the trading off-shoots such as in Kimberley. Always, they filled a gap and could develop this to their advantage and within a couple of generations, according to the records, most had migrated to the cities.

In Namaqualand like most other rural areas, Jewish dealings were mostly with Afrikaners and sadly, their relationship with the African assumed the traditional pattern of the day where skin colour made him the boss and the African the servant. Even in trading relationships that were extensive, the trader did not view his black customers as equals in their transactions.

A well documented story of a successful Jewish family, the Jowells, describes how the first arrival, Abraham Jowell developed a successful smous business from his cart and mules in Namaqualand towards the end of the nineteenth century. Within ten years his sons had joined him from Lithuania and extended their business by developing a trading store in Riebeek West which grew to include the sale of patent medicines, bicycle parts, material for clothing and other goods. Over the decades members of the Jowell family became increasingly prosperous as they extended their businesses in that western enclave of South Africa, even after relocating to Cape Town.

In the opposite direction, Oudtshoorn, reached from Cape Town via what we now call the Garden Route is in the Little Karoo. Ostriches ran wild once upon a time and were hunted for their colourful feathers by Khoisan and Cape Coloured people of that area. It was only in the 1860s that an international demand for feathers created a boom for the export of ostrich feathers that had become an item of high fashion. The Karoo climate was suitable for plucking the ostrich every eight months or so³ and producing the finest of feathers.

³ Sarah Abreveya Stein (2008) "Plumes" (Yale University Press)

This coincided with the mass immigration of Jews and interestingly, most of those who reached Oudtshoorn came from two small shtetls in Lithuania, Chelm and Shavll. They came with some experience in one of the allied textile trades, like fur or hides and soon came to dominate the feather industry in Oudtshoorn at that time.

The feather dealers were in fact smousing from the 1880s, walking from farm to farm to buy feathers during the week and selling them on a Friday in what became known as the Jewish Street. 90% of the dealers were believed to be Jewish at the time. Because this industry flourished other Jewish settlers set up all sorts of shops. Oudtshoorn boomed, grew more rapidly than other rural areas, and the export of feathers at the time became the fourth most important export from the Cape .

In her interesting study of feathers, Stein (op. cit) paints a rather romantic picture of the international connection of Jews dealing in feathers from the gatherer in Oudtshoorn and the traders who then dealt with the feather trade in London , Paris and New York where Jews dominated. But of course there was a downside: and there are cases where the wondering peddler searching for feathers was also attacked and robbed. Many of the local inhabitants did not benefit from the feather boom, such as the underemployed Coloured community and the poorer Boers who were the first to suffer when the industry went into decline.

And by 1914 the feather market collapsed - the fashion had changed. Leybl Feldman who made a study of Oudtshoorn and called it the *Jerusalem of Africa* described the crash:

"The dealers, speculators and exporters were reduced to poverty, feeling as hard done by as the ostriches had formerly felt after being plucked. Their poverty grew so great that they found themselves literally without a crust of bread. The majority of Jews were reduced to starvation and the Oudtshoorn shopkeepers formed relief organisationsJews no longer went out to buy feathers. Instead they wandered the streets in dire straits like victims of fire , dejected and desperate. The prosperous town of Oudtshoorn lost the glitter of its former wealth and the windows of poverty began to blow from all sides."

By that time Oudtshoorn already had the Queens Street Shul which is still in use. The other shul, in St. Johns Street has been converted into an interesting part of the surviving museum of the district. In his book *The birth of a community* the late Chief Rabbi Abrahams⁴ wrote about the area as follows :

The Afrikaner treated the Hebrew trader with respect due to a scion of the People of the Book. Steeped in scriptural lore himself, the Boer was able to view the Jew's religious susceptibilities with understanding and sympathy. The Jewish smous was almost invariably made welcome at the farmstead....."

There is a certain inconsistency in the assessment of the integration and acceptance of the Jewish smous-trader in the local scene on the one hand as described by Rabbi Abrahams and the instances of anti-Semitism by the Boer highlighted in the writings of Milton Shain. But as mentioned elsewhere, the Jew in South African society was increasingly incorporated into the white population with its economic and social benefits.

Gideon Shimoni⁵ declared that by 1910 *race was the primary determinant of people's lives* but in its culture, South Africa remained markedly heterogeneous and culturally diverse. The Jews, for example, have always kept together through their own communal organisations and the Shul.

⁴ Jewish Gen Website on Oudtshoorn in those times.

⁵ Gideon Shimoni (1980) *Jews and Zionism* (OUP)

Chapter 6Johannesburg

Jozi, as it is often called now, was my birth place and where all our family lived from the 1920s onwards. Today, nearly a hundred years later the family has moved on, another dispersal and another story. Johannesburg, city of gold, still remains the centre of South Africa's economic activity. Diamonds may still be a girl's best friend, but gold in this country always surpassed them in allure and importance.

Before gold was discovered around Johannesburg on the Witwatersrand in 1886 it was where cattle grazed, but when gold was found gold- seekers rushed to the area. The scale of the gold rush was immense; within three or four years Johannesburg had become a town with houses, offices and hotels and a generation later had a population of half a million people. Initially there were few restrictions on peoples' movement in this rush for gold in what was a less organised world..... but control of the Transvaal Republic and its gold did eventually lead to the South African war,(1898-1902) a bitterly contested battle between the British and Boer Republic.

This clash between Afrikaner nationalism and British imperialism was exacerbated by the personalities of Paul Kruger, President of the Transvaal Republic and Cecil Rhodes, the major player at the time in the diamond industry.

The tipping point was the *uitlander* question. This meant resolving issues around the franchise and other rights for 'outsiders', mostly British immigrants who had settled around the goldfields area and had been given few rights by the controlling Boers.

This war had a decisive effect on Jewish life around Johannesburg and many fled to coastal regions of the Cape for the duration of the war. But when the war ended and from the beginning of the 20th century Jewish migration centred around Johannesburg and the goldfields.

The Heydenreich/Borkums were in Kimberley during the Boer War probably caught up in the Siege that happened shortly after their arrival; probably as a 'greener', it is unlikely they would have had strong views, supporting one side or the other. There is no documentation on this but Auntie Anna Hoffman's *Saga*¹ did not overlook mentioning that her in-laws were connected with Rhodes.

Lazar Hoffman (her father-in-law) was an acquaintance of Cecil Rhodes and represented the Rhodesian Pioneers (1893-96) in Rhodes' funeral cortege in Cape Town.

From that snippet can one speculate that perhaps most of the family supported the British? I don't really know. While every family story has countless other lost stories contained in it, so from this small piece of information they may have supported Rhodes!

.....

Leibl Feldman² explained that the history of the Jews in Johannesburg runs in parallel with the history and establishment of the city. They were there long before there was a major settlement of other groups.

When gold was discovered Jews joined in the prospecting and financing but their numbers were small as few had the 'big money' that was needed. They mainly continued with smousing and some tailoring among the farmers in what was rural territory, in Turffontein, Doornfontein and Braamfontein.' They also owned bars and hotels in these areas, that today are among the derelict suburbs of Johannesburg.

A sphere dominated by Jewish immigrants around the goldfields was in the establishment of eateries for African miners with the derogatory name, the *kaffireaters*. The living and working conditions in these were appalling; beside

¹ Anna Hoffman (1952) *The Heydenreich Saga* (unpublished)

² Leibl Feldman "The Jewsof Johannesburg" translated into English by Veronica Belling (2007) Kaplan Centre Ppublications

them were separate canteens licensed to sell alcohol to Africans, segregated from those selling alcohol to whites. These became very profitable until more stringent regulations were enforced to prevent a perceived excessive drunkenness by black workers. It was a shameful enterprise all round. Feldman describes white agents being employed as 'trappers' to catch white liquor dealers selling 'forbidden' alcohol to Africans .

Trading with the Africans on the gold mines became a lucrative occupation in those times and lasted for many years. These new shops run by Jews were known as 'concession stores' as they were tied into a contract with the mining company. These shopkeepers were able to overcharge their customers in what was a monopoly on a given mining property and many became wealthy. Work on the mines of this sort was considered an 'undignified' occupation.

Rose Zwi's story "Another year in Africa"³ captures the atmosphere of the concession store in Johannesburg at that time:

"Berka recalled early his arrival in South Africa, early in 1892.

"Its a bad time to have come" his uncle reproached him. The pogrom should have coincided with with a boom in South Africa. "There is no gold in the streets not it seems in the mines, he continued crossly as he led Berka into a small room at the back of the concession store. 'You'll have to work hard. I pay £5 a month with free board and lodgings. If you want to get rich, save.

For several years Berka sold blankets and trinkets to black miners. On weekends he helped in the Kaffir Eating House attached to the store. The smell of burned entrails and cooked meat clung to his clothes and cleaved to his nostrils. His cousins sniffed fastidiously when he came to his uncle's house for an occasional meal.

.....years later when Berka stood in the vicinity of that concession store all he saw was his Uncle Feldman's possessions. He had become a man of property over the

³ Rose Zwi (1980) "Another year in Africa" from Claudia Braude (2001) 'An Anthology of Contemporary Jewish writing in South Africa..'

years. About twenty years before he had moved out of the locality but retained his concession store, the source of all his wealth. He had hired a manager and although he was close to eighty, he went to the business and at irregular hours. Berka thought grimly so that he could catch the manager stealing. Uncle Feldman was certain that everyone stole from him.

To think that 45 years ago this had been little more than a miners' village with row upon row of tin shanties, rough men, horses, ox wagons, and Berka shrugged his shoulders at the miracle of its growth.

.....

By the 21st century Vladisvac⁴ described Johannesburg in the following way:

.....the background is always a man-made one.....For hills, we have mine dumps, now covered with grass. We do not wait for time and the elements to weather us, we change the scenery ourselves, to suit our moods. Nature is for other people, in other places.

The above picture of the city would not have existed in the period of my grandparents, its more to bring it up to date as his descendants, and how this grandchild, me, remember it. While it is now fifty years since I lived there a certain something about the city has remained with me. There are those associations, those private spaces and places of the city that remain embedded in me even if they have not survived the city's upheavals.

I loved the centre of Johannesburg, and when I was old enough I would often go there for the many lessons and extra mural activities that took up my afternoons. Eloff Street was the main shopping centre; and it was where we gravitated, the street that stretched from the railway station past the great hotel of the day, the Carton, and to Commissioner Street with its large Art-Deco cinemas, the Coliseum, Her Majesty's and The Empire. Johannesburg was a city of wealth, skyscrapers and cars that filled the streets, which were designed in a grid system of short blocks. There was the OK Bazaars, which started as a dead-cheap New York style

⁴ Ivan Vladisvac (2004) Portrait with keys (Umuzi)

bazaar across the road from the more fashionable John Orr's and Cleghorns which imported most of their goods from England and beyond. Katz and Lourie was THE place for dazzling jewels and it was here that I helped my father buy a special present for my mother. When I was even younger, Eloff Street had red tramcars too. It was stylish in the 1950s and represented the wealth and prosperity of Johannesburg.⁵

.....

When my father finished his boarding schooling education at the end of the 1st World War he went to Johannesburg, to Wits University and boarded in what is now the Sunnyside Hotel in Parktown, but in those days was the Men's Residence. From those boyhood stories I loved so much I know that by then his whole family, including his mother had moved to Johannesburg.

After the end of the Anglo Boer War Johannesburg continued to be the main centre of Jewish life in South Africa and Jews moved there from Cape Town as well as new migrant Wives and children arrived and family units were mostly absorbed into trading of one sort or another, either selling or tailoring, shoe making or carpenting. It was from shopkeeper to shop assistant. Leibe Feldman's book on the Jews of Johannesburg describes life in 1914 written in Der Afrikaner as follows:

"In the good old days I opened a shop on the Reef, hired someone and paid him £10 for three months, and I had a kaffir. In the morning I ate challah with ginger beer. By day we cooked a piece of meat for sixpence and at night we drank ginger beer again. We opened the shop at dawn at 5.30am and closed at 10.30pm when we put our blankets on the counter and laid ourselves down to sleep. Thus I existed for three years. I saved up the amount of £300."⁶

Right from the beginning the Jews were accepted into that ruling class because they were white and the majority accepted this way of life without a murmur. As described above, we have a very poor trader who had to sleep on his counter but

⁵ Lorna Levy (2009) "Radical Engagements" (Jacana)

⁶ Gwynne Schrire (2000) "Mostly smouse? – SA Jews and their occupations a century ago (Jewish Affairs, Autumn 2000)

still had a servant. He probably accepted this as normal.....I wonder where this servant slept!

Joseph Sherman's translations of Yiddish stories written before 1920 reveals that many of these new settlers came with skills. The minute book of the Cape Town Philanthropic Society records bootmakers, locksmiths, butchers, tailors, carpenters and cabinet makers among those who needed help in the period 1897-1903.

My father and his whole family were united again in Johannesburg from say, 1920, but that central character, his father, had been the missing central figure and his family suffered as a result. It is quite clear when measured against the prosperity of their relatives and contemporaries they had been handicapped by that break-up of the Borkum family in 1906.

I picture them altogether in a house, rented probably in Yeoville. The five children, now adult, are all present without their father and moreover there is a silence about him. In the fourteen years since his death I surmise that life for Ella as Mrs Glatt in Vrede with her three younger children was probably a difficult one. She appears to have left Vrede and Mr Glatt as soon as she could to reunite with her two elder sons in Johannesburg and lived from then on with one, Joe, for the rest of her life.

From that time onwards there is a thread of information about those lives, and I can piece together the marriages and children of my uncles and aunts. When I came on this scene as a child, its basic structure had been set up in around 1920 and continued until the death of Ella in 1953. She was the central figure in the existence of her children and grandchildren.

I find it interesting to contrast her death in Johannesburg with that of Isaac Michel who died in the same year, also buried in the the West Park Cemetery in Johannesburg, but whose life style took a quite different turn. He had left Lithuania as a penniless smous in 1898, according to the biography by Roger Cohen⁷, his grandson, and a correspondent of the New York Times. He became

⁷ Roger Cohen (2015) "The girl from Human Street" (Bloomsbury)

one of the founders of the OK Bazaars in 1927, that household shopping name in South Africa for decades. Initially Michel was based north-west of Johannesburg and then moved to the city with his first retail store that he called C to C, like his preferred Cape to Cairo cigarette.

By the time he died in 1953 Isaac Michel was the owner of an urban estate in 14th Street Houghton, commonly known as Chateau Michel. *It had its arboretum, giant mulberry tree, fishpond and aviary where he was surrounded by houseboys, his turquoise fishtailed Cadillac parked in the driveway waiting to purr to life in the hands of a tall slim handsome chauffeur known as Kleinbooi.*⁸

There is some discrepancy about Michel's ongoing involvement with the OK Bazaars empire but Roger Cohen emphasises that his grandfather was part of its founding and although displaced it seems he held a huge shareholding of the company which he eventually sold. That accumulation of wealth provided for succeeding generations too. Roger Cohen, his grandson, grew up in England and is now a resident of New York....and I guess has little continuing connection with South Africa.

The co-incidence of the death of my grandmother Ella and Roger Cohen's grandfather Isaac in the same year and both buried at West Park Cemetery tempts me to reflect how fate moulded life for their families and descendents. Both Philip Borkum and Isaac Michel started as smouse at about the same time but the early tragic death of of the one shaped the life of his family so clearly and impacted on their life opportunities when compared with Isaac Michel's who continued trading in early Johannesburg, seemingly making a fortune that insured the future for generations of his family.

In the scheme of things this juxtaposition of two families probably presented the two extremes of fortunes, whereas for most others life's opportunities were somewhere in the middle.

⁸ Roger Cohen (op cit)

Chapter 7and finally

"Family likeness has often a deep sadness in it. Nature, that great dramatist, knits us together by bone and muscle, and divides us by the subtler web of our brains....." George Eliot, "Adam Bede"

In trying to create the life of Philip Borkum from fragments, I discovered the history of these Jewish immigrants who crossed the world for a better life. Recent research indicates that emigrants like Philip Borkum were motivated to leave the Russian Empire to achieve a better economic future. This was stressed recently at a lecture in Cape Town by Prof. Michael Stanislawski of Columbia University who, with the backing of data, said that mass emigration co-incident more with economic upheavals than the widely held view of being driven out by pogroms.

In the history of the Jews who settled in South Africa between 1890-1910, most were initially involved with peddling of one sort or another. Most Jewish people can point to a grand parent, or great grandparent who started out as an itinerant salesman. They did not stay in that occupation for too long before acquiring a small shop and more settled existence. Smousing was a means to an end; the political framework of the times in South Africa at the time assisted the smous, who was a white man in the right place at the right time as the economy of South Africa took off with its newly acquired mineral wealth.

As mentioned elsewhere, that first work was pretty consistent wherever these migrants went, they started out as peddlers. Most Jews were familiar with peddling as a common means of trading even if they had other occupations before.

These migrants must have been brave and inventive, with a sense of adventure that enabled them to move to 'new' places in this fashion, not knowing the language or customs with their beards and unusual dress. Viewed from this perspective it is easier to understand that their determination to succeed must have assisted many of them to become successful in due course. It was'nt only

that the opportunities were there but those peddlers also knew how to make them work to their advantage. Peddling was a means to an end and from most accounts their initial occupation did not last long.

The upward mobility could have started when the peddler acquired a wagon and some animals so he could travel further and extend his merchandise. The Jewish peddler/ smous also changed the lives of his customers by introducing them to a range of merchandise they may not know had existed before. This exchange also changed the smous, helped him to adjust as he had little previous interaction with his Christian customers in the past.

The smous did not meet much anti-Semitism in the way we usually describe it. The opposition to him centred less on his Jewishness and more because he changed life styles and habits by offering non-essential merchandise. Theirs was often described as shoddy fripperies.....and perhaps he was dishonest.....

This pattern of peddling in the new world is reinforced by countless life stories in South Africa, the United States and elsewhere. From peddling on the road, the next move was a settled stable position, usually a shop. That tiny shop in a village could become a larger business, and there were many who eventually headed some large enterprises.

In his autobiography, Anthony Sher, the celebrated South African actor described his grandfather in the following way :

".....dad's father Joel left home in Plungyan in 1897. He was 20. He was semi literate, spoke only Yiddish and with hardly any money, Joel made it into the interior and began to work as a peddler, trekking on foot from one isolated farm to the next, selling buttons and thread, trinkets and toys....."

Eventually Joel reached Middlepost.....There was a skirmish there in the Boer War.....and as the Boers afterwards were the second- class citizens of South Africa and unable to claim Middlepost, Joel bought the whole place for a song.¹

¹ Antony Sher (1988) "Beside myself" (Hutchinson)

Sher's version strikes me, with obvious local variations, as a template of how many early Jews settled in this country.

Sarah Gertrude Millin², reflected a view of Jews in the 1950s in "The Peoples of South Africa. She summed up the Jewish contribution:

'The creators, through diamonds and gold of modern South Africa are, but for Rhodes, Jews.

.....they have nearly all the smaller wholesale stores, and the Woolworth type of shops which in South Africa are called bazaars. They are not among the great builders, but they are the jewelers.

....They control the theatre world. Law and medicine are largely in their hands.

Sammy Marks remains a most striking example of a South African 'smous' success. From his humble beginning selling wares he became very wealthy and powerful, involved too with the politics of the day as a member of the Senate.

In the United States there are household names of corporations whose founders were peddlers, such as Levi Strauss, Samsonite, Goldman Sachs and Sears Roebuck. An interesting observation made by Diner³ is that once the smous generation settled down they soon lived a great deal better than their non Jewish neighbours. In the South African context they would choose English schools for their children.

It was the next generation, the children of peddlers throughout the new world who became educated and carried that initial success to even greater heights.

The dangers associated with 'the adventure' into the unknown are clearly illustrated in my grandfather's death while on a smousing trip. The travelling salesman on the road was often the victim of attack, a robbery and there are stories of the unfortunate deaths of peddlers.

² Sarah Gertrude Millin (1951) "The people of South Africa" (Constable)

³ Hasnia R. Diner (2015) op cit.1

But trying to find out more facts about Philip Borkum, the hidden and murdered grandfather, had the ease of a "a baby clutching at a basketball", to borrow an expression from Joseph Brodsky's essay "Less than one". There was simply too little information to expand on his life. So I have recorded what I know to restore what had been erased and selected facts and stories that may have been part of my grandfather's life and perhaps, created my version of the life of a smous of those times in South Africa.

A century later in the context of the 'New South Africa', the story of the migration of the 'smous' can be viewed in a different way. They were another group of white settlers in South Africa although quite a distinct and different group from the British and Dutch settlers. The majority were poor and uneducated, in the category known today as 'economic migrants'. Many suffered from racist exclusion by other white settlers but in the main they were absorbed into the white population. This was their great advantage as their arrival in South Africa coincided with the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley, followed by gold in the areas in and around Johannesburg.

Hazefirah, was a journal that circulated widely in Eastern Europe in that period. MD Hersch⁴ wrote articles about South African Jews in it. He had settled along the East Rand and his writing presented a clear picture of aspects of life in the country at that time. Relevant here is:

As soon as the natives commence earning money at their work in the mines the gold pounds begin to fly into the pockets of the shopkeepers or the liquor shops or to both.These blacks serve as the pivot of the trade in Johannesburg and its surroundings. Their numbers are estimated at a hundred thousand workmen and they are a source of income to many.

This 'whiteness' then was all important in the scheme of things and needs highlighting in any discussion of the Jewish *overall* integration into South Africa.

⁴ Johua Levy (2005 "The writings of Meyer David Hersch 1858-1933" (Amatt Press)

Many Jews became prosperous within a short timeand the list of successful Jews grew very long over the years.

In 1897 Jews made up 40% of Vilnius Jewry. The city was a leading centre of Judaism and produced a great number of scholars, writers and artists. The Jews were one of the oldest ethnic communities of Lithuania yet after the 2nd World War, to quote Primo Levi "*liberty had come. It was around us, but in the form of a pitiless deserted plain.*" Most of the Jews of Lithuania, Latvia and all of conquered Europe, were dead or the suffering survivors from the liberated concentration camps.

I mention this part of the history because it highlights that without that continuous migration of Jews from the Russian Empire in the late 19th century, that included South Africa, until the outbreak of the 2nd World War, few Jews from occupied Europe would have survived.

Philip Roth⁵ provides an interesting insight on writing about a Jewish subject which perhaps reveals something not altogether positive about the Jew, a certain embarrassment. I don't want to play into that Jewish stereotype of the smous with a pack on his bag, his long side whiskers, long nose and strange accent. My grandfather as a smous may have embodied that look and perhaps, because our family could not boast like Roger Cohen and others how successful our smous ancestor had been, just the opposite, the whole thing was played down.

Roth also said that certain writers strived to make the Jew and Jewishness acceptable, appealing and attractive and did not want to see anything that might detract from a heroic saga. Other than catering for those classes of people who despise Jews as long as they call themselves Jews, he says that one should be free to express what we like and not fall into a stereotype of deliberately keeping

⁵ Philip Roth (2007) *Reading myself and others* (Vintage)

what may seem an ugly picture of Jews out of the general imagination. This seems to Roth to invite the invention of the stereotype .

Of course, what Roth writes is fiction and not a real story. I have adapted his views to my true story; without heroism it ends the silence that surrounded the existence and tragic death of 'my smous.'

Cape Town

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