

## Pietersburg /Polokwane - Through the eyes of a one time 'Pietersburger'

### Where is Pietersburg and how did I get there?

I am a Pietersburger. In 1939, at the beginning of WW2, I was born here, a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Pietersburger. My father, Jack Hirschmann, was born here in 1898. His parents, Herman and Doris Hirschmann, like most of the Jewish population in South Africa, emigrated there from the Baltic states, mainly Latvia and Lithuania, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were fleeing anti-Semitic discrimination, political unrest and as in the case of my grandfather, unwanted military conscription. South Africa on the other hand was seen as a land of opportunity.

Herman and his wife Doris (née Thal, who came out from Courland to be his wife) set up their home on a farm named Woodbush in the Pietersburg or Zoutpansberg district of what was the Northern Transvaal which is 30 miles northeast of Pietersburg, now known as Polokwane.



The Hirschmann Family 1898

BACK: Herman Hirschmann, Joseph Kallmeyer holding Jack Kallmeyer, Jacob Hirschmann

FRONT: Doris Hirschmann [nee Thal], Bertha Kallmeyer [Palte], Isiah Hirschmann holding Harry Kallmeyer and Jack Hirschmann, Annie Kallmeyer [Salamon], Johanna Kallmeyer [nee Hirschmann].

I will write of the town itself and its names: Pietersburg and Polokwane. In these names lies much of its history and the story of those of us who lived there – from then and until now.



The town of Polokwane/Pietersburg is situated in the far north of the country, 200 miles north of Johannesburg and about 300 miles south of the Limpopo River, bordering Zimbabwe. It is the centre of a district called the Pietersburg or Zoutpansburg district, which includes a large number of farms, several small towns, many Black African settlements/kraals/villages plus a vast mountainous area of stunning natural beauty.



## The Afrikaners (the Boers)

When my grandfather first lived in this district in the early 1880s, the town, then named Pietersburg was established as the commercial centre of a large farming community. In the 1840s, [Voortrekkers](#) under the leadership of [Andries Hendrik Potgieter](#) established [Zoutpansbergdorp](#), a town 100 km (62 mi) to the north. This settlement had to be abandoned because of clashes with the local tribes (Lebelo, Langa & Ledwaba clans), they founded a new town in 1886 and named it "Pietersburg" in honour of Voortrekker leader [Petrus Jacobus Joubert](#). (The Voortrekkers were Afrikaners moving out of the Cape Province to get away from the British at the Cape). Pietersburg was at that time, the capital of the Northern Transvaal, a part of the South African Republic, under the leadership of President Paul Kruger.

My grandfather, and a number of other Jewish immigrants of those early days, received citizenship of that state. Grandfather Herman Hirschmann settled with a farm and shop in the area of Woodbush (Houtbosch in Dutch; Houtbos in Afrikaans) approximately thirty miles north-east of the town of Pietersburg and two hundred miles north of Johannesburg.

## The San and Black Tribes

For centuries before the arrival of the White nations, the entire area was populated by black tribes who had migrated southwards from central and north Africa. There are also signs of San people - their paintings can be found on cave walls. Other than an occasional white traveller, White people were not part of the scene.

Caves with evidence of prehistoric man can also be found near the town. When in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Voortrekkers reached these Northern parts, the ruling black tribe there were of the Pedi tribe – a branch of the North Sotho people.



The black settlement there was called Polokwane, meaning "Place of Rest" \*. The Pedi tribe boast a proud history of brave fighting warriors who resisted the Boer newcomers successfully for many years until finally forced into surrender by superior military weapons. This is in fact the story of the takeover of the Black race in all South Africa by the European colonialists. They lost all, becoming servants – almost slaves, without property, rights, or dignity. They were considered sub-human and even saw themselves as such. This was until 1992 when the new SA, under the leadership of Nelson Mandela introduced elections for all, disbanded the apartheid regime and Pietersburg was renamed Polokwane.

## The British

In 1901, during the Anglo Boer War, the British occupied Pietersburg, although for many more long months the war still raged in the district. My grandparents, like many other Jews living on farms and in the country areas, were considered *Boere-Jode* – Jewish people who spoke Afrikaans in their business lives (and also their home lives) and sympathized with the Boers in the war. As such they

were incarcerated in a British concentration camp and only returned to their home on the Woodbush farm at the end of the war. This must have been a bitter pill to swallow and indeed was never spoken of.



My grandfather's house and store in Woodbush

After the English defeated the Boers in the long and bitter Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902, the Transvaal – once known as the South African Republic, became a province of SA which was part of the British Empire. From then on, the British took over and in 1910, the Union of South Africa was formed, uniting the two Boer Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State as well as the British controlled provinces of the Cape and Natal.

The Pietersburg I grew up in the 1940s, was the biggest town north of Pretoria in the Union of South Africa. Until 1948 The King of England was our king – at the end of films in the *Bioscope* (the South African word for 'cinema') we all stood up to the music of "*God Save the King*".

## The Indians

Though compared to the Whites and Blacks they were and are a relatively small group of people, but the Indians had and have considerable influence. They were also considered non-white and indeed they were dark skinned. They were a relatively prosperous community. They too, like the blacks, could not live in town and had their own separate neighbourhood and school out of town. They were allowed to own shops in the bottom street of the business section, and I think that my own father who was active in the local chamber of commerce was instrumental in the permission given them to keep their shops within the town limits.

To the credit of the Pietersburg Jewish community, who were defined as "white", they assisted these people in many ways. On a recent visit to that region I was told by an Indian physician, today, of course with full equal rights, that his father, a Pietersburg merchant knew my dad who was a pharmacist and owned 'Lasts Chemist" and my Uncle Charlie who was his lawyer. He told me that only my uncle and another Jewish lawyer were prepared to defend Indians. (See memoir on the CHOL website of Julian Meyer from Pietersburg here [Letters in a Shoe Box, 1940-1945](#)) (I know my uncle did this also for the blacks without pay.)

## The Nationalists' victory in 1948

The Nationalist government, mostly supported by the Afrikaans speaking whites (who remained bitter about the British takeover of their country) gained control in the South African elections of 1948. South Africa then left the British Commonwealth and became the Republic of South Africa. This government entrenched the apartheid system in law. This Pietersburg was my home from 1939 until I left for Israel in 1962.

Since I left, I often visited my parents and was witness to the changes over the years. Of course, whether under English rule or Afrikaans, non-whites were forbidden to live in the town and their homes, such as they were - shacks and small houses were located in the surrounding district and in a huge Ghetto type place known as a "location". Domestic servants were permitted to sleep in quarters provided by their employers and went back to their homes when on their 'off 'days or on leave. They could only go out in the town at night if they were given a written permit or "pass" from their 'masters'.

## Our servants

Our home like most of the white peoples' homes, had bedrooms and a washroom in the backyard for the servants. There for most of my life in the town, Daniel Makwela and Minna, lived and worked. Daniel grew up in our home – started as a garden-boy – perhaps at about the age of thirteen. As he grew to be a man, he became the cook and head of staff. As children we played together and would



often sit with them around a small fire eating Mielie Pap (corn-meal porridge) and gravy. Over the years our relationship remained congenial. Minna, whose surname I am ashamed to say I never knew, was the maid in the home. She was quiet, good natured and hardworking, while running a roaring liquor trade from our backyard. It was illegal for Blacks to trade in alcoholic drinks and from time to time my dad would have to go to the police station to get her released. So, it

seemed my parents did know about her business on the side but chose not to interfere.

Minna and Daniel with my mom, Sadie and my brother David outside our home

I remember Daniel as a tall and good-looking man with much wisdom and humour. He always dreamed of the black liberation and indeed did live to see it. Minna, always with a *doekie* (scarf) on her head kept her opinions to herself. She had only one eye but she always knew where everything in the house was. My dad would say, 'She has an eagle eye and with that one eye sees all'.

They both lived outside of town and we, our family visited on occasion. Daniel lived on a small plot in a large black neighbourhood – the official address 'Nobody's Place'. He attempted to grow mealies (maize) there but rain was scarce so this was not a great success. His wife, Martha took in washing and they had three sons.

The one son went to work on the mines in Johannesburg and, at the age of seventeen, was murdered. This horrific tragedy broke their hearts. I was quite little but distinctly remember that event. They belonged to a huge Christian sect (Zion-city Moria) and my parents attended the funeral. Serious crime has been a part of South Africa for as long as I can remember.

Minna lived in a tiny home with a daughter and granddaughter in the Pietersburg location. During the time that I studied Physiotherapy in Johannesburg she told me that this then 6-year-old child had been diagnosed with TB (Tuberculosis). I made it my business to discover where she could be treated and my mom and dad helped to send the child there. She recovered. Minna thanked me with all her heart and said what I never forgot. 'When she grows up one day I hope she can work for you'. This is how she saw herself. This was her ambition for her grandchild. Thus were these people brought to their knees under a yolk of racial oppression.

I must give credit to my parents that, like quite a number of others in the Jewish community, were as liberal and anti-racial as was acceptable in that environment. They were active in a number of organizations supporting the non-white community. We, the children were educated accordingly and were strictly instructed to always be polite and considerate to all races. We were never allowed to use derogatory language of a racial nature.

Nevertheless, the gap in our conditions of living were enormous and like all around, though we objected to, we did enjoy the benefits and privileges of the whites of the country.

Like most of the Jewish community my parents always voted for the most liberal party that could exist in an Afrikaans town like Pietersburg. In Johannesburg there was a more liberal party that openly favoured liberation of the non-white races. But not in Pietersburg. Of course, there was no social interaction what-so-ever – this was definitely not done, certainly not in Pietersburg.

Physical intimacy was not legal. I must mention here that there were also those who were active participants in the anti-apartheid movement. This included Arthur Goldreich and my own younger brother David Hirschmann who at university became the chairman of the SRC (Students Representative Council). Most of us did our best but were not that brave. (There were severe penalties of banning and imprisonment.)

## The Jewish Community

The Jewish community now, as in most country towns, is almost non-existent. In my day there were ninety Jewish families – a flourishing community. Most of them stemmed from two large families – One was our family – the Hirschmann /Kallmeyer family and the other the Israelson family. Both of these families originally came from Courland, Latvia in the 1880s and 90s. They settled in the Woodbush and surrounding area. Here they established their farms, homes and stores. Over time they were joined by many relatives. My grandfather I believe was instrumental in bringing many of his own family into the area and into the town itself. Over generations many marriages brought in new names and families. Others, originating in Lithuania, Poland, Germany and in fact many other countries joined this thriving community.



My brothers, Herman and David and I (Richelle)

When I was growing up, the pre-European history of South Africa was not taught. To most of us the name Polokwane\* not known, but I did know of it. I had the unusual good fortune to be in a mixed high school – The Pietersburg Hoerskool. (By mixed, I mean English and Afrikaans – of course no Blacks). In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade we could choose to learn Sesotho – the language of most of the Blacks in the area. Two of us from the English speakers' class chose this subject. The others were Afrikaans speaking children, mostly from surrounding farms. They had grown up with many black labourers and had played as small children with the small black children whom we called picaninis – thus many could already speak the language. Our teacher, named Mr. Kriel told us the story of Polokwane Otherwise, I think I would never have heard of it.

In this  
picture  
of my



Batmitzvah in 1950 [Courtesy of Lena Woolf

on the Pietersburg Jewish Community web site <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/pietersburg/Photos.html>

BACK: Richelle Hirschmann, Fonda Halberstadt, Marion Worms

FRONT: Laurane Klingman, Lena Rakusin, Carla Friedman.

## My mother

My mother, Sadie Kark, came from a Johannesburg Lithuanian family and became a Pietersburger when she married my dad, Jack in 1937.

Most of those living in the countryside, moved into the town eventually. ([Jacaranda](#) trees line many streets in the city, blooming purple blossoms in October every year.) But like us, many families kept their farms and country businesses. Sadly, most of those that remained in Europe did not survive the Holocaust.

After WW2, my dad, with the help of Red Cross, tried to find remaining members of the family. There were none – neither of his father or mother's family.





## The New Millennium

On my most recent visit in 2014 it had again become Polokwane, now the capital of the Limpopo province of the new SA. What I saw was a city of a near million people – today the blacks are included in the population count and of course form the vast majority. Where once they were forbidden to live in the town, today they flood the city. Some have moved up considerably – both in education and standard of living. Many still remain poverty-stricken and unemployed. Many years are needed to close the gap.



Part of the Polokwane CBD with car dealerships and suburbs in the background, together with the R101 road passing through – photo 2024 by [JasonMoe289](#)



On this last visit we met Daniel, then a man of over 90 with his family. We had coffee together at a mall, like the one pictured here, an undreamed-of event in the days of my childhood. The mall was full of well-dressed people of all races and shades and could stand anywhere in the world – Johannesburg, Los Angeles, Cape Town. Of course, to my eyes,

so used to seeing a very different Pietersburg, it was absolutely amazing.



## Our home

We also visited other places in the town. I remember well – **our home**, still standing and lived in, at the corner of Devenish and Voortrekker Streets.

We saw what was once my dad's pharmacy, on the corner of Mare and Voster, now Thabo Mbeki Street. (Last's Pharmacy see the picture on page 2)



The synagogue is there and is now a computer agency.

## The Jewish cemetery



We visited the Jewish cemetery where my grandparents, parents and many relatives and friends are buried. Sadly, this is all that remains of that once thriving Jewish community.



My dad Jack Hirschmann outside his pharmacy



Recently Rabbi Silberhaft responsible for these outlying cemeteries has had the stones flat so that they can't be toppled or broken. This is how I saw them.



## Pietersburg / Polokwane today

Some of the town seems as it was in previous times - but much is very different.

Polokwane has developed in all directions: smart residential neighbourhoods uptown; the lower streets are crowded with mainly black people; the centre still a shopping centre but filled with pavement stalls, parks, administrative buildings, banks etc – and all that goes to make a big city.

It is hard to believe that this is the very place where I and my two brothers, Herman and David were born and lived throughout our childhood.

Richelle Shem-Tov, Kiryat Ono, Israel, 2024.

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\*Recently I read an article on the internet published in the 'Culture Review' magazine saying that 'The Name Polokwane is a Distortion of Black History'. What I thought to be the story - was one which was told to us by an Afrikaans high school teacher. There was a small town and Afrikaans agricultural high school nearby called Marabastad. You may like to read this too here:

<https://culture-review.co.za/the-name-polokwane-is-a-distortion-of-black-history>

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