

THE HISTORY OF THE LOUIS FAMILY IN SOUTH AFRICA

WRITTEN BY LIONEL LOUIS

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I am writing this as the oldest member of the Louis family. I will be 65 in May 1975.

My grandfather and grandmother on my father's side were Louis and Liebe Abramowitz. They had lived and married in a shtetela in Lithuania named NEUSTAD.

Owing the Pogroms in Russia they decided to leave Lithuania in 1884 for South Africa and arrived in Cape Town in 1895. The date was pinpointed by my father telling me that he was 9 years of age when they arrived in Cape Town. There were two sons, Barney and Max [my dad]. A year after arriving in Cape Town a third son Sam was born. At that stage they were living in Stellenbosch in the Cape Province.

My grandfather ran a dairy farm and also farmed grapes. The Cape was known for its long winters and dampness and this caused my grandfather to suffer from asthma, which had started in Lithuania. Both Barney and my dad went to school in Stellenbosch and in 1889 the asthma forced my grandfather to decide to move to the Transvaal where the climate was drier and more suitable for his health. That was the year of my dad's bar mitzvah in Stellenbosch. In this year they and their dairy herd moved from Stellenbosch and took the train to Kimberley which was the rail head at the time. They then organized to drive their herd to the goldfields by 'road'. This arduous journey took six weeks of hard dusty travel on nonexistent roads and through relatively unknown country to the gold fields of the Witwatersrand. They suffered deprivation, hunger and thirst but finally arrived in the Witwatersrand and decided to settle in the village called Boksburg.[Today a flight from Johannesburg to Kimberly takes about a half an hour as against 45 days of travel by ox wagon].

My grandfather progressed in health and their dairy herd flourished. They settled just outside of Boksburg in a small village called Leeupoort and today there is a street named Louis Street after my great grandfather.

At that stage my grandfather who could neither read nor write, was having a difficult time to keep his accounts and a cousin had settled in the Johannesburg. He was the first Jewish lawyer. My grandfather went to him to ask him to change his name as it was such a long name and difficult to spell. So his cousin changed his name to Adam Louis. My grandfather asked him why he changed his name to Adam Louis and the cousin replied, you are the first Louis and Adam was the first man.

We lived mainly off the land. In the summer there were plenty of peaches, grapes, nectarines, and apricots and we drank plenty of fresh milk from the dairy and had an abundance of fresh cream and cheese for many of our meals, to say nothing of the fresh eggs for breakfast and for supper. Our house was filled with flies and I remember that my grandfather took strips of paper and dipped it in a sweet sticky substance and hung it around the house. The flies would stick to it and thus we got rid of the nuisance.

My dad went to work at the age of 15 as a messenger for one of the stores in the village and earned the princely sum of £2 per month. In due course he became a barman and doubled his income to £4 per month.

In 1893 having tired of the life of a barman he found a job on a mine and in 1898 took a job in a place called Pienaar's River near Pretoria as a manager of a store. He earned £10 per month which was a fortune in those days.

In that year the Boer War broke out. He had no means of communicating with his parents in Leeupoort. His parents had decided to move to Cape Town to get out of the area where the war was being fought. They left all their worldly possessions in the hands of their servants, including their furniture, cattle and other goods and took the stagecoach to Cape Town where they stayed with their brother and sister-in-law. They remained there until the war was over in 1902. In the meantime, my dad continued to work in Pienaar's River and in 1900 a troop of British soldiers arrived in Pienaar's River to harass the Boers. The commanding officer came at night to my dad and asked him to purchase stoves for them. My dad recognized the officer who was at school with him in Stellenbosch. Dad agreed to supply them with as much as he could and the British departed. They advised my dad where they would be hiding out so that if there was any trouble with the Boers for supplying

them with the stoves, he could join them. A few days later his shop assistant came rushing in and told him in Dutch that the Boers were coming. Dad, who had his bag ready in case this happened, mounted his horse and rode off into the bush to find his friend. After much wandering around he found them and the captain asked him to join them. The British gathered their forces and in the middle of the night fled westwards to escape the large troop of Boers who were based in Pretoria and were superior in arms and members and the small troop of British would have no chance. The Boers kept on after them, stopping at the stores and razing them to the ground.

The British troops decided to try to get to Walvis Bay in the German territory of South West Africa. This was a distance of 1500 miles. After many months the Boers finally gave up.

The British troop moved slowly to Walvis Bay after suffering many privations including thirst particularly as they had to cross the Kalahari Desert. Many of the soldiers died of thirst and the troops had to slaughter their horses for food and much of it was dried for biltong [jerky] to sustain them for later on. The hides of the horses were used as leather for boots. They also trapped spring hares and shot buck when they could close enough to them.

This trip across South West Africa took six months. Quite a walk full of tragedy and all kinds of problems. When they arrived in Walvis Bay they were bedraggled and torn with beards down to their waists. Clothing had been patched together and sewn with strips of leather from the hides.

The German authorities cabled Cape Town and in another six months a ship arrived to transport them back to Cape Town.

In the interim my grandparents learned from some means that my dad had been killed by the Boers and they sat Shiva for him in Cape Town and they vowed that when the war was over they would return to the Transvaal and find my dad's grave to erect a stone in his memory.

In 1902 when the war was over, my grandparents undertook the long and arduous journey back to the goldfields and eventually arrived home to find their home intact

and their cattle flourishing. This was due to the servants who were honest and for which my grandfather rewarded them with the offspring of the cattle.

When they had settled down my grandfather took a cape cart and travelled to Pretoria and then to Pienaar's river. He found the shop which had been burned to the ground but found no trace of the grave of his son. A search of the area proved fruitless and sadly he returned to Boksburg and his wife and the remaining two sons. By this time many Jewish families began to trickle into Boksburg and he then founded the Jewish Community Center. He also obtained the permission of the council to create a separate Jewish cemetery in Boksburg alongside the Christian cemetery. He was the first chairman and the founder of the chevra kaddisha.

In the meantime, my dad arrived back to Cape Town and made his way to the house of his uncle and aunt.

He knocked on the door and his aunt opened the door and when she saw this bedraggled bearded ragamuffin standing there she shouted "Go away or I will call the police."

My dad said to her in Yiddish

"Tanta der kenst meer niet, ich bien zainer plimenick Max."

Translated "Auntie you don't know me , I am your nephew Max".

Just imagine the tears of joy. My aunt took him in and cleaned him up and gave him her husband's clothes and of course fed him.

She told him of the report of his murder by the Boers and the sitting of Shiva by the family in this very house. He was also told of the return of his parents to the Transvaal.

Dad then made his way back to Boksburg. He took the train to Kimberly and having no money, got a job as a transport rider and drove an ox wagon loaded with supplies to the goldfields.

Just imagine the joy of the reunion with my grandparents in Boksburg. They were beyond belief in this immaculate return from the 'dead'.

In 1903 my grandfather on my mother side arrived in Boksburg and they built a shop on the mine. His name was Samuel Levy and my dad went to work for him and in 1904 my mother Lily arrived from Russia to keep house for my grandfather. She was from a village in Russia called UPINA. [This is a village near to Latvia and Belarus].

This was the time when the railroad was completed from Cape Town to Johannesburg. My mother was on the way to Kroonstad to visit family when the body of Paul Kruger was being brought back from Switzerland and he was lying in state at the Kroonstad station.

My mother had arrived in Boksburg in 1904 where she met my dad. They were first cousins. She was a beautiful girl and my dad, despite his trials and tribulations, was a handsome and rugged man. They were married on the 25th of June 1905. They lived behind the shop in a tiny room. My mother became pregnant with my elder brother and when she developed labor pains my dad took his bicycle rode 10 miles to fetch the only doctor in town.

My mother had two daughters both of whom died at a very early age. There were no hospitals in the area at the time.

There was no running water and the only water came from the mine and had to be hand-carried to the house. This was not only for drinking but for all other purposes and was a precious substance.

At the time the labor on the mines was convict labor imported from Chinese goals. They were convicts for murders rape etc. You can imagine how happy the Chinese were to get rid of them but they became a major source of crime. The following story was told to me by my mother. Every Wednesday my grandfather walked to the Boksburg station from the mine to take the train to Johannesburg. The Chinese watched him and saw him always carry a small bag which to them looked like a money bag. Eventually they attacked him and beat him up. They found that the bag was actually his Tefillin and Tallit bag. My mother was in the shop and called to my

dad to look at the bloodied miner. He needs immediate attention. My dad looked at my mother and said that is no miner that is my dad. Of course my dad raced off on his bicycle to fetch the doctor.

With all the problems with the Chinese the government of the Transvaal eventually prevailed on the Chinese government to take back all the prisoners. This was in 1910. That was the year of the birth of the Union of South Africa and my birth.

In the next few years we moved to a house nearer the shop but eventually decided to move to Johannesburg. My maternal grandfather, who was a partner in the shop, Smuel Itzik Levy, decided to go back to his family in Lithuania.

My oldest memory was the outbreak of World War One in 1914. My grandfather Adam Louis, died in 1915. In 1916 my brother Abe was born but he died from diphtheria at the age of two. In 1918 my brother Charles was born. In 1918 armistice was declared

At this stage the synagogue was built in Boksburg and shortly thereafter the first wedding took place. I remember it well because the floor collapsed under the bride and groom and the Rabbi, and they fell through the floor and disappeared. They survived.

In 1919 the Great Flu epidemic struck and many people died. My mother would spray us with some sort of chemical three times per day.

My next memory was the strike of 1922 and because of that my parents moved the shop to Benoni in the workers hall. Much fighting took place and my mother's shop was blown up. My mother was 21 at the time. They had to start from the beginning again. They started a small drapery shop and struggled to make a living. My brother Simon finished high school in 1923 and became an attorney and in 1926 moved to a town called Lichtenberg about 100 miles east of Boksburg.

In that same year my dad got me a job in Johannesburg. I travelled back and forth each day and earned the huge amount of £5 per month. The train fare for the month cost me £1.50.

Eventually my parents decided to move to Johannesburg. The cost of moving the whole house of furniture was £2.00. My mother closed her business and rented a house and in order to survive she took in boarders. My dad had purchased an old Chevy truck and travelled into the country selling skins and hides. This was the time of the great depression 1926 to 1935. There was no room for me to sleep in and I slept on the front porch to make room for the boarders. My father had now given up travelling because it was impossible to make a living. He sold overalls walking from place to place. However, my brother Solly also had a job and we combined all of our income and managed to make a living.

My first major blow to the family in Johannesburg was the death of my brother Solly who caught meningitis and died in 1936. In those days there were no drugs to help combat disease.

In 1937 I met my wife Ruth and we were married in December of that year. My son Peter was born a year later. During that year between my two brothers and me, we bought a garage near to where my parents were living and my mother ran that until a short while before her death. She died in 1959 at the age of 76.

On September 3rd 1939, war broke out between Britain and Germany. In that same year my dad died of prostate cancer.

During the war I served as an ambulance driver for the St John's Ambulance Brigade [a similar organization to the Red Cross]. I had learned the nuances of what would today be called a paramedic.

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**Submitted by Peter Louis, Lionel Louis' son, July 2023 who lives in San Diego, California**

**Note by Peter Louis:** My dad passed away on March 17<sup>th</sup> 1980, the 29<sup>th</sup> of Adar and my mother passed away on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2000 , the 26<sup>th</sup> of Adar.

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