

CHOL – Community History On-Line

A forum for those involved in preserving the footprint of Southern African Jewish community life in digital form

Community History On-Line CHOL Newsletter #20 June 2025

The Life and Death of Colonel Sir David Harris, diamond pioneer, soldier and statesman – the *Grand Old Man of South Africa*

And Rev Bernard Wulf's reminiscences of his special time in Kimberley.

Life was dicey in the early days of the diamond diggings. The Kimberley cemetery bears witness to the large number of young Jewish men from Britain and Europe who died there before they were 35 years old.

It was not in Africa, though that David Harris escaped the clutches of death – but in London. This was in 1911 when he was there to receive his Knighthood. He was trapped at the top of a prestigious hotel when the



building caught fire. He had literally to cling to the balcony railings to be rescued on long ladders by the fire brigade. He was traumatised, as one could imagine – particularly as he had lost the fine suit that he had had made specially for the investiture and had also lost the precious medals he had earned.

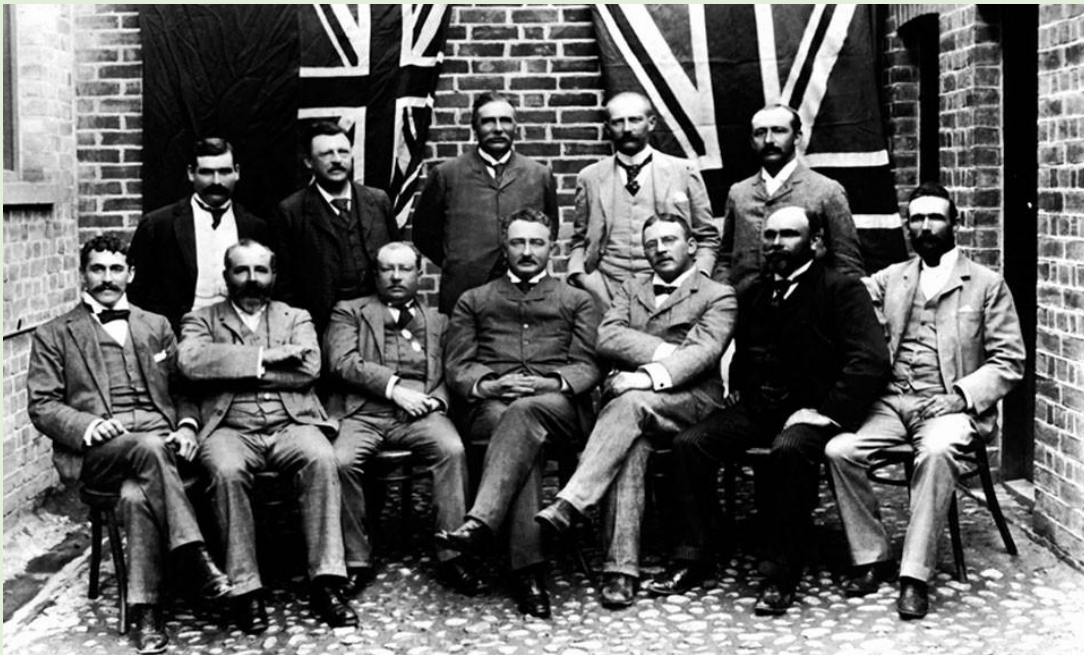
David Harris was born in the City of London on 12 July 1852, the son of Woolf and Phoebe Harris (nee Romaine). He was educated at Coxford's College, City of

London. He was a cousin of Barnet Isaacs, later to be known as Barney Barnato. Both were to become millionaires and legends on the Kimberley Diamond Fields.

David Harris lived his whole long life of 90 years in Kimberley. He died on 23 September 1942 and was buried with full civic, military and Jewish honours in the Kimberley Jewish Cemetery. I was thrilled to discover in the Kaplan Centre Archives, an interview with Rev Wulf, who was the minister in Kimberley at the time of his death, describing his dilemmas and the details of conducting this remarkable funeral. I include this in this further down in this Newsletter. First let's get to know a bit more about the man and his life.

Diamonds

In 1871, at the tender age of 19, David Harris set out for the diamond fields in South Africa, walking to Kimberley from Cape Town for six weeks, beside an ox wagon. He invested in a claim in the Dutoitspan Mine, which he worked with moderate success. He also became a buyer. He later acquired more claims in other mines and became an associate of Cecil John Rhodes. He rose to the very top of the diamond industry and became a director of De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd. He remained a Director of De Beers and several other diamond mining companies until he retired in 1931 aged nearly 80.



Directors of De Beers Consolidated Mines of 1893 Standing: left to right: E Bernheim, William Craven (Secretary) Gardner F. Williams (General Manager) Ludwig Breitmeyer, Lt Col. David Harris. Seated: Woolf Joel, Charles Nind, Harry Mosenthal, Cecil Rhodes, Barney Barnato, Francis Oates, George Compton



This picture is of part of a spectacular brooch David gifted his wife, Rosa. It has over 70 diamonds including a couple of whoppers, four square-cut diamonds and five beautiful yellow diamonds. It is composed of seven flower-heads, the centre claw set with an old brilliant cut diamond weighing 3.20 carats. It was sold at auction in 2015

Soldier

Throughout his life he was involved with military matters. He was a leading officer in campaigns from 1887 onwards. He served in the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902 as a **Commanding Officer of the Kimberley Town Guard**. He was mentioned in dispatches, appointed a CMG and awarded many medals and decorations. From 1903 until his death, he was honorary colonel of the Kimberley Regiment.

Col David Harris gave funds for an annual regimental ball that was held on his birthday. The ballroom at the back of his house, that is now at the Kimberley Mine Museum was the venue for many of these balls.



Politician

David Harris was much involved in politics and sat in Parliament for 32 years. He first entered it in 1897, at Cecil John Rhodes' suggestion when his cousin Barney Barnato died representing Kimberley. After Rhodes' death he represented Rhodes' constituency, Barkly West. After 1910 when the four provinces were united to become the Union of South Africa he was the representative for Beaconsfield in the House of Assembly.

Family life: First Jewish Wedding in Kimberley

David married Rosa Gabriel of Pomerania (Prussia) in November 1873. He had met her on board ship on a return journey from England to South Africa in 1872. This was the very **first Jewish wedding to take place in Kimberley**. It took place even before there was a synagogue there. The first synagogue constructed of wood and iron, was only built three years later in 1876. This served for 26 years, until the wealthy diamond magnates by that time – led by David Harris, and Gustav Bonas, created the magnificent Memorial Road Synagogue. This opened in 1902 and is still in regular use – though only a handful of Jews remain in Kimberley in 2025.

The Harrises chose to continue to **live in Kimberley**. Many of their wealthy contemporary diamond pioneers such as Barney Barnato, Alfred Beit and JB Robinson, once they had succeeded and become millionaires, built palatial homes for themselves on Park Lane in London and amassed great art collections. (Perhaps Harris was the one who had to stay behind in Kimberley to mind the shop!)

Rosa gave birth to seven children. Five survived to adulthood and only one of their children, their youngest daughter Phoebe, lived beyond the age of 53. Sir David, aged 90 when he died in Kimberley in September 1942, had outlived his wife for 32 years and outlived all of his children except for Phoebe, who lived to 78.

Rev Bernard Wulf in Kimberley – during the War – 1941-1943

Rev Bernard Wulf served as a locum minister in Kimberley during the war years from 1941 to 43, while the regular minister was in the Army.

I knew nothing about Rev Wulf – but reading the transcript of his interview from the Kaplan Centre archives at UCT, I have learned what a forward-thinking and interesting man he was. It was so

interesting to read his adventures at the special time he served in Kimberley which included being Chaplain to the war time pilots training school and also being in post at the death Kimberley's most famous Jewish son, **Col, Sir David Harris KCMC**



Rev Wulf was a graduate of the famous Ponevez Yeshiva in Lithuania. He came to South Africa as a very young, qualified Rabbi in 1925. He served smaller congregations like Carnarvon and Victoria West before going to Upington for eight years.

Bernard Wulf married an Upington girl, Mollie Nurick, whose mother Sally Sarah Nurick (née Goldberger) was born in Kimberley. Mollie's father Abram Nurick was a well-to-do businessman in Upington. Rev Wulf and Mollie went back to Upington after his time in Kimberley, where as well as being the minister he was also in business with this father-in-law.

His time in Kimberley was truly special as he relates:

He said: 'Kimberley always had ministers provided by England, trained at Jews College. They tried to maintain the same status, the same type of congregation as Cape Town's Gardens Shul, because the original

congregants were English pioneers there, the Oppenheimers, Harrises, Barnatos and all that history. And then they had an advert in the paper they were looking for somebody with my qualifications. I applied and it turned out to be a temporary position at the time when a minister that they had brought out from England [Rev Yesorsky] joined the forces and went 'up North' as a Chaplain. I took it on, and we got on very well together. I was the first from Eastern Europe who occupied the pulpit in that beautiful shul the most beautiful shul in South Africa. Somehow, I fitted in with respect.' (pictured is the interior of the Memorial Road Synagogue.

He describes the situation he found in Kimberley

'There were three types of Jews in Kimberley. There was still a remnant of Jews who used to talk about Rev Harris Isaacs of 50 years ago (who had served the community for 30 years) and there were the Eastern Europeans, my fellow immigrants from Lithuania and other parts, older than me of course who came out long before, and there were quite a number of local born. Somehow or other, I managed to fit in with all sections of the community and we got on very well together.'

Rev Bernard Wulf's adventures as Chaplain to the Air Force

Rev Wulf describes his time in the Army while in Kimberley: *There was a big Air Force camp in Kimberley, and I was made the Jewish Chaplain and given the rank of Captain. I organised services and other facilities for the boys there and I got to know them each one and I took a lot of interest in them as well as generally in the city. The army was very cooperative. Every Friday night the Air Force boys used to come in full force to shul and during the week when I used to go there to give services, they were all available and I had good attendances. I used to give the other Chaplains a chance to come to my services, the Methodist ministers and so on ... in this respect I would like to tell you a little incident.*



One evening I arrived for service and there was a YMCA hall which had various rooms. We the Jewish boys were supposed to assemble at a certain room. When I came, I found that most of the congregants were on duty and I only had three or four Jewish recruits, so we started talking. While we were talking, I noticed a sergeant passing by up and down, eventually he came up to me: I was in uniform, which for me had Mogen Dovids on my cap and epaulettes and he saluted. He said 'Sir may I speak to you', I said 'certainly what can I do for you?' He said 'We are of the Dutch Reform Church assembled in room so-and-so, but our padre Bekker has not turned up, will you take our service?'

I looked at him and said 'you realise to what denomination I belong', he says 'yes, I know, and you know the best attendance you had was from the Afrikaners'. So, I said to the boys in my room, the three or four boys 'Come on, let's see what we can do'.

So, I came into the room, and they all stood up and I introduced myself, I could have done it in Afrikaans but by that time I was quite fluent in English. I had my set service, so I said to them you can sing any of your Hymns that you know and then we will carry on. They sang a Hymn, I read them a Psalm, I addressed them on the 'goodwill', the usual address in war years, what we are up to and what we are trying to achieve by doing this, and it turned out to be quite successful evening. After half an hour, they all filed by past me and saluted, and thanked me. To take part in inter-denominational services was not uncommon, we often used to come together in services for the soldiers on parade ... but to be directly delivering a non-Jewish service was something else!'

Rev Bernard Wulf meets Col Sir David Harris

Rev Bernard Wulf related his experience of something else, which he says does not happen to every Jewish minister. He explained: *Colonel Sir David Harris, KCMG, was a well-accepted Jew in his day, He was a Director of De Beers when it was formed. He was also the Colonel of the Kimberley Regiment and had been in the Parliament.*

When I came, he was about 90, paralysed, sitting either in a chair or in bed. I used to visit him very, very often, at least once a week and we became quite friendly. Contrary to other pioneer Jews like the Oppenheimers and so forth, he kept to his Jewish faith and remained in Kimberley. He was very much Jewish in his behaviour and so on and eventually he became very ill.

One afternoon, the nurse said to me, 'It looks to me like we are coming to the end'. People called me when there was a death any time day or night, so I said to her don't hesitate to call me. I was called at about five o'clock the following morning, [23 September 1942]. I actually held his hand while he died, I said a prayer, his daughter was with him. His daughter was married out of the faith. She turned round to me and said 'Mr. Wulf I married out of faith, but I'd like my father to have a proper Jewish funeral', I said 'Certainly'.

Now in all the years of my service I have spoken on all different types of occasions, but I made up my mind from the first day never to prolong a funeral. I never delivered an oration, whoever it is, I looked for opportunities at later dates, maybe the shiva house, maybe at a special memorial service and so on, so I said 'certainly', I immediately phoned the Chevra Kadisha to make arrangements but everything got stuck, the minute his death was announced – they came.....

Rev Wulf said: 'I don't know if I was right, it depends on which way you look at it. He was Colonel, pre-Boer War and so on, he was an ex-Member of Parliament a man of great standing and all wanted to give him honour, and they came together, the Mayor from his side, the Army from the other side, they wanted to give him a military and civic funeral.

I had to think on my feet, how to marry, without offence to either, the Jewish requirements and the honour the military and civic authorities wanted to pay to this great and popular soldier, statesman, politician, financier and Jew.



Now what does that consist of: the Mayor, the Councillors and so on, in all their robes following the hearse: the military wanted to give a company of soldiers with a band. Now all this gave me a bit of a shock, I did not know what to do, if it means giving honour to a Jew – and through this perhaps we can bring together closer the Jewish sections, the Jews and the non-Jews, and they want to honour a Jew, I said 'all right we will do it'. They said, 'we want three days to organise it', so they were organising this.

I stipulated that from the house, the pall bearers, from the house to the hearse, and from the hearse, I mean the Chevra Kadisha will do their job as usual. I followed the hearse in the car and then followed the military and the Mayor and Civic Dignitaries and the band, all this, down to the cemetery the pall bearers even non-Jews until the gates of the cemetery. (pictured are the gates of the Green Street Jewish Cemetery)

Once we arrived at the cemetery gates I insisted the Chevra Kadisha must take over. It was quite an occasion, quite an occasion, and I said to them I am not going to make any oration I do not want to treat Sir David in any other way than any other Jew, but I said to the Mayor, the City Council can organise a memorial service two weeks later or so, they had a daily newspaper there,



advertise as much as you can, and we organised a memorial service two weeks later in the shul, in the synagogue, and there I will deliver my oration. And that is what we did ... this is something maybe a minister of a big congregation will not have this opportunity. As I say it gave me a bit of a sleepless night, I know in certain respects I am not doing right, but I had to weigh the pros and cons. I thought to myself ... it was a very trying time, (1942) we had the Nazis working, we did not know what's happened to our people – and this gave us an opportunity to bring us together.

What a brave and forward-thinking man. I am sure he did absolutely the right thing.

To read more about Col Sir David Harris and his family click here [Colonel Sir David Harris](#)

Take a tour of the [Memorial Road Synagogue](#)

CHOL Newsletter no 20

The Life and Death of Colonel Sir David Harris – Diamond Pioneer, Soldier, Statesman and Rev Wulf's report on his time in Kimberley

compiled by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London, June 2025

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CHOL – Community History On-Line is a forum set up in 2020, under the auspices of the Kaplan Centre at UCT and the South African Jewish Museum – bringing together all those working on / or interested in creating an online presence relating to the **History of Jewish Communities in Southern Africa**.

see www.chol.website

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