

A VANISHED ERA

SHTETL LIFE IN THE
SWARTLAND IN THE
NINETEEN TWENTIES

Nostalgic Memories of
Malmesbury

By **Dr Julius H Kretzmar**



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edited and with pictures added by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London, Sept 2023

(above: Julius in the 1930s and the 1980s)

In the 1920's the Jews of Malmesbury, like almost all of the country communities then in South Africa, lived two lives. One was the life of the outside world, the society that we lived in and the other of the world of Judaism. But today all that world of Jewish life is gone ... gone for ever ... from Malmesbury as from so many other country towns, like Calvinia, and Beaufort West, Oudtshoorn or Hermanus.

This is the story of a vanished era; and I want you to join me in a gentle stroll down Memory Lane in the small Swartland town of Malmesbury in the nineteen twenties. This town nestles in the lap of five or six rolling hills that surround it, and in that town from the end of the last century, there lived, what became a thriving, vibrant and active Jewish community.

My father Tobias (Tuvye) Kretzmar's family came from Birzh in the Kovne Guberniya, Lithuania and my mother (Taube) came from Shimberig, (sometimes called Shimberg or Shomberg) some 25 miles northeast of Birzh near the border with Latvia. My father came to South Africa in 1899, on his own with other young men, leaving behind his wife and four small children – probably in Shimberig with her parents.

When he arrived in Cape Town, he was met at the docks by *landsleit* from Birzh, and a cousin of my mother's, Meishe Rubin. He had the magic £5.00 one needed to disembark.



Meishe Rubin (pictured left) later had a *shopke* on the corner of 98 Caledon Street in District Six. I often visited that little corner *shopke* in the 20's when my father took me with him to Cape Town from Malmesbury. That little *shopke* was the anchor for my father in Cape Town in the *Goldene Afrika*, with the Boer War already ranging far and wide. He supplied the goods on credit for my father to sell, at first door to door, before setting up his own shop. I have in my possession today, nearly 100 letters written in Yiddish, and some in Hebrew, that my father wrote to my mother. *in der heim* from Cape Town and from Malmesbury, from 1900 to 1903. She

must have kept them and brought them with her when she came to South Africa. In those letters he tells the story of his early years in South Africa when he arrived in Cape Town. [You can now read these letters that have been translated, and placed on a dedicated website created by Gwynne Schrire with his son Philip, at the Kaplan Centre for Jewish studies at UCT here: [Kretzmar, Tuvye: Letters to My Wife](#) .

The scene then shifts to Malmesbury, round about 1901. He walked there from Cape Town. In the 20's it took 2½ hours by train from Cape Town to Malmesbury. Today (1986) it takes about 40 to 45 minutes by car. He started life in Malmesbury as a smous, graduating later to a *shopke* in the main road. After the Boer War had ended in 1902, he made plans for his wife and the four children to travel to South Africa and join him in Malmesbury. By the time that the First World War and the Spanish influenza epidemic were over, there were already seven children. Many of the other families also had seven or eight children.



Picture of our family in about 1907: left to right, Noel, standing next to Tuvye (Tobias) with Arnold on his knee, David, Leah, Taube and Freda. I (Julius) am the baby on the table. (My younger sister Ashne was not yet born).

The Shul

In a count in 1904 it was found that there were 114 Jews in the Malmesbury community which had been established in 1900. In 1906 it was decided that they should build a shul. This was a very courageous and ambitious undertaking, but it was crowned with success.

The foundation stone was laid by Messrs A Katz and Benzion Olswang on 11 November 1911 (11.11.11). That shul is still standing today. From the start this shul was the central focal point in the community's life. Daily minyanim, daily cheder classes, weddings, barmitzvahs, Yom Tovim and all congregational activities took place in that building.



By the 1920's the community had grown, and all the Jews had improved their positions, financially and socially. We all lived in an amicable atmosphere with all the gentile inhabitants. The younger generation, boys and girls mostly born there with the surge of immigration after the Boer War, grew up in the new environment, went to the schools and learned to speak English and Afrikaans, which many of their parents had to struggle with almost all their lives. And they excelled, often taking most of the prizes at the presentations in the Town Hall. And how those Lithuanian *landsleit* *kvelled* with pride and well-nigh burst with *naches* as their children walked up the aisle to the stage at the Town Hall to collect their book prizes and a handshake from the principal.

This was the *Golden Afrika* which they had come to from the ghettos of Europe, with their poverty, *pogroms* and *Cossakken*, and how sweet indeed were the rewards!!!

By the mid-1920s Malmesbury had installed a water scheme and electric lighting.

This was a great fillip to the old town. There were now quite a large number of Jewish general dealers – *Algemene Handelaars* – and from these businesses came a number of *smouse* (travellers) some going out to the farms in the district for a whole week with carts and horses, with groceries and drapery. and haberdashery and Dutch medicines, like *Rooi Lavental*, *Groen Amara*. Hoffmans *druppels*, *Kramp druppels*, *Wit Dulcis* and *Wonderkroon* to mention but a few. These came from Lennons, the wholesale chemists in Cape Town, selling for four pence a bottle. The smous returned for *Erev Shabbat* with skins and hides,

and eggs and poultry – the hens or ducks in cages hanging from the axle under the cart and with cash in hand from the week's trading. Most of the enterprises of the Jewish community prospered and thrived.



Our house in Malmesbury

Zionism

Zionism was a cause warmly supported. A Benevolent Society was formed. Meshulochim came out by train from Cape Town, working through to Klawer – venerable old gentlemen, bearded, in long black frock coats and flat black hats, like they wear in Mea Shearim in Jerusalem. They collected for *Yeshivas* in Jerusalem, giving out little receipts to contributors. A Maccabean Association was formed, and many functions were held in the Town Hall, like a Mock Trial, a Mock Parliament session, intertown debates with Zionist societies from Cape Town or Paarl.

The JNF, the *Keren Hayesod* and the 'Blue Box' – a piggy bank for Israel in every home – found a strong response. In 1926, when Nahum Sokolow came to South Africa on a campaign, the Zionist Congress was held in Cape Town, and Malmesbury sent five delegates. They were Rev Efron, Dr Harry Myers, Edel Hurwitz (who later became President of the South African Zionist Federation) my father Tobias Kretzmar and Ralph Goldman. What a proud day it was in the Shul when our delegates returned to report back on the Conference!



The *Joodse Basaar*

Then there were the bazaars in the Town Hall for Zionist Funds. Trestle tables, laden with *Yiddische* dishes and delicatessen, with needlework and home industries; and outside the sheep and calves and poultry, donated by the farmers and some by members of the community were auctioned. These were great occasions, with just about the whole town visiting the *Joodse basaar* and helping to swell the funds.

Learning, Worship, Benevolence

The ancient Sage Simeon the Righteous, affirmed that the world is sustained by three things. 'Learning, Worship and Benevolence'. These responsibilities have been hallmarks of Jewish community life through the ages. Alongside 'Community worship, learning and benevolence' must be added the range of religious and cultural activities as part of family life in the home.

All the threads of our lives in that small *Swartland* town, daily *minyanim*, *Shabbat* services, our *Yom Tovim*, our *Rebbes*, the *cheder*, *kashruth* and life in the home - were linked to the traditions that our old folks had brought out with them *fun der heim*.

Yom Tovim



In our **shtetl** of Malmesbury, Yom Tovim were gala events. On **Succoth** every home built its own succah with a roof of palms, leaves and reeds, with flowers and blossoms, bedecked with large photos of Theodore Herzl, Max Nordau, Ussishkin, Chaim Bialik and Chaim Weizmann. And every year we children had to carry the *esrik* and the *lulav* through the town to the

homes for the women worshippers to make the *broches*.

Pesach was an occasion for the cleansing of the home. In every room a small piece of bread – the *chometz* – lay on the corner of a table, and had to be wiped off with a feather, collected and destroyed. And we all made our wine, good old Pesach wine – in a big cask, filled with basketsful of black hanepoot grapes and sugar through a big tin funnel. The old grapes had of course to be cleaned out of the cask first, and it was always a pantomime to see the chickens and hens and the odd duck or goose getting drunk on these grape skins. They would stagger and stumble and fall around in the yard like the baboons and elephants in Jamie Uys's film 'The Gods Must Be Crazy'. That is a scenario ... vanished – gone - never to return.

And Pesach night – *halailo hazeh* and *Zietst men doch ongespart*. A settee would be stacked with cushions and pillows for the head of the house to lean on. The big dining room table sparkled with the spotless, white damask tablecloth, shining new Pesach crockery and cutlery, the two shining silver candlesticks which came *fun der heim* and the silver *becher* for Kiddush. Then the singing of the *Haggadah*, from the *vier kashes* to the *Chadgadyo, miet chazzones nogal ...* and then also of course the excitement of the hiding and the search for the *afikohmen ...*

On **Rosh Hashanah** the solemn festival of the year the shul was packed with families joined by relatives and by Jews from the outlying villages who came in for the services from Mamre, Darling, Kalabaskraal and sometimes from Piquetberg. Everyone was dressed up in all their fineries, dresses with gold chains and locketts, *fun der heim*, and hats specially made or bought for Yom Tov. The men, many of the older members of the congregation wore long

frock coats and top hats. It was a sight indeed, to behold, whole families walking down the main road to the shul.

Naturally all Jewish businesses were closed for the Holy Days.



And then the *Tashlich* service on the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashanah! A small river named the Diep River runs right through the town from East to West. A narrow wooden bridge crossed over the river very near to the shul. Almost the whole congregation would slowly march along the shady Cape Town Road, to the far end of the sportsgrounds, turn to the right to the bank of the river, where the Rov would incant by the running waters for the washing of all of our cares, and our woes.

And **Yom Kippur** and *Kol Nidre* night. The Shul, brightly lit by the many electric lights now, shining on the packed seats below. The *Torahs* shining in the open Ark. And then the silence as the first plaintive notes of the cantor started the *Kol Nidre*, followed by the whole emotion charged service through to the end. And the whole congregation, after greetings outside the shul slowly drifting away to their homes crossing the little wooden bridge. And on the Day of Yom Kippur the sadness and the sobbing of the women upstairs in the *Yiskor* service; remembering so many family members and aged parents who had been left behind in the *shtetlach*.



On **Simchat Torah** the *shtetl's* festive spirit and shul celebrations were given full rein. Tables were laid out in the shul with *gehakte herring* and *gehakte lebber*; and biscuits and sweets and chocolates for the children, and brandy, wine and whiskey and cigars for the *ballabatim*. The *Torahs* were read and then carried round and round the *Bimah* by relays of our venerable fathers with singing and dancing and clapping of hands.



It was hilarious for us kids to see some of our respected elders dancing and prancing holding on to the Torahs and singing 'Ober Iden zeinen mier. Ober bran fin trienken mir' – over and over.

One of the 'entertainments' on Yom Tov in the shul was the *shnoddering* for *aliyahs* (being called up to say a blessing for the reading of the *torah* and for the honour of saying the Maftir. Well do I remember Rev Hoffenberg moving from one side of the bimah to the other, scanning the congregation for bids for the *Aliyahs*: *Tswei guineas far Shliesie. Fienf guineas far Shliesie, Tsen guineas far Shliesie*; and then *Tsen guineas far dem ersten mol. Tsen guineas far dem tswieten mol* and then *tsen guineas far dem drieten mol*. Generous donations from our community went to the Cape Jewish Orphanage (the Ochberg orphans had arrived from Russia in Cape Town in 1922) the Aged Home in Cape Town, the local *Beth Hamedresh*, and for *Yeshivahs* in Jerusalem.

The Rebbes

I remember our *Rebbes* - there were many over the years. My brother Arnold has recalled some of the escapades the children got up to, to make Rev Ossipowitz's life a misery. Poor Rev Ossipowitz fumed, and threatened the most dire and horrendous punishment to the culprits. He would explode in Yiddish: *Az du vest vidder varfen steiner und brechen die ven sters, wei ich dir olshakken alle deine tseiner* or *Ich wel dir oisbrechen die hent und die fiess* or *Ich wel dir gebben a frask az es wetflieen fire vun die eigen*.



In 1922 there arrived from the prestigious *Shlobodka Yeshiva* in Lithuania, one Rev Efron. At once the Winds of Change blew over the benches of our cheder. There was no nonsense with him, no more pranks and hoaxes. There was a discipline and a decorum. He had a new technique of teaching Hebrew. Hebrew in Hebrew not in English, with charts, drawings, posters and coloured illustrations. Soon we became interested and then enthusiastic. He taught us how to conduct services, mincha and maariv, different child taking the service every day. He taught the children for their barmitzvahs, and he was also a Mohel. He became the secretary of the *Gemiles Chesed*, the Financial Helping Hand Society, His minutes, written in his beautiful *Yiddishe* writing can be seen in the Jewish Museum in the Gardens in Cape Town.

He left us to go to Maitland in 1942 and he retired from Maitland in the 1970s to Sea Point. He died at a ripe old age in the early 1980s. His funeral was attended by many people who had been his cheder pupils in Malmesbury and Maitland over half a century ago. He was indeed from a Vanished Era.

Nearly everyone had a cow in the yard, so we all had fresh milk. We children had to milk our cow before going to school and had to be careful not to get wet strips of milk across our clean



trousers if we missed the bucket. We made our own cream and butter and cheese. Fish came from the fish shops, or from the carts that were heavily laden from Cape Town, announced by blowing the fish horn as in 'Snoektown Calling' the SABC radio programme of Cecil Wightman. Signs and sounds also of A Vanished Era ...

In our Home Life, *Yiddish* was the language with our parents and some English, while amongst us children we spoke English and some Afrikaans. As the years went by, our parents learned to read and write and speak English and some Afrikaans, and to sign their names. Newspapers in the home were the Cape Times or the Cape Argus or *Die Swartlander*, the local Afrikaans weekly. The old folks read the *Yiddische* newspapers from America. *Der Amerikaner* and *Forward*. On Friday nights after supper, my father would spread *Der Amerikaner* out on the table and read us extracts from Bialik's poetry, or a comic story by Sholem Aleichem. Then the whole family would listen to my brother Arnold reading from Israel Zangwill, Charles Dickens or an English translation of Sholem Aleichem, or extracts from Afrikaans writer C J Langenhoven's 'Sonde met die Bure' with much laughter.

Piet van der Westhuizen

In the late 20's, by the efforts of Rev Efron and the elders, a *Chevre Kadisha* [a 'holy brotherhood' who were the burial society] was formed. Land was acquired for a cemetery through the generosity of a farmer, Mr Piet van der Westhuizen. He provided a suitable ground to the Jewish community just on the outskirts of the town, and just inside the fence of his farm

Rozenberg. He left a proviso 'That this land is always to remain for the Jews.'



He was a fine type of old Voortrekker model farmer, with a small goatee beard, almost like General Smuts. He was always dressed in khaki trousers with braces, and a khaki shirt and an old slouch hat. Whenever he mentioned the name of the Lord or spoke of God, he would stop in his tracks, raise his old slouch hat, and make a small curtsy. He was a staunch and loyal friend of our people, and a lovely warm old friend of my father's. He was also a warm supporter of the Zionist cause, giving donations to the funds in cash and cattle for the bazaars. The community later presented him with an illuminated address in thanks and appreciation of his feeling for the Jewish community of Malmesbury. My father's signature is also on that beautiful, illuminated address. I often saw it hanging on the wall of the *voorhuis* on the farm. He is one of those fine characters of this Vanished Era. His kind are not seen any more these days.

At the turn of the century *in der heim*, our people had feared the Cossack cavalry and the pogroms of the peasants. Here in Malmesbury, in the *Goldene Afrika* there was no fear of

that. We lived in amity with all the other races in the town. Of course, as always, there was an undercurrent not far from the surface and *Die Blerrie Jode* or sometimes more emphatically, *Die Verdomde Jode* were heard.

Dr Malan's Quota Bill of 1930 effectively stopped Jewish immigration into South Africa. How many thousands of our people could have been saved from Hitler's Holocaust some 10 years later? A childhood memory of mine from Malmesbury in the 20's is having a stone thrown at me by a coloured youngster calling out 'You Christkiller' in Loedolf Street, in the Onderdorp. I have never forgotten it – makes you think.

Friendly relations nevertheless existed between the Jews and the coloured people. There was no Group Area Act then, so people lived near each other in quiet harmony. Many worked in Jewish homes and businesses, and some even learnt to speak Yiddish quite fluently.

Record Achievements

At one time somewhere in the 20's there were more than 50 families, and 40 children in the *cheder* with Rev Efron. And this colony that came to Malmesbury round about 1900, produced at least eight doctors, six lawyers, two dentists, four businessmen, two farmers, one mining engineer, and one Professor of Jurisprudence at the University of Cape Town. What a record of achievement for such a small shtetl over such a short period of time.

And the record afterwards, up to the closing of the shul, and the shut down and demise of the community, is also impressive. My research take me back as far as 1929 when I myself left Malmesbury after my father died. But that is all over. It is all gone. It is all no more. That beautiful shul, still standing there, is no more a Jewish House of Worship. The Torahs from the *Orren Kodesh* and the *Bimah* round which we sang and danced on *Simchat Torah* are now safe in the Herzlia shul in Vredehoek in Cape Town. I visited Malmesbury again in 1986. The old stalwarts and our old pioneers, including my father, rest peacefully in their graves in that quiet little cemetery in the Rozenberg farm, now sadly overgrown with weeds in keeping with the mood.



An era has vanished; of carts and horses, *smouse* on Swartland farms, *shnoddering* for *Aliyahs* in shul on *Yom Tovim*, *Tashlich* by the waters of the *Diep Rivier*. But let us not despair. We will return to the world outside of helicopters, jet aeroplanes, computers and TV world news coverage by satellite, and talk of Star Wars. Let us not despair that the shtetl has vanished. Let us rather gather strength and courage from what our fathers and mothers accomplished in a far-flung foreign land with a strange new culture. strange peoples and strange languages, arriving, many of them in the middle of a war, and in an unfriendly environment. Let all that rather be our inspiration in this day and age, adapted to our times, to carry on with our hallowed traditions the traditions that have sustained the Jewish people throughout the centuries.



My parents, Tobias and Taube Kretzmar in Malmesbury in the 1920s



Here in 1994, are three of the Kretzmar's seven children who grew up in Malmesbury: Julius seated on the left aged 87 (b Malmesbury 1907) and his older brother Noel aged 95 (b Shimberig Lithuania 1899). Behind, standing with her arms around her brothers, is youngest sister Ashne born in Malmesbury in 1913.

Reflections on a Vanished Era Shtetl life in Malmesbury

By Julius H. Kretzmar (1907 Malmesbury – 1995 Cape Town)

Edited and illustrated by his niece (Noel's daughter) Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London, June 2023 for the Jewish Community of Malmesbury website

<https://www.chol.website/communities/malmesbury/>

Feedback:

From: Beulah Gross, in Australia, 28 June 2023

Hi Geraldine

Just thought I had to tell you that the Malmesbury article is just great. Thank you so much for sharing it. My late dear cousin, **Benny Katzman, wife Helen**, also deceased, **and their four children lived** in the town for some time before making Aliyah. He was a pharmacist born in Oudtshoorn and she was a Londoner. I've forwarded the article to their daughter, Ruth, who is in Cape Town and who I speak to sometimes via WhatsApp.

Thank you again.

Beulah Gross

From David Bass, in South Africa 28 June 2023

Dear Geraldine

It's a terribly small world (after all). Sharon Taub is my wife Shelley's cousin and passed Julius Kretzmar's memoir of Malmesbury on to her. Sharon and Shelley's connection to Malmesbury stems from the fact that their grandfather Rev Samuel Kibel travelled there from Cape Town in December 1936 to marry my parents **Berthe Cohen and Louis Bass** – which is where I come in.

My Mom Berthe Bass (nee Cohen) daughter of **Abraham and Leah Cohen** grew up in Malmesbury and knew Julius Kretzmar very well. I got to meet Julius in Malmesbury when I drove my parents out there for the opening of the Museum in the old Shul building. I still have video footage of the event, and some footage of Julius' speech. It was a scorching hot day and I still remember Julius prefacing his speech with "*Hierdie sonnetjie brand nog warm in Malmesbury*" (this old sun still burns hot in Malmesbury") Incidentally, **Benzion Olswang** who part-funded the construction of the shul was my mother's uncle. And Rev Efron was still in his prime when I was born and officiated over my Brith Milah. Lastly, Rev Sam Kibel lived just long enough to perform the marriage ceremony for Shelley and myself in 1980 – exactly 44 years after marrying my parents on another sweltering Malmesbury Sunday.

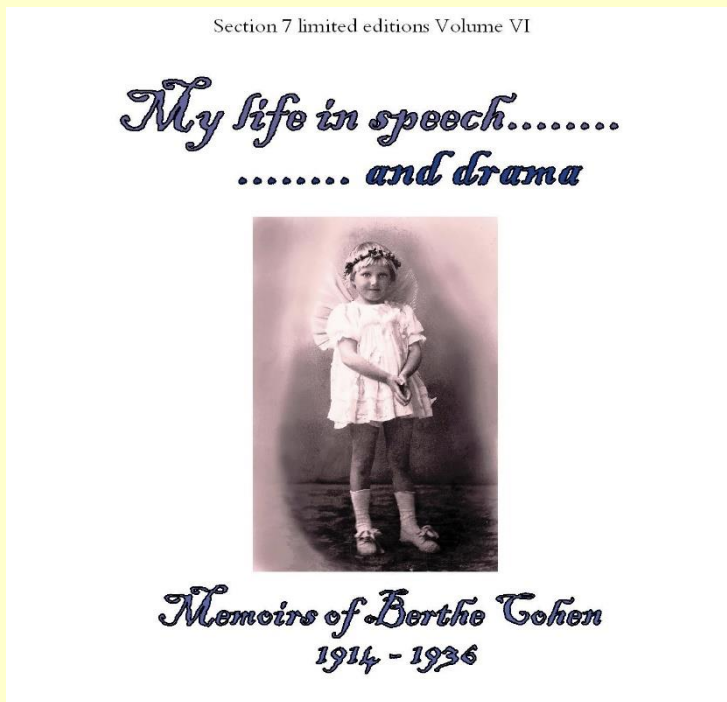
I found an early typed version of Julius' memoir in a bunch of my mother's papers soon after she passed on in 2006. I think you've done a lovely job of the editing and the layout. These documents are extremely precious – even if only to that select group of people who

appreciate the resilience and resourcefulness of their brave ancestors who ventured out into a strange New World to seek and establish a better life for their families.

Thank you so much for making this document available. I can certainly try to lift the sequence from the museum opening from my home videos, and send it to you

Sincerely, David Bass

[Look at it on our 'images' page of the Malmesbury website]



On the subject of memoirs, David continued my Mom put together quite a delightful spoken memoir of her Malmesbury years 1914 till she got married in 1936, when she was in her eighties (see above the cover art). That might be of more value to your website than anything I can write. I am also attaching a snippet in which my Mom describes how she and her siblings used to “entertain” themselves in Malmesbury one hundred years ago.

I was not born in Malmesbury, but as a child, travelled there at least once a year with my Mom

and uncle Benny to visit my grandfather **Abraham Cohen**’s grave. According to my Mom’s spoken memoirs, Abraham was one of the first persons to be buried (in 1925) in the newly acquired graveyard.

[See the story of the Cohen and Bass families on the family pages of the Malmesbury website www.chol.website under communities]

David said:

“The online archiving of family and community history such as CHOL is a modern blessing, one which our children and grandchildren will hopefully appreciate when they - as we did - develop that deep-seated need to know more about their origins.”

David Bass 2023 re Malmesbury

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From: Colin Robinson Jerusalem.  
June 30, 2023

Dear Geraldine

My mother Sally Robinson (née Berman) was from Malmesbury and my grandparents, Jacob and Rebecca Berman, only left in 1970 just prior to my barmitzvah. I mapped the community according to my mother's memory in the late 1990s and have ongoing connections.

Colin Robinson -in Jerusalem

Colin sent the story of his mother and grandparents Jacob and Rebecca Berman in Malmesbury

[see the **Berman family story** on the 'people' pages of the 'Malmesbury website' to be found on the 'communities' page of [www.chol.website](http://www.chol.website) ]

Colin said:

*"I do want you to know how much I appreciate your amazing efforts to preserve all this – for myself and my family and for my town. I am relieved that thanks to you and the CHOL initiative, all this rich material and history, presently squirreled away in my files and my head, will not be lost."*

*Colin Robinson*

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From Abel Levitt, in Israel

Dear Geraldine

We met at the meeting in London organized by Danielle Lockwood, to discuss the Birzai (Birzh) Project, founded by the late Ben Rabinowitz. Since then, I have followed with interest your writing and the regular Kimberley newsletters that you send.

I read recently the newsletter about Malmesbury, the town where my brother-in-law **Lazer Sternberg** and his wife **Isobel** lived. It was through Lazer, one of the last Jews of Malmesbury that the Sifrei Torah of the synagogue were donated to Herzlia School in Highlands. I was at the time an active member of the school committee and was really delighted to be present at the handing over of the valuable gifts to the school synagogue. Abel Levitt (Kfar Sava Israel)

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