

# CHOL – Community History On-Line

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

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Community History On-Line

Newsletter #5

May 2024

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## Set in Stone

### Time Capsule inspires Jo Turpin's Art Exhibition at SAJM

In February 2022, the foundation stone of the **Rustenburg Hebrew Congregation's Synagogue** in the North West Province was removed – the building was finally to be sold. There had not been an active worshipping congregation in over twenty years. After removing the stone, a time capsule was found. Dated 1924, the bottle contained documents citing the history of the community.

The Synagogue had been founded by the artist Joe Turpin's great grandfather, Philip Wulfohn and his brothers, immigrants from Zhager in Lithuania. At that time, their community was fragile, and they did not know what would happen to them or their community in the future. The capsule was evidence of its existence.

Inside the bottle, which was carefully opened, were the names of the members of shul committee at the time of the opening, as well as the 'order of service' at the laying of the foundation stone. Joe found many with the surname Wulfohn. This was the Synagogue that his grandparents and then his mother had attended when she was growing up.

Joe's artworks deal with his Jewish identity and history, some of it site specific, in South Africa. He feels that during a climate of growing global antisemitism, art has the potential to make people aware of antisemitism's danger. This is critical in a diasporic Jewish community of dwindling numbers, such as the current reality in South Africa. The use of artworks as an educational and conceptual tool holds the potential to promote greater tolerance, understanding, and respect. Let us hope so.

The exhibition opened on 16 May and will run to 30 June at the South African Jewish Museum (SAJM) in Cape Town. Read more about the artists and his work here: Thank you to Gavin Morris, Director of the South African Jewish Museum for bringing this exhibition to our notice. See more here: <https://www.sajewishmuseum.co.za/ex-joeturpin>

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## New additions to the CHOL website

### *From Magachan to Merced and My Dear Papa - Letters from an African Farm*

CHOL is honoured to upload two booklets faithfully recording in words and pictures the story of two families who arrived in South Africa from Eastern Europe at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both families settled flourished and farmed extensively in the Transvaal. They worked hard, their children and grandchildren studied hard and within less than 100 years they had almost all left South Africa – and their Jewish communities in Springs and Pietersburg are no longer in existence.

*From Magachan to Merced* written by **Leiz Isakow**, born on the farm, Rietkol, in 1939) follows



the fortunes of the Isakow family from Magachan shtetl in Lithuania to Merced agricultural area in California via their sojourn in South Africa. Leiz's father, Isaac Isakow, started farming on the Farm Rietkol northeast of Springs in the Delmas area. He and his brother-in-law Tom, produced top-quality potatoes, beans, pumpkins and corn working with oxen. In the years of the Second World War, farmers did well as troopships had to be supplied with fresh food in

South Africa. After his father passed away early, Leiz's mother and older brother took over the farming. As soon as he finished school in 1957, Leiz joined them becoming a partner in the farming enterprises at an early age. He describes the innovations they made in using their land

and creating and building machines for managing their crops. They later focused on livestock. They imported pedigree bulls and reared prizewinning cattle.

Leiz and wife Hermione's four sons all did brilliantly at school – Springs, Benoni and King David Johannesburg. Two became significant doctors in America, one a vet in Canada and one went into agriculture in California. Pictured are Leiz and his wife Hermione who joined this son in agriculture in California. Read Leiz's story here [From Maqachan to Merced](#)

***My Dear Papa – letters from an African farm***, follow the fortunes of the Hirschmann family from Courland to Cape Town thence to the farm *Woodbush (Houtbos)* to the northeast of Pietersburg.



In this moving 123 page 'memoir' of her own family **Richelle-Shem Tov** (born in Pietersburg, also in 1939) has cleverly constructed in her mind the voices of her family as they described their travels, travails and triumphs in moving from Talsen in Courland to settle in the northern Transvaal to farm in the Pietersburg area. Richelle says: 'In writing this story I set off on an incredible writing journey – an adventure of fiction married with fact. I re-lived almost every detail in my thoughts, only some of which have gone down on paper. I found myself in another world and another time. As I wrote I saw my work taking on a life of its own. I was led from year to year and from place to place. I discovered in my wanderings and searching through history and geography ever new vistas of lives and a way of life, long gone. I learnt of East European Jewry, of Courland; of immigrants who came to a primitive, undeveloped African world to build new lives; people who parted from their parents and family – often never to see them again. I learnt about the South Africa where I grew up; about the Second Anglo-Boer War, with all its horrors and into which my grandparents were trapped; how they coped and created a home for us, their children and grandchildren. I felt as if I was bringing these people, some of whom I never knew, back to life. Hard Copies of this book are available from Amazon. You can also read it here on the CHOL website: [My Dear Papa – Letters from a Farm in Africa](#).

Both these families are great examples of the Litvak families, making journeys from Lithuania and Latvia to South Africa at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their children and grandchildren are making immense contributions to science, agriculture, medicine the arts and life in general – in South Africa as well as North America, Israel the UK, and Australia wherever they have re-migrated and settled. (I don't think that South Africa could ever have contained all the extraordinary talent that grew out of this community).

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## Interconnections

### Roodepoort /Maraisburg connections

There have been many intertwined stories connecting CHOL followers. **Robert Schneider** in Sydney, Australia subscribed to the CHOL email news and noticed that **Geoffrey Boner** (in Israel) was developing a site for Roodepoort. He wrote to Geoff:

'My late father, **Max Schneider**, his parents **Lewis and Gertie Schneider** and siblings lived in Maraisburg, which is part of the Roodepoort Municipality, between 1900 and 1950. Some time ago, I wrote a piece on Maraisburg. I have revised it and attach it for your information. I will be delighted if my article could be shared with others who may be interested. This article is now on the Memoirs page <https://chol.website/memoirs.htm> look for 'Maraisburg Recollections'. (It is also linked from the people page of the [Roodepoort](#) site.

It turns out that **Geoff Boner** was at Wits Medical School with Robert Schneider's relative, **Aubrey Milunsky** who grew up in nearby Florida. Robert was able to read the biosketches of both **Geoff Boner** who was from Roodepoort who became Associate Professor of Nephrology at Tel Aviv University and **Aubrey Milunsky** from Florida who became a renowned professor of paediatrics and of human genetics at Boston University, on the [Who's Who of the Wits graduating class of 1960](#). This graduating class of 1960 and its website was part of the CHOL presentation no 6 which you can look at here: [Community](#). Most pleasingly Robert (right) visited Israel last month from Sydney, and met with Geoff (left) in Hofit near Netanya.



## Ceres connections

**Another Schneider, Eloise** (née Loon) who grew up in Cape Town and today lives in Oregon (possibly unrelated to Robert Schneider above – but related to our Gail Loon Lustig) wrote to Gail. She had heard that there had been a recent CHOL Zoom presentation about the community of Ceres and was really keen to see the recording as they had a strong family connection with Ceres. (You can see the recording of this presentation on this link: [Community](#).)

Eloise's late husband Norman Schneider's grandfather was **Rev Hirshel Natas**, who had been the minister of the Ceres community for 26 years, from 1927 until 1953. He had chosen to serve in Ceres because it was close to the special school in Worcester for hearing impaired children. Rev Natas's daughter Sarah (Norman's mother) was so afflicted. Jos Kahn, the last man standing in the Jewish Community of Ceres, sent us the letter written to him by Rev Natas's son Alec Natas (Sarah's brother) giving more details of the family history. Eloise then sent this picture of her late husband Norman Schneider, taken with 'Uncle Alec during a visit to Cape Town a few years back. Alec at that time was 103!!! Alec's letter has been posted on the CHOL website for Ceres – on the 'people' page with the entry for Rev Natas <https://chol.website/communities/ceres/people.htm>. Eloise was very excited to discover the [Ceres](#) site. She is only sad that Norman was not able to see it too!



And as a further connection, Eloise's daughter **Jodi** – Rev Natas's great-granddaughter, read her moving story on the last '**Share Your Stories**' session, lamenting the death of her father Norman.

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## Share Your Stories – and listen again.



Over the last few months, our *Share Your Stories* pages have received several entries, the last four, very recently. The pieces share opinions, events, personal tastes, and experiences from the past. I enjoyed **Harry Friedland's** essay about his 'reading chair'; **Lynette Karp's** account of the current events in Israel; **Beulah Gross's** fetish for Mills & Boon novels (Beulah has submitted 20 stories so far – including one on how she began writing!) and **Linda Frysh's** story of visiting Langa in Cape Town on a trip to the city years ago. Read them here with the other 135 wonderful original stories here: <https://chol.website/stories.htm> (If you want to hear the stories read by the authors, you can click the date links on the last column.)

There have been fabulous suggestions for reading. Steph Berry recommended I should read Maya Arad's trilogy. Each story is a slice of life of an Israeli woman whose reality was altered by immigration to the United States. I read the first of Arad's three books, *The Hebrew Teacher*, which has been translated into English. I couldn't put down!

I invite you to send me your tales – the muse sometimes hits at odd hours and then all you need is to open 'Word', make sure there's a cup of your favourite drink close by and voila, you might be really pleased with what comes up! Send them to me at [gail@chol.website](mailto:gail@chol.website)

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Please keep us informed of your own 'Community History On-Line' activities and interests.

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**CHOL Newsletter no 5** compiled by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London May 2024, comes to you with every good wish for calm and peace in a troubled world.

Checkout the CHOL website: [www.chol.website](http://www.chol.website) which now has on it:

- 47 communities
  - 38 Memoirs
  - 139 original stories
  - 29 Videos of presentations
- also resources and journal articles etc

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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).



**SAJM**  
South African Jewish Museum