



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 #24 October '25

Jewish farmers of the Northern Transvaal by Charlotte Wiener with addendum by Richelle Shem Tov, née Hirschmann



Crop harvesting Goudplaats 1930, Israelsohn family

The Northern Transvaal [Limpopo] was the last region to be developed in South Africa. Farms were allotted to any man, who wanted to settle on the land, provided he possessed a rifle and ammunition and a horse and a saddle and was willing to do military service.

The local Boers did not object to Jews farming in their area, but they did object to more of them becoming traders. On 28 January 1930, an article appeared in the *Zoutpansberg Review* under the

heading 'Why Immigrants from Lithuania'. It reported that a gentleman from Lithuania was touring South Africa and he was interviewing Government representatives with a view to purchasing farms and placing "Littish agriculturists". In the Pietersburg area, he was told that: "we have all the Lithuanian traders we require but we can offer a warm welcome to agriculturists from that country on condition that they ARE agriculturists and will be repatriated in the event of them abandoning the land for the mart, store or even the pedlar's pack"

There were many farmers in isolated areas in the Northern Transvaal. Mr HE Benjamin farmed in the Nylstroom region in 1904. Charles Whyte bought several farms in the Settlers area and established a town there. When he died, his daughters put the town up for sale. There were many Jews farming around Potgietersrus. Mr D F Cohen farmed near Potgietersrus. The **Luries** and the **Plauts** farmed near Steilloopbrug, the **Dondes** owned the farm Trefusis and De Hoogedoorns, **Aaron Glasser** had farms near Hammanskraal and Rust de Winter. **William E [Patsy] Cohen** bartered his farm Koedoesvlei near Mara with an African chief.

Barney Herman, besides being president of the Pietersburg Hebrew Congregation for 34 years and mayor of Pietersburg, became chairman of the Farmers' Union and the Agricultural Society and he won several prizes at agricultural shows. **Julius Heimann**, married to **Sarah Norden**, from a well-known Eastern Cape family, owned farms in Haenertsberg in 1890.

Herman Hirschmann, who came from Latvia, owned a farm near Haenertsberg. He also had the farm Zaagkuil in Houtbosdorp. This farm was confiscated by the British in the Second Anglo-Boer War and the family was put in an internment camp at Houtboschdorp.



Syferkuil, Israelsohn family

The **Israelsohn brothers** obtained a government loan to purchase the farms Turfloop, where the University of the North now stands, and Syferkuil. They brought out their family from Riga, Latvia, and they spread out to Groot-Spelonken and Goudplaas. The **Schmahman family** had a farm at Slypsteendrift during the Second Anglo-Boer War. They had to give shelter to both the Boers and the British on their farm at different times.

Willy Halberstadt farmed in Sekukuneland. **Solly Tager** farmed with cattle at Blinkwater and **Victor** and **Marion Miller** (nee Worms) started growing and exported Proteas in Palmietfontein, a farm not far out of Pietersburg. **Jack Klaff** has a farm near Messina.

Morris Wiener arrived in Pietersburg from Germany in 1936 and soon had his own engineering works. He manufactured and fixed machines for the agricultural industry. He developed the Wildebees hammermill that was used to pulverize lucerne for cattle feed.



Lasfontein June 1917



The Hirschmann Kallmeyer family

Sir Lionel Philips bought 14 farms in the Houtbos area in the depressed economic times after the Second Anglo-Boer War 1899. He commuted between his homes in Haenertsberg, Johannesburg, Cape Town and England. Sir Lionel's wife Florence contributed much to the area. On the 25 June 1910 she started a branch of SANU [South African National Union], which promoted the export of South African products and industry as part of a rebuilding process after the Anglo-Boer War. She also tried to promote the furniture trade. Sir Lionel contributed extensively to forestry and the wood industry in the Haenertsberg area, as the Government began promoting the planting of exotic fast-growing varieties of pine and eucalyptus. Sir Lionel purchased five farms at £100 each. They were renamed 'Broederstroom Stud Farm'. The Phillips couple intended breeding polo ponies and municipal mules, but the venture failed due to the unsuitability of the soil. As the soil lacked the calcium necessary for the formation of strong bones in growing animals, the foals died. The idea of a stud farm was abandoned and instead Aberdeen Angus and Shorthorn cattle were raised. Lionel Phillips was knighted by the British King as 'Sir Lionel Phillips Bart of Broederstroom, Northern Transvaal'.



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### **Zebediela and IW Schlesinger**



Entrance to Zebediela Estate



At the Gompies Dam, there is a sign reading 'You are now entering Zebediela, the World's largest citrus estate – a Schlesinger organisation'.

Zebediela was the home of the Amandebele, a tribe that assisted the Transvaal Republic in the war against the Sekukuhne by supplying 400 men, corn and cattle. In 1885 the area was named Zebediela's Location after the diplomatic chief who had earned the name 'Madediela' – 'the one who pacifies' and this in time became Zebediela.

In 1918 the first planting of orange trees took place.

**Isidore William Schlesinger**, one of a large family of Hungarian-Jewish immigrants to America, came from America to South Africa. He founded a chain of insurance and banking companies in the 1920s, as well as the country's first chain of radio stations which he sold to the government, and which became known as the South African Broadcasting Corporation.

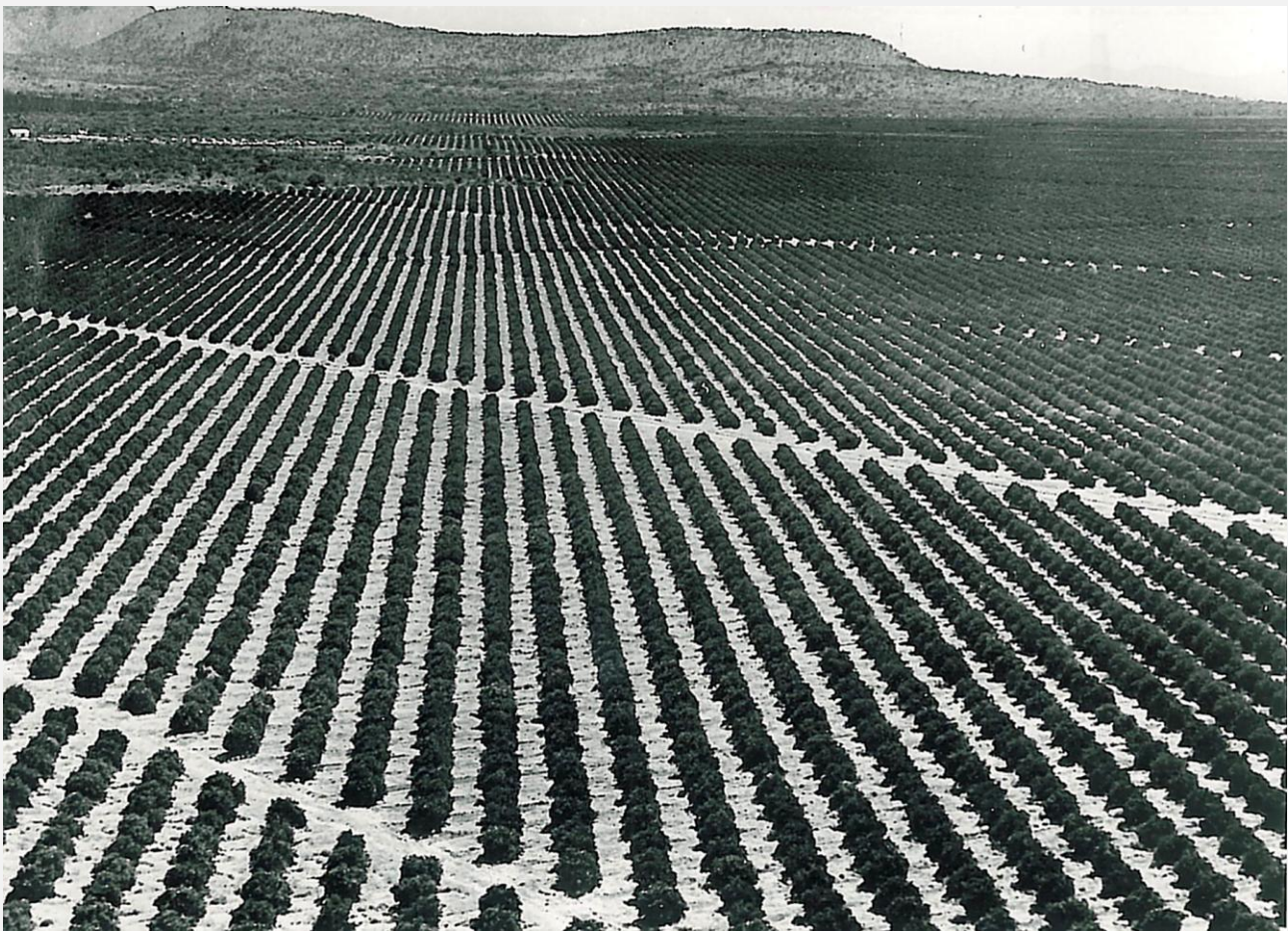
He developed the largest citrus estate in the world at Zebedelia. The Zebedelia Estate produced three million cartons of citrus annually, of which 70% was exported. In the beginning to promote the products of Zebedelia, Schlesinger would give away through his Publix supermarkets a free

pocket of oranges with every five shilling's worth of goods purchased. Schlesinger employed thousands of labourers.



It used to be called "the diamond of agricultural projects," and in 1978 the Readers' Digest, in its Illustrated Guide to Southern Africa, wrote: "Nearly 400 million oranges are harvested each year... At the height of the season, about 15000 cases of oranges leave Zebediela every day. The fruit comes from more than 565000 trees irrigated by enough water to supply a city..."





Zebediela Estates was a magnificent show-piece of a citrus estate. From the air it could be seen to stretch for kilometres displaying the neatly trimmed orchard lines of a well-planned, organised, and adequately managed enterprise. It was reputed to be the largest private citrus estate in the world at one stage. The harvest was worth R30 million a year.

The century-old plot, originally comprising 20 000 hectares of citrus, was handed over to the apartheid government and the ANC government later relinquished ownership to private investors and the community after 1994. Since then, sadly the estate has failed to support its workers. Trees have been neglected and cut for firwood and the packing houses burned to the ground.

Although he had never lived permanently in Zebediela, when he died in 1949 at the age of 78, he requested to be buried on his estate. The Pietersburg *Chevrah Kadisha* performed the last rites, and he was buried on a hill facing his Zebedelia Estate. A few years later Mrs Schlesinger died and was buried next to her husband. Her son John flew to Zebedelia for the funeral. The Pietersburg *Chevrah Kadisha*, including Messrs Smulke Solomon, Saks, Palte and Wally Levy once again traveled to Zebedelia to perform the last rites. The conversation at the cemetery turned to the fact that they had not yet been paid for the late Mr Schlesinger's funeral. Mr Wally Levy was allocated to write to the Estate claiming the princely fee of £150 for both funerals. John Schlesinger received a copy of the letter and paid the account promptly. In a letter from Nan Diamond, the Director-Public Relations of the Schlesinger Organisation stating that Mr Schlesinger was shocked and surprised to hear that the account of £75 for his father's funeral was still outstanding. A cheque for £500 was included, £150 to cover services rendered in relation to the burial of the late Mr and Mrs Schlesinger and £350 as a donation. In 1974, the South African government bought Zebedelia for R8 million. Today the Zebedelia Estate has been abandoned but the Schlesinger graves are still there.



The graves of Isidor Wiliam and Florence Schlesenger, Zebediela Estate, Limpopo.



**Richelle Shem-Tov née Hirschmann** who grew up in Petersburg and holidayed on her grandparents' Houtbos Farm has added some anecdotes:

### **Hirschmann's of Houtbos Farm, Haenetsburg**

My paternal grandparents, Herman and Doris Hirschmann arrived at an early age from Courland, Latvia to South Africa towards the end of the 19th century. They established a farm on a huge tract of land with a river flowing through it, near Haenetsburg in the Zoutpansberg or Pietersburg district. I don't know if they bought or received this farm. They named it Woodbush or Houtbos Farm. Here they brought up five children, my dad Jack being the eldest. These children grew up here very much like the Afrikaans farm children. Although the family moved into the town of Pietersburg (now Polokwane) in about 1912, Herman maintained the farm and a general store on it and the family would spend most holidays and weekends there.

The Hirschmanns were of the earliest Jewish settlers in the district. Another Jewish family from Latvia, the Israelsons (Marion Miller's in-laws family) also arrived in the late 19th century settling on a neighbouring farm, becoming close friends which lasted through generations. On Woodbush farm my grandfather grew a variety of agricultural products but mainly concentrated on breeding and selling cattle and associated products.

After his death in 1922, my father who studied pharmacy in England at that time and later became a pharmacist in Pietersburg bought the farm from his siblings and continued to run it as an agricultural project -still primarily, but not only, cattle. My brothers and I did indeed live and go to school in Pietersburg but spent a huge amount of time on the farm, including a six-week period during the Polio epidemic when the schools were closed. We always considered Woodbush as our second home and my dad kept us closely involved with the farming activity there. The cattle would be brought into Pietersburg from time to time to be sold at the auction market. Other products were brought to the train station to be taken to Johannesburg and Pretoria. This of course I remember from when my father was the owner. In about 1960 my dad sold the farm as it ceased to be a profitable enterprise.

### **The Boer War**

I would briefly relate something of what I learned and of scattered memories of that beautifully situated place. During the Boer War, my grandparents, who though they took no part in combat, did sympathise with the Boers and probably helped them hide or escape. They were incarcerated by the British into one of the infamous concentration camps - this was something never spoken of in our home. They had two small children at that stage - I don't know if the children were with them in the camp or lived with family in Pietersburg.

The farm-house was not burnt down as it was used as a British military base. After the war ended in 1902, the Hirschmanns could return and restore their farming project. During the war period a young man from the black tribes, Malap was his name, took care of the cattle. He took them away from the farm, hid them somewhere in the forests and, to my grandfather's eternal gratitude, saved them and the Hirschmann livelihood.

Apparently at some stage during the war, the English captured Malap and whipped him, but he never gave away the hiding place of the livestock. I remember Malap as a wizened old man, still living on what was then my father's farm. Herman had left instructions to always ensure that Malap could stay on the farm and be well provided for.

I also remember picking peas in the fields, bathing in water from the river, going to the cattle kraal in the early morning, using candles for lights, sliding down huge rocks in the riverbed, climbing mountains, eating mealie-pap with the farm labourers and so much more....

Richelle Shem Tov, (née Hirschmann) Israel, October 2025

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Earmark Tuesdays in November (4,11,18 and 25) for our CHOL autumn seminars. It you would like to contribute your story to the seminars or to our list of agricultural achievers, we will be pleased to hear from you.

Tell your friends that to join our mailing list, they can write to info@chol.website.

We now have a Facebook group and we invite you to join us to have your say at

[CHOL Facebook group](#)

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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](http://www.chol.website) contact [info@chol.website](mailto:info@chol.website).

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