A Kroonstad Life, by Micha'el S Bloch



Kroonstad Town Hall, picture by Janek Szymanowski

I was born in the picturesque village of Parys in South Africa on 22 October,1940. At the time my parents were both working for my maternal grandmother Hettie and my mother's brother Oscar Tager. When I was 6 months old my parents moved to **Kroonstad,** in the northern Orange Free State, 200Km south of Johannesburg, where my paternal grandfather Nathan Bloch and two of my father's siblings were living.

After a protracted financial struggle my parents opened a shop for used furniture which succeeded over time. After a few years grandmother Hettie and uncle Oscar also came to Kroonstad from Parys.

Childhood

We lived a mere 100 meters from the Vals River where my sister Sharroll and I with our Afrikaner friends played in the bushes; and where we swam, fished and rowed in my tin canoe which Driesie Steyn and I put together with the help of his father. It was terribly unstable and entering and especially exiting from it had to be done extremely gingerly. It was generally speaking an idyllic youth.

The river was a strong seasonal tributary of the Vaal River and prone to flooding when it rained a lot.

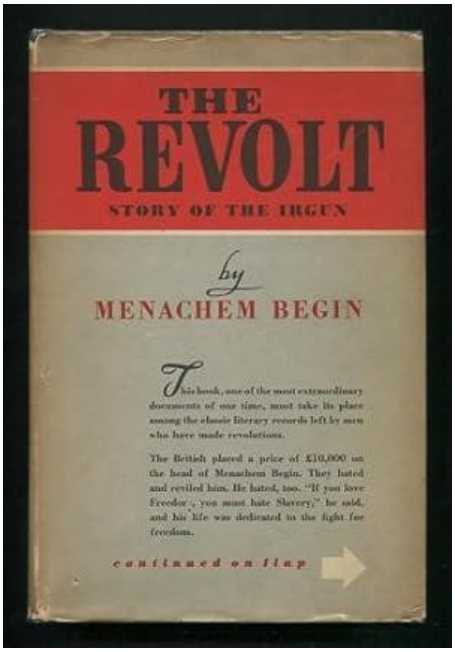
Antisemitism in my childhood in Kroonstad



After a few years – when I was about 7 years' old, remarks of an antisemitic nature started occurring. I didn't quite understand what it was all about. It was usually 'all Jews are rich'. I remember saying that if we Jews are all rich – how come we live next to you in the same small house and drive the same battered Dodge car as you do? Then it became 'the Jews killed Christ'. I asked my parents about these things, and they explained that there is a difference between us and the gentiles; we have a different religion and some Jews are quite successful and the gentiles get jealous, also, that when the Christians go to church, some of their ministers feed them this canard, so they start to believe it. 'But what about us killing this Christ man?' Well they believe that we killed their god. This floored me – 'how can you kill a god?' My parents explained about the episode; adding that all of this was written 150 years after the supposed event and that it was the Romans who had killed him together with thousands of other Jews.

Telling my Christian friends this didn't make much difference. Generally, however, other than a few kids at school, there was very little antisemitism. In Primary school there was especially one stupid bully who had failed once or twice and an Irish boy with whom I used to have a fight after school and then we would play marbles on the pavements near his home – with him infallibly winning most of my marbles. (Today he would be referred to as 'frenemy'.) When I reached the higher classes at around 10 years of age things turned somewhat worse and I started having at least one fight a week. The Church and their parents had done their work!

At the age of ten I joined Habonim and started learning about Israel and Kibbutzim. By the time I was of twelve most of the Madrichim had left for Johannesburg and the rest had lost interest, so I was asked to lead the movement. That year I went to Habonim camp – I think it was at Onrust on the coast in the Cape. The following year in 1953 a plague broke out in South Africa called 'Infantile Paralysis' (Polio) and all December youth camps were cancelled.



At the same time Menachem Begin's book 'The Revolt' came out and my parents who were Zionist Revisionists bought it. During that end of year school break I read the book, and my eyes were opened to 'my truth'. No longer did I think of Kibbutzim – now I was itching to fight for Israel! I was hugely impressed that the Irgun Zva'i Leumi and Lechi underground movements in Palestine – as it was then called – were not scared to take on the mighty British Empire; and were most instrumental in expelling them from what would become Israel.

Immediately school restarted – I changed Habonim into Betar – the Zionist Revisionist youth movement – and immediately lost more than half my membership. The Gabaim of the congregation at that time were all Socialists and, from being that 'nice Bloch boy who does so much for our children' – I became the 'head of the Hitler Jugend'! What a disgrace – but so the world turns!

Schooldays

At school I played rugby and tennis. My uncle Oscar was an excellent sportsman and as strong as a lion. He joined the rowing club in Kroonstad; and whatever uncle Oscar did, Micha'el followed. He became a golfer and of course I started playing golf. I have to say that I enjoyed all the sports I partook in; but golf is definitely my favourite; even though I was never much of a player and at my absolute best never improved on a 16 handicap – which is nothing to crow about.

At that time a friend of mine returned to Kroonstad from Johannesburg where he had been at Jeppe High Boarding School and he took over the Habonim with about 35 members and I had 16 in Betar. As an aside: from my small group 3 of us made Aliya, a fourth one was supposed to make Aliya as well but was tragically killed shortly before leaving. Only one from Habonim made Aliya and their leader has been living in Canada for 50 years!

Kroonstad develops and the Jewish Community thrives in the 1950s



Kroonstad had slowly become a prosperous town as they made it a major railway junction. A huge detention centre opened, and a large military camp opened in the town. In the 1950s General Milling opened in the town as well as a very big clothing firm, Jaff and Co.



Below is a picture of the Kroonstad Synagogue corner of Station and Buitenkant street designed by architect John Philips Mumford which opened in 1933 – and above we see it after it had closed and was sold and became a commercial emporium.



More Jews started arriving too. Eventually there was a congregation of over a hundred families – about 400 Jews. Most of them had little shops catering to the non-white public, including farm labourers and miners passing through to the gold fields at Welkom.



There developed a very active Jewish social life in which my mother played a prominent role organizing dances, plays, a book club, WIZO, Union of Jewish Women and I started the 'Brinkelbrook Ping Pong Club' for all the youth.

The Dr JL Landau Lodge HOD No 22 was inaugurated in 1928 with over 70 members and all the adult males in my family joined it. **Judah Leo Landau** (23 April 1866 – 26 August 1942) was a Galician-born South African rabbi and writer. A noted scholar, poet, and playwright, he served as the inaugural Chief Rabbi of South Africa from 1915 until his death in 1942. (Pictured above)

Eventually the death knell to the congregation arrived: the 'OK Bazaars' mega store opened its doors in the 1960s, and slowly but surely destroyed Jewish life in Kroonstad, as they sold the same items as the small traders did for far less. When I and my family came on Aliya in 1989 there were about twenty Jewish families left – now in 2024 there are only two widows!



This Is Cross Street, Kroonstad in 1988. On my left further down Adami House Near OK Bazaar Supermarket.

After school

Fast forward to having written Matric in 1958: I was determined to join Betari friends in the movement and go to Israel to join the Nachal brigade that took in overseas volunteers. When I announced this to my parents my mother screamed that she was having a heart attack; and played the part. I got such a shock that I was forced to tell her that I wouldn't go, which 'brought her back to life!' To this day I regret not having gone! Perhaps my doing such a great deal of voluntary work is my way of emotionally expiating my not having gone to Nachal! (My wife and youngest daughter are also great volunteers). I do have satisfaction in that all three of my children went to the army and my son fought in the second Lebanon war in the cannon brigade.

As I had not gone to Israel I decided to do Law. I had not done Latin at school, so I went to Johannesburg where through 'Rapid Results College' I did four years of Latin in six months and passed.

I then went on to Witwatersrand University and started my BA LLB; majors being Jurisprudence, English Literature and European history. After completing the first year, I decided to leave out the Advocate (LLB) side of it and to just become an ordinary lawyer. I was very fortunate to find a firm that I could join without having to pay them for accepting me. The economy was very bad at the time and articled clerks had to pay the firm that took them in.

At university I immediately joined the Rowing Club (think Oxford /Cambridge annual race on the Thames) and got as high as the second team. There were 5 teams. We went to Regattas in Vereeniging and East London. I was a useful participant as I could row both stroke (left) and bow (right) and apparently had quite good timing which is important in that that is a sport where co-ordination amongst the rowers is essential – not just power.)

Debt Collector

After being with the Law firm for about 3 months they made me a glorified Debt Collector. They had an African driver named Pleasance and he and I had to go around Johannesburg including the African locations like Soweto and Alexandra. It was no pleasure as we were purposefully misdirected and when they espied us they quickly disappeared. Sometimes it was funny and we had a good laugh, but when occasionally we were stoned; it was no joke. Suffice it say that that I would not recommend it to anyone. The worst occurrence was after I had been with the firm for 6 months; when we were sent to Mayfair; a middle-class area where a lot of Lebanese lived – who were known to have a Mafia. The house's occupant I can remember to this day; including his name: Edmond S. (no names no pack-drill). I knocked on his door and this hugely fat little Leb opened the door; I introduced myself and asked for a payment. He said wait a bit, turned around and two minutes later returned with a six-shooter revolver and hissed at me: 'Listen you Fu#@@%%^ Jewboy! – if I see your face here again I will bloody-well blast you!'. I stepped back in shock and said OK I'm going – turned around and rapidly walked to the car. Pleasance had gone as white as an African can and I'm pretty sure I had turned green. While walking back to the car I felt a burning sensation in my back as if it was anticipating the arrival of a bullet. On returning to the office we reported the incident. I immediately handed in my resignation, thanked them for the time I had been with them and immediately started looking for another job.

After a few weeks through the good offices of my father who was a client of Edblo Mattress Company; I got a job there in the sales department. I had been well and truly cured of ever practising Law – even though I had thoroughly enjoyed the practice thereof until I had had to go debt collecting.

At that time, I joined Sam Busa's gym that taught Ju Jitsu. There were eight Jewish boys in it and at least twenty gentiles. I am pretty sure that Sam himself was Jewish. I found it absolutely fascinating – how a small person has an advantage over bigger men. This took place in Hillbrow, an area where youngsters from all over South Africa gather. A cosmopolitan area similar to Soho in London and Greenwich Village in New York. Many Bistros, restaurants, tea houses, cinemas, dance clubs, social clubs, residential hotels etc. and high-rise blocks of apartments crowded into 3 streets: Pretoria, Esselen and Twist. A glorious ambience that pubescent boys and girls can enjoy to the full.



Hillbrow in the 1960s

Going overseas 1964: Our trip to Israel

In May 1964, a fellow in my group of friends: Les Z, announced that he wanted to go overseas and especially wanted to check out Israel and his cousin's Kibbutz. I also wanted to go overseas and to check out Israel with the possibility of settling there. So, we went together which was very pleasant for the two of us.

We toured virtually every part of Israel; wherever buses could take us. Les then decided to go to his cousin's kibbutz and to try it out. A week later there was a banging on my door – when I opened it Les started shouting without even greeting me 'They must think I'm mad. They make you do three hours of guard duty at night and then at 5.00 in the morning they wake you to feed the cows and milk them. Aliya – one strike down!

I tried to find work as I had no interest in settling on a Kibbutz. The Soviet-style of economics had made Israel into a third-world basket case. They called it a “mitun” – financial depression. The goods produced were shoddy and the iron fist of the Soviet Style Histadrut would brook no competition. That monolith owned just about everything and was a study in bad economics and unmotivated workers. Israelis and new immigrants were leaving in droves. There was a strike for more money by the stevedores at the ports where huge crates of oranges were rotting. Had it indeed been in Russia the army would have loaded everything; but in Israel: it was the workers’ RIGHT to strike - and to hell with the economy! There wasn’t work for the citizens; so where would a newbie without Hebrew find employment! Aliya - two strikes down!

And on to Europe

After five weeks in Israel, we went on to Greece, then Italy, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Switzerland, France and I went alone to the Costa-Brava in Spain. In France something happened which changed my life: Walking along the road one day in Paris I saw an extremely long line of scruffy-looking men. I asked a passerby if he spoke English; he did; so I asked ‘What is this long line of men about?’ He said that at the front of it there is a church and every day they give lunch to these unemployed men. I had never seen anything like this in my life – and said to myself ‘Listen here Mr Bloch – you had better go into your father’s business when you get back – or you’ll be standing in a line like this one day!’ So at the age of 24 in 1964 I embarked on the next phase of my life.

Back in Kroonstad in the Family Business and the HoD Lodge

Suffice it to say that I remained in the business and when my father passed away in 1976, I took over. My mother continued to work with me.

Within one month of my return, I was approached by a member of the HOD Lodge and I had the honour of having my father inaugurate me. It was August 1964. There were about 50 members and they met every month. We held many charity events and I attended virtually every installation in South Africa. I now find it strange that we never thought of going to Rhodesia where they had lodges in Salisbury and Bulawayo.

I became president for the first time in 1971, and we then had 28 members. The Lodge in fact was running the social events of the whole congregation; and had several charitable events for Israel every year.

As time went on, the drift to the cities continued and we bled members. The late WB Max Abrams and I would swap positions every two years; as President and VP. We started having our installations together with Welkom Lodge, Shalom, which still had a large membership. (There is now one widow with her two daughters left in Welkom.) We would join them every month for their meeting and they would join us for ours. Their President at the time was Glen Eliastam (changed his name to “Elon” on his making Aliya where he is a member of our Lodge Moledet) who inaugurated the visits. I must have been President at least six times, and we had actually two meetings a month. One in Kroonstad and one in Welkom.

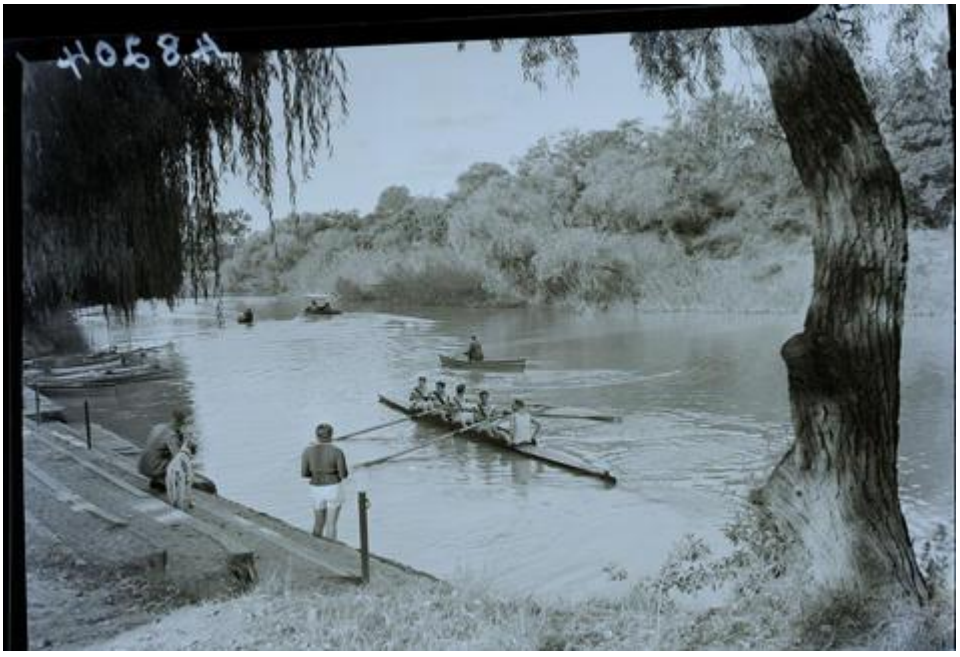
As time moved on our membership diminished to seven – yet we continued with our monthly meetings; wearing dress suits with full regalia and proper ritual. This continued until my Aliya in 1989; and as there were only six members left – they joined up with Welkom but that did not last long, as they felt unwelcome. They eventually just joined Lodge Herzl in Johannesburg as ‘country members’.

That therefore is the sad demise of an outstanding Lodge: Dr J L Landau Number 22. It basically reflects the sojourn of the Jews of South Africa from their height of 120,000 persons to 40,000-50,000 today! On my Aliya I immediately joined Lodge Moledet in Ra’anana. I became Vice President and after five years I left and joined Lodge Sharon in Netanya where I was Secretary for two years. I resigned when I saw that their Lodge was teetering on the brink of destruction with members fighting with each other. Within a few short months it did indeed cease to function after I had left and rejoined Lodge Moledet in Ra’anana. Soon again I became VP for several years and in 2017 took over as President and Treasurer in which capacity I remain ensconced with 32 members, two of whom live overseas and do pay Subs.
Micha’el S Bloch 2024 (Edited by Geraldine Auerbach, November 2026)

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Moll street.



Boating on the Vals River
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