

## Maurice Antonis 1919-1937

### A Family Tragedy Uncovered, by Gail Loon Lustig

A few months ago, Geraldine Auerbach who lives in London, asked me whether Maurice Antonis was related to me. Geraldine had been researching the Kimberley community for an Online Community History Site she has setup (CHOL) and came across his name while collecting data of those buried in the Jewish Cemetery. She recalled from a story I had written, that my grandmother Celia, had been an Antonis. On the gravestone, it was noted that he had died in Kimberly in 1937, far from his home in Cape Town. He was only seventeen at the time of his untimely death.

I had never heard of Maurice!



Maurice Antonis's tombstone in the Green Street

## **Some background:**

The Antonis side of my family was always a source of pride to my father, Donny. He would tell us endless stories about them. There was his grandfather Max Antonis, officially a hat-maker, but who far more enjoyed seeking rare plants in the veldt or acting in Yiddish plays in Johannesburg than working in a stuffy factory. Then there was his talented mother, my grandmother, Celia Antonis, a remarkable woman who taught us that cooking and baking tasted much better with 'love' as the main ingredient soaked in generous dollops of butter. Her warm babka covered with a sheet of white paper for us to take home, was a treat like no other.

Max had 4 children, my father's uncles and aunt and as far as I knew, a brother Solomon who left Johannesburg to come and live in Cape Town. So, Solomon was my father's great-uncle.

My knowledge of Hebrew came in handy on reading the dedication on the tombstone. Maurice was the son of Solomon, (Shlomo). This meant that Maurice, who died at 17 in 1937, was my dearest grandmother' Celia's younger cousin! And so, yes, a more distant cousin of my father who was born four years later.

From that moment on, it became quite easy. Solomon's children, my grandmother's cousins were more than just names for me. Bette, one of the daughters, was especially close since she was married to Issy, my grandfather's brother, David Loon.

We loved visiting Bette's wool shop in Cape Town. I remember her smile, her friendly energy, her practical knowledge of anything that had to do with wool and patterns and above all, her courage as she stood most of the day, having suffered from Polio as a child. Sunday afternoon visits to Bellville by Issy and Bette were always welcome and passed far too quickly. I had no idea that she had a younger brother who died at the age of 17!

There were six years difference between the two.

Following Geraldine's question, I immediately wrote to Eloise and Martin, two of Bette's children who live in the States, asking more about Maurice.

A few minutes after writing to Eloise her reply back was;

*Maurice was indeed my mother's beloved younger brother. He was the youngest of the Antonis children. The apple of his mother's eye. The second son out of a bunch of daughters. Apparently, he was an excellent swimmer and was at the Vaal River with friends, when they got caught in a very strong undercurrent. He was said to have helped*

*one of the friends who had got into trouble and then couldn't save himself. I think the friends thought he was kidding.*

*My mom's folks were driving up to see him but were stopped by a road block because "a boy had drowned". I never met my maternal grandmother but she was (not surprisingly), never the same again.*

Suddenly, the tragic story of Maurice Antonis, who drowned in the Vaal River became very vivid. His loss must have affected his parents, Solomon and Sophie, his siblings, Celia, Annie, Sarah, Leah and Abraham in a most devastating way. Their youngest brother, just out of school, died in Kimberley in an awful accident, far from home while on a summer holiday.



**Top Row:** Sophie and Solomon Antonis

**Second row:** Bette (insert) Sarah (Reznick), Granny,(Sophie's mother), Celie (Futeran), Annie (Boerbaitz)

**Bottom Row:** Leah (Mallach), Abe and Maurice on extreme right

With Eloise and Martin's encouragement, I decided to put feelers out to Maurice's High School in Cape Town to hear whether they had any record of his attending school and his fate after *Matric*.

Within a week or two, I received a reply:

The headmaster's personal assistant at SACS High School located records of Maurice in their admissions register. *' He is recorded as admission number 6135. His full name was Maurice Bernard Antonis, born on 4 September 1919. He attended SACS from 23 January 1933 (Standard B) until 11 December 1936 (Standard E). His parent/guardian was S. Antonis, a merchant, who lived at 4 Mill Street, Gardens.'*



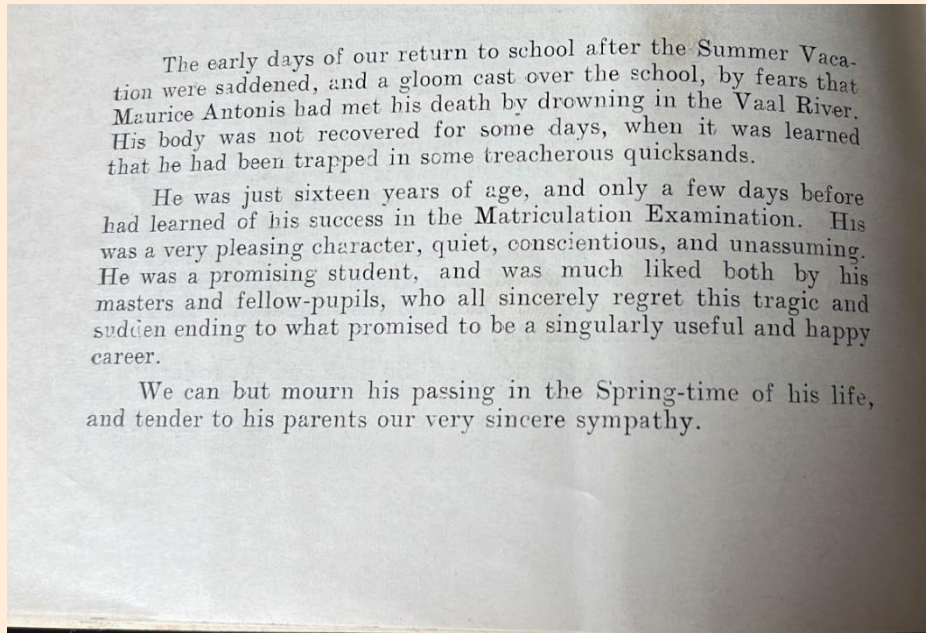
The Antonis Home -4  
Mill Street, The  
Gardens, Cape Town.



On further enquiries regarding, Maurice's death, the staff kindly passed the information on to the History Department of the School. Amazingly enough, students are given the task of researching history of past students during a certain period in the week.

It took a few more weeks to receive the following note from the school:

*The boys searched the archives and found the attached article in the 1937 SACS school magazine. It is a privilege to have been of assistance. We have all been very saddened by what happened to Maurice. Our thoughts are with you and the family.' Shereen Martin*



*The Article that appeared in the SACS High School magazine in the beginning of 1937*

Geraldine was very keen to understand what had brought Maurice to Kimberley. Clearly, he must have been visiting family or friends, but she knew nobody that had been to his school or had close Cape Town connections. I then asked her to check whether there had been any articles in the local newspaper of the times. She asked her friend at the McGregor Museum to see if he could find anything.

In actual fact three articles were found from the Diamond Fields Advertiser from February, 1937 describing the accident. Maurice and a dozen friends were swimming in the river near Harrisdale. At some point they found a log about twelve feet long which they floated on. The river was rapidly rising in flood and was muddy. Once a little way out, one boy jumped off the log and swam back to the shore, leaving his two friends behind. As they moved on the log, Maurice shouted to his friend to jump back to the riverbank which he did. Maurice himself jumped off the log and tried to swim back to the bank, to no avail. Despite his being a good swimmer, he was swept away by the currents and was lost. It took a few days to recover his body.

The article says that 'The victim of the tragedy, the 17-year-old son of Mr and Mrs Antonis of Cape Town was spending a holiday with Mr S Apter and family of 8 Egerton Road and had only arrived in the city a week before'. (note the articles at the end of the story)

From all reports, it appears that Maurice was indeed a brave and remarkable soul. His death was an accident that occurred in an unpredictable and split-second moment while visiting friends in Kimberely. The Apters too had come from Dvinsk, Latvia to South African and the two Solomons, Antonis and Apter, kept up their friendship after starting their new lives. Their children were good friends and together with a crowd of friends, planned on enjoying themselves in the river for the day.

My late father, Donny Loon, Maurice's first cousin once removed, would have, I'm sure told us this story had he known the details. I can imagine him relating it in his special compassionate way. He might even have been very emotional the first time he told it, for he was an admirer of bravery and courage especially when it came to family members.

Instead, some eighty-six years later, following a chance question about Maurice's grave in the Kimberley Cemetery by Geraldine, I have written this account for all the Antonis family wherever they be. May Maurice be remembered together with all his siblings who lost him at far too young an age.

I am not sure whether we'll ever pay our respects by visiting his grave, but I for one, since learning his story, have given him lots of thought these past months and find myself connecting to the lovely person Maurice seems to have been. Martin Loon, his nephew, recently told me that his mother Bette, kept her brother's sports blazer and gave it to Martin to wear to the sports meetings at SACS school, decades later! It fitted him perfectly! What joy Bette must have felt!



MAY HIS DEAR SOUL REST IN PEACE.

*Solomon, Maurice, Unidentified  
ladv, Bette and Sophie*

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**Maurice Antonis - A Family Tragedy Uncovered by Gail Loon Lustig, Written in 2023**

Posted on the CHOL Share Your Stories Site in August 2023

## VAIN EFFORT TO SAVE FRIEND

### GRAPHIC STORY OF VAAL RIVER TRAGEDY

#### Body of Drowned Youth Not Yet Found

In a river which was rapidly rising and badly discoloured, police officers spent the whole of yesterday in an unsuccessful attempt to find the body of young Morris Antonis, who was drowned in the Vaal near Harrisdale on Sunday afternoon.

The police went out to Riverton on Sunday immediately word was received that a fatality had occurred, but after spending some hours in the water were forced to abandon the search.

Yesterday morning, three police constables, who are all strong swimmers and excellent divers, left the city at 7 a.m. to search for the body.

The victim of the tragedy, the 17-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. Antonis, of Capetown, was spending a holiday in Kimberley with Mr. S. Apter and family, of 8, Egerton Road, and had only arrived in the city a week to-day.

#### FLOATED ON LOG.

On Sunday morning a party of about a dozen young people decided to go for a swim at De Hoek. Three of them secured a log of wood about 12 feet long and floated down stream about 10 yards from the bank. One of the three dived off the log and swam to the shore, leaving the remaining two to drift along, gradually getting nearer to the bank.

Left on the log with Morris Antonis was M. Apter, who told a graphic account of the incidents that followed.

"When we were within less than five yards from the shore Morris who was behind me shouted to me to jump and I did so, reaching the bank very easily," he said. "I then looked round and saw that he was in the water, drifting outwards. I jumped into the water and got within 10 feet of him, but soon found myself in difficulties. It was just as much as I could do to get out again. Morris shouted for help, and at first I thought he was playing the fool as he was a good swimmer. I then started shouting as well, but unfortunately the rest of the party did not hear us. He was struggling in the water, and I urged him to try and get back to the log, while I fetched assistance. I ran off to look for the others, but when we all returned there was no sign of him. We searched about four or five miles down the river, but all to no avail."

The deceased was a popular and promising youth, and had just passed his Matriculation examination.



## POLICE ABANDON SEARCH IN VAAL

### Little Hope of Finding Body of Drowned Boy

Kimberley police have abandoned the search for the body of Morris Antonis, the young Capetown boy who was drowned in the Vaal River near Harrisdale on Sunday afternoon. Despite every effort to locate the body on Sunday afternoon and throughout Monday the police were unsuccessful, and they were reluctantly obliged to give up hope.

The police from Barkly West have been instructed to patrol the banks of the Vaal, and local residents are doing their best to assist, but little hope is entertained, as the river is dirty and in flood. The waters were rising throughout Sunday and Monday, and though there was no rise yesterday it was almost impossible to continue with the search.

the King and Queen, Queen Mary and Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose, who travelled home by the Royal train. The Royal party were warmly cheered as they drove away.—Reuter.

## CAPETOWN LAD DROWNED NEAR RIVERTON

### Police Attempting To Recover Body

A drowning fatality took place on the Vaal River at 12.45 o'clock yesterday afternoon when Morris Antonis, believed to be a Capetown youth holidaying with some Kimberley residents, was drowned when bathing at a quiet spot on the river opposite "Harrisdale."

A telephone message from Riverton informed the Kimberley police of the tragedy at 1.45 p.m. The police went out to the spot to attempt to recover the body, but their efforts yesterday were unsuccessful, and they will make another attempt this morning.

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