

From Naishtot to Nelspruit – The Solomon Family Story:

Innovations in Citrus 🍊 and other agriculture

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Crocodile Valley Citrus Estate, now known as **Crocodile River Estate**, is a massive citrus, avocado, and macadamia farm located just 10 minutes from central Nelspruit (Mbombela), South Africa. It was developed by the Solomon family for nearly a hundred years, from 1925 to 2018.

Dennis Solomon (Left) was its owner and driver from 1956 when he joined his father Ivan in the business, until his death in 2005. He was nationally recognised as an accomplished and visionary agriculturalist with many published complimentary obituaries when he died. (see the end of this article)

The family came from Naishtot in Lithuania. Alexander (Ha Kohen) Solomon, born in 1840 in Naishtot went to Palestine with his wife Jenny circa 1900. Alexander and Jenny

Solomon were both buried on the Mount of Olives. They had four children:

1. Yehuda Leib (Louis) Solomon (Ha Kohen) born in 1860 Naishtot and died in 1937 in Potchefstroom. (He is our main player). **2. Malka Solomon** married Avraham Hyman from Riga. They came to South Africa and settled in Calitzdorp circa 1904 and **3. Benny Solomon** married Bessie Port. They also came to South Africa circa 1904 and **4. Leah Solomon** who married Modlin and also lived in Calitzdorp.

Louis Solomon married Hena Mindel (Anne) Landau, also born in Naishtot in 1858. (She died in 1945 in Potchefstroom). They had two children while in Naishtot: **Hannah** in 1887 and **Himie** in 1890 (father of Zara Aginsky's mother, Mona Sloot).



In 1890, **Louis Solomon** left behind his wife and the two small children in Lithuania while he and other young Lithuanian Jews, looking for better economic opportunities set forth for South Africa. These immigrants arrived in Calitzdorp in the Oudtshoorn area of the Eastern Karoo to take part in the ostrich feather boom. This industry was the 4th largest export from South Africa supplying 85% of the worlds ostrich feathers. The first decade of the 20th Century brought an incredible surplus of wealth to the 300 Lithuanian Jewish families. Oudtshoorn was known as 'the

Jerusalem of South Africa'

In 1897, some six years later, Louis returned to Naishtot to collect his family. He arranged for his parents to go to live in Palestine and he brought his wife, Anne and the two children (Hannah and Himie) back to South Africa with him, settling in Calitzdorp near Oudtshoorn where another two children were born: a son, **Ivan Solomon** in 1897 and daughter, **Bertha** in 1901.

In 1913, the feather industry was at its height. Things were very good for the feather traders. But that year they changed dramatically. Motor cars had been invented, and the ladies' fashion trend of feathers was not suited to this. There were rising tensions in the world which disrupted trade. And then the First World War broke out. These were some of the factors that caused the feather market to collapse. Widespread bankruptcies ruined the farmers and traders. Many Jewish families were then attracted to the rich mineral and agricultural resources in the Northern Cape and the Transvaal. Louis and Anne Solomon, with their children, **Himie, Ivan and Bertha** went to Potchefstroom. (Their older daughter, **Hannah** had already married to Yechiel Maltz and with four children, they left Calitzdorp for Johannesburg.) Bertha Solomon, married Jacob Rottanburg, settled on a small farm in Potchefstroom where they had an ice cream factory.

In 1916, **Himie Solomon** (Louis and Anne's older son) married Florence Gerson in the Fordsburg Mayfair synagogue. They settled in Potchefstroom where their 5 children were born.

Crocodile Valley Citrus Estate



Louis and Anne's younger son, **Ivan Solomon**, finished school in **Potchefstroom** and went to Wits University in Johannesburg, graduating as a lawyer in 1921. In 1922 he joined a law firm in **Pretoria**: Friedland, Hart, Solomon and Nicholson. In 1924 he married Lilian Goldin. They had one son. **Dennis Solomon** born in 1926.

Ivan's law firm had a client which owned a failing Citrus estate, Prudential **Citrus Estates**, near **Nelspruit**. In 1925, the partners in the law firm bought it. Two years later, in 1927 the 3 partners sold their shares to Ivan Solomon who was then the sole owner. It was registered as the **Crocodile Valley Citrus Estate**. Ivan saw it through the challenging and hard times in the 1930's.

In developing his citrus estate into a major agribusiness and becoming the largest independent citrus grower in the country, **Ivan**, became a director of the Citrus Board of South Africa and got involved with the politics of the global fruit trade. In addition, with his wife Lilian, he was also heavily involved in Jewish and civic life in Pretoria, assisting charitable organisations and

supporting cultural activities. They were patrons of the Arts. In 1932 Ivan was appointed the **Mayor of Pretoria** for a four-year term until 1936.

Ivan Solomon given the keys to the City of New Orleans

On 5 May 1956, on a trade visit to New Orleans, deeply tied to international trade and agricultural logistics, Ivan Solomon was given **New Orleans honorary citizenship** and keys to the city from Charles Erdman, an aide to Mayor deLesseps. He deserved this award of an honorary citizenship as a prominent South African political and agricultural figure, and for his international diplomacy and economic networking. By honouring a former foreign mayor and titan of the global fruit trade, New Orleans sought to position its port as a premier hub for South African agricultural imports and strengthen bilateral trade relationships.

Ivan and Lilian's son, **Dennis Solomon**, graduated as a mechanical engineer at Wits University. He then went to study further at Purdue University, Indiana, USA where he obtained his master's degree in engineering. In 1956, Dennis, much to his parents' delight, joined his fathers' business.

Dennis Solomon joins the firm in 1956



At the age of 30, Dennis brought his engineering skills to the company. He devised innovative and cost-effective methods of growing, watering, harvesting and packing millions of cartons of citrus which the company exported annually. He introduced sprinkler irrigation and the farms' own hydro-electric power. He developed the business into a world class citrus farm. He was responsible for the development of several new successful citrus varieties.

Unlike other companies at the time, Crocodile Valley Citrus Estate provided good family housing for the workers on the estate, including electric lights, purified water and village amenities for the workers for example, a primary school, a day care centre, a clinic with free medical services, recreational and sports facilities and subsidies for high school education. This was unheard of at that time in the South African farming community.



Dennis Solomon enjoyed living with his family on the estate near Nelspruit. He served the citrus industry for 50 years. For 25 of those years, he was a director and executive member of the famous 'Outspan' citrus marketing company. He was respected by his peers as a businessman of keen instincts and broad industry knowledge.

His other agricultural interests and innovations were in avocado, macadamia and pine forestry plantations. In milk production he established the country's premier high producing Jersey herds. He also developed a new registered cattle beef breed crossing Afrikander (for hardiness and ease of calving) with Charolais breeds (for better beef) which he called the Huguenot.

He was especially interested in game conservation and wild life management, having had at one time on his ranch at Croc Valley, the largest concentration of Sable Antelope outside of the Kruger National Park. When Dennis passed away in 2005, his son **Marc Solomon** born in 1960 continued managing the estate which was then known as **Crocodile River Estate**. The Estate was bought in 2018 by Komati Fruits. Dennis's younger son **John Solomon** born in 1965 in Nelspruit did an MBA in Washington Seattle, became senior buyer for Hewlett Packard, and in 2018 became Vice President and General manager of Google-Chrome Operating Systems. So, from Nelspruit and Crocodile Valley Citrus estates to Google Chrome in Mountain View, California – emphasizing the 'IT' at the end of Nelspru'it' and in the middle of C'it'rus!

Zara Aginsky concludes: My mother's uncle, **Ivan Solomon**, never forgot his family, especially his nieces and nephews. He had seasonal fruit delivered every week to the homes of the Kaplan and



Gevisser families in Durban; the Solomon family in Vereeniging; Maltz family in Krugersdorp and the Kalinko, Maltz, Slood, Cline and Kusner families in Johannesburg. As a child in the 1950's I remember the joy and excitement when the railway truck stopped outside our house on a Friday afternoon and the weekly, delicious fruit arrived.

See below the obituary notice in the SA Fruit Journal



Dennis Ivor Solomon

The Lowveld loses a legendary pioneer

Written by IVOR SOLOMON

The Lowveld lost one of its most respected and prominent citizens with the passing of Dennis Ivor Solomon, on September 23rd, in Nelspruit at the age of 79.

Dennis Solomon was known throughout the Lowveld as an accomplished and visionary agriculturalist, developing Crocodile Valley Estates into a successful and much admired enterprise. He came to his position as general manager there after earning a degree in engineering from the University of the Witwatersrand, followed by a Master's degree from Purdue University in the USA, and then gaining experience as a young professional at several engineering firms in the UK and South Africa.

Crocodile Valley Estates was founded in the 1920's by Mr. Solomon's late father, Ivan Solomon, who saw it through the challenging early days of its development and the hard times of the 1930's. When Dennis Solomon took the helm of the operation in 1956, much to the delight of his father and mother, Lilian, he brought his formidable engineering skills to the company and devised innovative and cost-effective methods of growing, harvesting and packing the million cartons of citrus it now exports each year.

"Croc Valley" pioneered the bulk handling of citrus from orchards to pack house to get away from the old system of using field boxes. In 1956 Dennis Solomon designed and installed this world-first bulk-handling system which resulted in large labour savings, better handling and less damage to fruit. Croc Valley also became the first large citrus farm in RSA to do away with the traditional furrow /basin or flood irrigation systems by placing all of its orchards under sprinkler irrigation, effecting great savings in water usage and irrigation labour, in schemes designed by Mr. Solomon to use gravity pressure from the estate's high-level canal.

Alongside its farming developments and virtually in defiance of the then government's migrant labour policies linked to apartheid, Croc Valley persisted in providing its employees with good family housing on the estate with electric lights, purified water, flush toilets and village amenities including a primary school, subsidies for higher education, a day care centre for workers' children, a clinic with free medical services, and recreational and sports facilities. Croc Valley now assists its employees to acquire their own homes, with financial support from the provident fund it established for them many years ago.

Dennis Solomon served the citrus industry for 25 years as a

Director and Executive Member of Outspan and its predecessor organisations and was respected by his peers as a businessman of keen instincts and broad industry knowledge.

His agricultural interests, however, went well beyond a horticultural focus (which eventually included avocado and forestry plantations). The Croc Valley Jersey Stud, was established in 1956 and went on to become one of this country's premier high-production Jersey herds. "Croc Valley Janet" still holds the national record for lifetime milk production.

Croc Ranch, near Phalaborwa, established and developed from 1953, became the centre of Mr. Solomon's now widely respected cross-breeding of indigenous Africander stock with Charolais cattle. Dennis Solomon and his ranch manager found that a 5/8 x 3/8 blend of Charolais/Africander was ideal for hot and dry conditions, these cattle retaining the Africander breed's hardiness, ease of calving and ease of handling while incorporating the much better beef production characteristics of the Charolais. This distinct breed, for which he coined the name "Huguenot", is now officially registered by the South African Studbook Association.

Dennis Solomon maintained a lifelong passion for game conservation and wildlife. At Croc Ranch game conservation was a major priority and game auction sales became a feature of the operation. At one time the Ranch had the largest concentration of Sable Antelope outside of the Kruger National Park. Croc Ranch erected the facilities for and used the "Tempo training" system which greatly reduced the stress and mortality rates during game capture. In 1981 Dennis was presented with an award for his contribution to game conservation in recognition of his application of advanced game capture techniques. Indeed, the Park was one of his greatest interests, and he seldom missed an opportunity to spend time there, accompanied by his wife, Margaret, who was at his side supporting him in all his enterprises for 47 years. Together, they travelled throughout the world promoting new markets for South Africa's continuously expanding citrus exports.

Dennis was also an innovator in the timber industry. He diversified into timber with the development of Goedgeloof Plantations near Graskop in 1958. This virgin land property was purchased and developed into Pine forestry and Dennis Solomon invented a procedure known as "Diagonal thinning" to improve the economic viability of thinning of pine plantations, this procedure is now widely used throughout the timber industry.

Mr. Solomon will be remembered not only as an astute businessman and farmer, but also as a generous supporter of just causes as well as a devoted family man - anyone who knew him well knew also that his "family only" times were not to be breached. In addition to his wife, he is survived by two sons and three daughters.