

Jewish life in Cape Town in the 1930's and 1940's by Philip Lanzkowsky

My childhood in Cape Town, during the late 1930's and 1940's, replicated to some extent, life in the *shtetlach* of Eastern Europe.

I was born to a "mixed marriage," so to speak. My father came from a small *shtetl*, Secemin in Western Poland just north of Krakow and south of Chenstechova. My mother came from the East End of London. My father left his home in 1922 at the age of 18 to come to South Africa and worked for his uncle who was the only Jewish baker in Cape Town. He left behind his entire family and extended family whom he never saw again.

My father travelled steerage class to Cape Town via Danzig and from there to Southampton, England. Since he kept Kosher, he brought with him food for the six-week journey to Cape Town. As he often said, he brought with him a small case which contained all his worldly possessions - a pair of *tefillin* and a *siddur*.

Upon his arrival in Cape Town, he lived with his uncle. Their daughter came into his room one morning and saw that he had put on *tefillin* and ran out, terrified to tell her father that the "greener", which was what immigrants were called, was crazy and wearing horns on his head. His job in the bakery was to deliver the bread by horse and cart, including on Shabbat. Working on Shabbat was an anathema to him. So, shortly after his arrival in Cape Town he went to the Rabbi to advise him on how he could emigrate to Palestine. He thought he could observe Shabbat and live a more Jewish life in Palestine than he thought was possible in Cape Town. The Rabbi persuaded him to stay in South Africa.

My mother came to Cape Town in 1902 with five of her nine siblings from the East End of London. Her family, who were religious, emigrated from Lodz, Poland to London in the late 1800's. My mother and her family were very British having been brought up in London. I was born in 1932 and during my formative years I was nurtured by the strong religious influence of my father coupled with British sartorial and culinary traditions instilled in me by my mother..

At a very young age I remember my parents' discussions and concerns about what was going on in Europe during World War II. Money was sent by my father to his family in Poland and was returned in September 1939 from the Red Cross labeled "undeliverable because the addressee was in enemy territory". Apart from the news from a table-top radio, and the newspaper, little was known of the actual conditions and horrendous suffering of Eastern European Jewry during those years. They had no concept of what was actually going on in war-torn Poland towards the end of 1939. Most houses had maps of Europe with pins, marking the advancing German army.

There was little evidence in Cape Town of the war apart from minor food rationing, windows with blackout shades, and cars with blackened headlights. There were practice drills at school in the unlikely event of being bombed and an auxiliary civil defense group who were trained in First Aid and how to extinguish fires using very primitive equipment. The only other signs of the war was the presence of men in army uniform and the occasional army truck in the streets of Cape Town.

Many of my cousins voluntarily joined the South African army and fought against the Italian and German forces in North Africa. It was quite common to see men in military uniform in Shul. Warships with troops from Australia stopped in Cape Town en route to the war raging in Europe. Many of these soldiers were Jewish and were entertained by the Jewish community in Cape Town, especially on Shabbat and the Jewish holidays. The experience and training received by the servicemen in the South African and British armies played an important role in the War of Independence in Israel in 1948. My female cousins joined the army in noncombatant roles e.g secretarial work and lorry drivers. It is remarkable that 10% of the entire Jewish population (roughly 10,000 men and women) understood their patriotic duty and voluntarily joined the Union Defence Force.

Seared in my memory was the terrible day when France fell to the advancing German army in 1940 and the desperate feeling that Germany was winning the war and that there was no hope. I remember a prayer service at the Great synagogue in Cape Town when the Chief Rabbi Professor Israel Abrahams gave a stirring sermon and buglers played 'Taps' during the service, reserved usually for memorial services and military funerals.

The immigrants to South Africa during the inter-war years brought with them life from the “alter heim”. Growing up, I lived in ‘shtetel Cape Town’ at the tip of Africa. There were similar *shtetlach* in cities with large Jewish populations. All of these *shtetlach* had the same synagogue services and public facilities similar to the atmosphere of vibrant orthodox Jewish life in Eastern Europe . The common language spoken was Yiddish. As in Europe, these Jews lived in a secluded community not integrating into the larger secular non-Jewish community.

What did the *shtetl* look like in the far-flung geographic location at the tip of Africa almost a century ago?

The Jews in Cape Town all lived in the same area about half a square mile consisting of a handful of streets . There were three large shuls - the Garden Shul, the Schoonder Street Shul (which replaced the Roeland street shul), the Vredehoek Shul (which replaced the Constitution Street shul) and a small *shtiebel* in Maynard street called the Ponevese shul (which replaced their shul in lower Buitenkant street). The building of the shuls over a period of 50 years in different locations coincided with the migration of the Jews to more affluent areas. The area also had a large Hebrew school (a two-story brick building with about 10 classrooms and a large auditorium used as a shul on Shabbat) referred to as cheder, a Jewish orphanage, a hostel for Jewish children from the country communities, an old aged home, a mikveh (located in the municipal swimming pool), a Jewish cemetery not in the *shtetl* but in Maitland and a matzah factory. There was also a Jewish Center, known as the Zionist Hall, where various celebrations took place such as weddings, bar mitzvahs, communal meetings and lectures by prominent speakers. It was here that the Gitlin Library, since relocated to the Garden Shul Campus, was housed. All of these facilities were in close proximity to one another. In addition, there was a large Jewish book shop, Beinkinstadt selling Hebrew and Jewish texts, and a variety of religious items for the home and shul. They had a special adjacent warehouse for Passover goods.

The *shtetl* also had a Beth Din consisting of three Rabbis and a head of the Beth Din (Av Beth Din) who dealt with civil disputes, usually on financial matters, amongst members of the *shtetl*. They generally preferred to go to the Beth Din rather than to the civil courts. There was also a “governing board” of the community, The Cape Jewish Board of Deputies. which, inter alia, represented the Jews to the wider South African community.

I attended an all-boys secular school in Cape Town from 9 AM to 3 PM and at 3:20 pm I walked to Cheder, a few blocks away. Cheder classes often lasted until 6 to 7PM. We learned Chumash (Ivrit B'Ivrit-Biblical Hebrew translated into modern Hebrew and then into English) and Jewish history. We had special classes with a specific curriculum in preparation for the bar mitzvah. There was an examination based on the curriculum before we could celebrate our bar mitzvah. We learned Hebrew grammar, poetry and sections of the Bible and Prophets in preparation for Hebrew, as an official academic subject, for admission to university. Three languages were required for admission to university. English and Afrikaans, which were the official languages in South Africa and a third language was required. Latin, French, German or Hebrew were accepted by the secular educational authorities in South Africa. It was quite remarkable that Hebrew was accepted as one of the official languages for the matriculation examination and admission to university. As part of our Hebraic education at cheder we attended Shabbat services on Friday night and Saturday morning, conducted by the students under the watchful eye of our teachers. As it happens, my father fed me a daily diet of quotations from the *Tanach* and *Pirkei Avot* (ethics of the fathers). I remember them well, they taught me very important lessons and I quote them frequently to my children and to anybody else who will listen.

I did not enjoy the highly disciplined and secular school SACS, (South African College school) I attended, where caning with six lashes occurred fairly frequently for the slightest infringements. Students who took Hebrew as a subject had a free period during the school day while other students had their language class. On one occasion, we began singing the latest *Palmach* song and unbeknown to us our voices resonated through the school. The principal came into our classroom and with his Scottish brogue said "who are the opera singers here?" That earned each of us a good caning.

The school emphasized sports, particularly rugby and cricket, which I did not enjoy. It also had a very active marksman and cadet program in which I participated. We welcomed Princess Elizabeth (later Queen) when she visited the school on her 21st birthday while on a Royal tour with her parents to South Africa.

Jewish life for children in Cape Town was extremely vibrant. Apart from attendance at cheder and celebrating the Jewish festivals, both in the home and in the shul, there were active Jewish childrens' groups. I was a member of the Jewish Children's League (JCL) before

my bar mitzvah. This group met weekly at Rosecourt in Breda Street and was organized by a Jewish German immigrant. The motto of the group was “ If I forget thee Oh Jerusalem, may my right hand forget it’s cunning (Psalms 137:5)”. One of the psalms recited by the Jews who were exiled in Babylon and yearned to return to their homeland in Israel. The motto which we recited instilled in us our attachment to Jerusalem and the need to establish a national home in the land of Palestine.

I did not experience any verbal abuse as a Jew or any antisemitism when I was growing up in Cape Town.

There was no social contact, and very little commercial contact, of the Jews of the *shtetl* with the wider community. The attorney (Mr.A), the bookkeeper/accountant (Mr.K), the Pharmacist (Mr.H) and the physicians (Dr. Rebecca K and Dr B) were all Jewish.

At the age of 12 I joined Habonim which was a Jewish Scout movement based on the principles of Baden Powell and heavily influenced by the kibbutz movement and by Zionist socialism. The motto of this group was *Chazak V’Ematz* “be strong and of good courage (Joshua 1:6-7)”. The Movement reinforced the principles of Zionism and the yearning for a national home in Palestine at a very young age. I was very active in Habonim and rose in the ranks to troop leader (Rosh Gedud), Head of camp (*Rosh Ha’machaneh*) and ultimately to Assistant Commissioner of Western Province Habonim (*Mishneh Ba’coach*). I learned social and leadership skills in Habonim which have served me well throughout my professional and personal life.

Most of the Jews in Cape Town at the time, were skilled laborers. They were carpenters, barbers, tailors, bakers, watchmakers, dress makers, shopkeepers, printers and traveling salesmen. My grand uncle established the first Jewish bakery in Cape Town, Toker and Lanzkowsky, in the late 1800s and they built a modern bakery in Canterbury Street in 1937 with mechanized equipment. On Fridays, the women in the community would bring their bread to be baked in the ovens since they lacked home ovens. A metal tag was placed in the bread to identify the owner. On a visit to the bakery as a little boy, I vividly recall a baker taking a handful of dough and smearing it on my face, because I was probably making a nuisance of myself. There was a Mr.D who had a small bakery that I loved to visit because they had a cow “Elsie” in their backyard.

There was a group of very educated teachers who came from larger cities of Eastern Europe, to teach Hebrew, became Rabbis, and performed as *mohalim* and *shochtim*. The Jewish community in Cape Town generally employed Jewish laborers, most of whom were immigrants

To best convey daily life in Cape Town a more detailed consideration of some of the characters in this *shtetl* is revealing. The contribution to science, medicine and economics, made by the progeny of this relatively small group of Jews was remarkable.

Back in those days, fish mongers roamed the streets of Cape Town blowing their fish horn, horse drawn wagons selling produce and selling blocks of ice (household refrigerators were uncommon) were daily sites in the streets of Cape Town. Most of these vendors were Jewish. All the shopkeepers were Jewish, catering to the specific needs of the community, particularly for Jewish holidays, such as Pesach and Rosh Hashanah. There was Mr. P who had a horse and cart and sold vegetables door to door. His son became a professor of psychiatry in Australia. There was the shochet whose son became a well-known surgeon. When he was asked about the vocation of his father, he always described his father as a throat surgeon. There was Mr K, a glazer, who walked the streets with a box of glass on his shoulder offering to repair broken windows. Mr.K subsequently began to bake cookies and taygelach and used to walk the beaches of Cape Town selling his baked goods. His son became a psychiatrist in the United States.

There was a Mr. S, a stocky man with a limp who spoke a broken English with a heavy European accent. He was called “*der hinkerdiker* (Yiddish:the cripple)”. He was a master carpenter who worked on ships in the docks with a rough crowd of laborers. He told me one day that when the other carpenters had a problem they would say to each other “let’s call the Jew who will solve the problem”. His sons became highly successful businessmen. There was a Mrs.U, who was deaf “*der Toyber* (Yiddish: the deaf one)” who used a horn, like a shofar, to amplify sound when talking to someone. There was a Mr.S who had a dairy and had a cow or two in his backyard. He provided the community with milk and various cheeses. There was a blind *chazan*,Mr Immerman a remarkable individual who knew the entire prayers, including the high holiday prayers and the entire Torah by heart. He taught boys for their bar mitzvah and conducted services and read Torah (all by heart) on the high holidays. In keeping with the *shtetl* culture, he was called “*der blinder chazan* (the blind chazan)”. There was also a Mrs. S who ran a very effective fish store together with her daughters and a Mr. L who had a poultry and egg store. They were extremely busy on Thursday in preparation for Shabbat selling chickens and plucking the feathers off the chicken so that they were presentable for sale. The

women of the *shtetl* would purchase their chickens on Thursday for Shabbat only after carefully examining a few chickens before deciding which chicken to purchase. They also sold eggs which were checked with a bright light to see that the egg was not fertilized in which case they would be non-kosher. The matzah factory, Cohen and Bloch, was an interesting attraction for the children of the neighborhood who would lineup at the side door to receive leftover bits of matzah. The sounds and smell of the streets in this shtetl, particularly on Erev Shabbat, remain with me all my life. There was a Mr. F who was a Kosher butcher, whose grandson was a Governor of the bank of England and subsequently was knighted by Queen Elizabeth. He told interesting stories of his experience at the Bank of England and meeting the Queen. One of the bankers leaned over to him one day and asked him whether he came from a banking family. He said to the banker, 'not exactly, since my father was a jeweler and my grandfather, a kosher butcher'. There was a Mr. C, a barber, frequented by the Jews in the *shtetl*. His barbershop was a center to hear local gossip and where political, religious and cultural discussions took place. They would also come there to read the local daily paper while awaiting their haircut. Mr. C became a well-known bridge player and won many tournaments.

When it came to the doctors at the time : There was a famous internist in Cape Town, Dr. Grayce, who was Jewish and who was one of my tutors in medical school. Surprised by his unusual name for a Jew, we did a little research and found that his family name was "Katz". In the Shtetl, Mr. Katz a large man , was referred to as the "grayser katz"(Yiddish:large Mr.Katz) His son, anglicized his name and kept his father's nickname, "Grayce", discarding his family name Katz. Then there was Dr. B, who was our house doctor, was an outstanding clinician and occasionally did anesthesia. He would make house calls and I am not sure whether he even had an office. In his doctor's bag he would literally have a bag of money so that he could provide appropriate change when paid at the end of his house visit.

My father owned a grocery store at 96 Buitenkant Street and most of his customers spoke Yiddish. Our family lived behind the store in a three-roomed house. The store was created by converting the front room into a shop. Since the store was relatively small, our house also served as a storeroom. The passage of our house was lined on both sides with boxes of matzah before the Passover holidays and with round raisin-containing challahs before Rosh Hashanah. One wall of my parents' bedroom had sacks of sugar stacked from the floor to the ceiling. In those days, the toilet and the bathroom of the house were outside in the yard. Since there

was no running hot water, a bath entailed chopping wood in order to feed the burner to heat the bath water. With all the limitations of the house, I always considered myself pretty privileged compared to my friends. I was fortunate in that my mother saw to it that I had age-appropriate toys and activities. I had a Meccano set, collected stamps and had a bicycle. These simple childhood activities set me apart from my friends who had none of these amenities. Another favorite activity of mine was to assist in packing the shelves in the store and making models out of wooden crates in our backyard. I enjoyed participating in the annual stock taking which required the counting of all goods in the store for the purpose of filing income tax. In the absence of television and other distractions, some of these activities were both enjoyable and educational.

My mother who spoke both Yiddish and English was able to assist many of the customers when they needed to speak to doctors or to any authorities. She would make telephone calls on their behalf since they could not speak English and people did not have telephones in their homes. Even though I was very young at the time I remember overhearing conversations amongst the people in the shop about deaths occurring during childbirth. I now realize that they were describing postpartum hemorrhage, pulmonary embolism (women were kept in bed for 7 to 10 days following delivery) and septic abortion (abortions were illegal). Anesthesia in those days was extremely primitive and consisted of open mask chloroform. Since there were virtually no monitoring, other than clinical signs, anesthesia was hazardous. I knew of a number of children who had died during dental anesthesia and during tonsillectomy. Many children died of diseases such as diphtheria, polio and meningitis since this antedated the availability of vaccines and antibiotics.

My father purchased a new brown Chevrolet panel van for £200 in 1939 to replace his original Vauxhall van which needed constant repairs. The Jewish salesman (Mr. Goodwin) came to the house to sell him the van. I remember the discussion about the prudence of making such an investment on the eve of war breaking out in Europe. I accompanied my father in his new van when he made his rounds to deliver groceries to the upper echelon of Jewish society who lived outside the shtetl. I also accompanied him when he bought the groceries from Jewish wholesalers (Walt and Gorfinkel; Rabkin and Hoffman) and when he went to the market to buy produce. I used to love accompanying him during these activities. I especially enjoyed playing with the children of the well-to-do customers while he was either taking orders or

delivering the groceries. These children had more sophisticated toys, such as electric trains and sports equipment.

My parents worked exceedingly hard from early morning till late at night. The profit margin on many items was only one farthing (a quarter of a penny). When the supermarkets (bazaars) opened in Cape Town they were selling groceries cheaper than my father could purchase them from the wholesalers. Nevertheless, there was always enough money for education and for charity.

Almost every Sunday morning the *meshulachim* came to collect money for various charitable institutions, real and imaginary. I was there when they came, and I observed that he never refused anybody who was asking for charity and always contributed to the extent that he was able. He always commented that one does not become poor from giving charity. Some of the very poor immigrants were unable to pay cash for their groceries so my father extended credit to them. They were given a small exercise book to record their purchases and tally what they owed which they paid at the end of the month. In the case of Mrs.S. I clearly remember that every Passover she paid for the groceries that she had purchased the previous year's Passover. The lessons of being kind to others and giving charity, have remained with me all my life.

During my father's working years as a grocer, he never gave up on his desire to be able to keep Shabbat. He yearned for the day that he would be able to do so. In 1948 he had earned enough money (£60/month) to sustain himself without working as a grocer so he sold his store. After a year or two, he entered the building trade and built a number of apartment buildings with partners in Wynberg, Vredehoek, Tamboers Kloof and Greenpoint. He was very successful in these endeavors and subsequently proudly purchased the icon building, Marais Mansions in Sea Point. That was the pinnacle of his entrepreneurial career. With his relatively early retirement, he devoted the rest of his life to enjoying Shabbat and the Jewish holidays. He lived directly opposite the Green and Sea Point shul and acted pro bono as a *chazan* and read the Torah on weekdays. He was a member of the Chevra Lomdei Torah and studied Talmud every week. It took him several years, but he ultimately accomplished his dream of living an orthodox Jewish life in Cape Town.

Sunday afternoons were always very enjoyable since, after *cheder* in the morning, we would pile into my father's van and sit on boxes on our way to the beach at Muizenberg.. My mother

would pack a hamper, consisting of roasted chicken, sour pickles, and rye bread smeared with chicken fat, for lunch at the beach. We had a great time meeting our friends, building castles in the sand and surfing in the rolling waves of the ocean

At that time Jews belonged to one or other of the Orthodox synagogues since Reform Judaism did not exist. The synagogues were packed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I remember many women sobbing and often crying during the Yom Kippur prayers especially during the *u'nesaneh tokef* prayer; smelling salts were passed around to bolster people's strength and to keep them awake. The occasional person fainted. There was no air conditioning since the *chazan* insisted that the windows be closed in case "he caught a cold".

Post War II saw the disintegration of the *shtetl* as people moved to other areas of Cape Town, such as Vredehoek and Oranjezicht and later to Sea Point. In 1943, we moved to Oranjezicht to an apartment owned by my father. Material comforts improved dramatically. We had running hot water and the bathroom and toilet were inside. One of our neighbors was Simcha Koussevitsky, a famous *chazan* who officiated at our wedding.

The descendants of the immigrants in *shtetl* Cape Town achieved remarkable success in commerce, science and medicine. Three were knighted for medicine, science and commerce (Bill Hoffenberg, Aaron Klug, Bradley Fried). There was one Nobel prize winner (Aaron Klug), for his work on crystallography, and numerous professors in various branches of medicine at prestigious universities in England, United States, Israel, and Australia. This is quite remarkable considering that the Jewish population of Cape Town was small. The Jewish population of Cape Town at the time was 20,000. One can only imagine what contributions the 6 million Jews, who perished in the Holocaust, would have made to the world at large.

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Written in 2025

A Word about Me:

I have lived in New York since 1970 with my wife and family. I worked as a pediatric hematologist-oncologist and enjoyed a full and stimulating career in academia, as well as enjoying an important role in the planning and development of a children's hospital in New Hyde Park, New York as well as the Schneider Children's Medical Center in Israel. One of my proud achievements is a textbook on pediatric hematology- oncology, which is in its eighth edition and has been translated into many languages.

This piece was written recently on the 80th anniversary of my bar mitzvah when I was asked to speak about the subject at the local Shul in New York. I have written an extensive memoir (823 pages) with many pictures, but in the main it is a very personal and family-oriented document which I don't think would have great interest to people in general.

A special anecdote I'd like to add is the following: Throughout my high school days it was my intention to enter the Rabbinate and indeed I had won a scholarship to go to Jew's College the training ground for Rabbis in the Commonwealth, affiliated to the University of London. The year was 1948 and my sister had left with a group of ex-Habonim members on a commercial ship from Cape Town to the newly established State of Israel. During the War of Independence she was stationed at Kibbutz Mayan Baruch, in Northern Israel. Since I was her only sibling, I could not leave for London since my parents were alone in Cape Town.

There were no *yeshivot* in SA training Rabbis.

So, at a very late stage in the application process to Medical School, I applied and was fortunately accepted....and that's how I became a doctor!

The rest is history!

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