

Ponyvezh Shul, Gardens Cape Town by Harry Friedland

Yesterday a friend here in Milnerton told me that he was in the habit of doing a weekly trip through to the Ponyvezh shul (we've dropped the "h" and now it's just "Ponevez") to help them to make up an evening minyan. He asked if I'd like to come along. I didn't even know that the old shul still functioned, but out of curiosity I agreed to go along.

The shul is at 45 Maynard Street in a little house in the suburb of Gardens in Cape Town. I've known about it since my childhood, and I've walked and driven past it countless times – but I've never been inside. ⁽¹⁾



To my surprise there were another two Milnertonians (is that a word?) in the car. So we struck out for the shul in quite an atmosphere of camaraderie. We were early so the shul was locked, but other cars started pulling up and eventually someone unlocked the place and we trooped in.

Not only did they all know each other but to my surprise I discovered that I knew most of them. We were quite a motley crew, mostly "old boys" from God knows where – let's say the four corners of Cape Town – all very upbeat and happy to see each other – this was more like a club than a minyan!

The first thing that I noticed as I stepped over the threshold was the smell – the musty smell of old books. I love that smell. It is a sign of books that are loved, well-thumbed, over a long time, opened and closed many times.

Unlike the prayer books in a modern shul, which are usually identical and from the same print edition, neatly arranged on bookshelves in perfect rows so sharply that you can cut a line along the shelf with a knife, these books were scattered all over in the pews, as if their users had suddenly stood up in the middle of a service and walked out – perhaps disturbed by Cossacks in a pogrom or something!

The books are of a wide variety of print editions and I suspect that aside from the prayers inside, each book has a story: little books with small, faded print on paper as thick as blotting paper – cheap books speaking of harder times and far away places – I always go to the first few pages to look for the place and date of printing. Many

seemed to have been printed in Germany. The earliest date I could find was a print from the 1800's. So this book here, for example, was tucked into someone's suitcase and carried across the ocean, perhaps it was taken out and psalms were read from it during the voyage, perhaps it only surfaced after landing in Cape Town? Who knows? There was no sign of ownership anywhere.

One, from around the time of the Boer War, had copious, almost illegible notes crammed into the blank spaces.

And the modern ones were there too – but the evidence of regular use were on those as well. So this wasn't just a museum: this was a working, living shul. You have no idea how much that thought comforted me: to know that the faith lived, that it breathed, that prayers, psalms, Torah, Talmud and the spirit of Jewish debate actually lived and inhabited this little place, that this wasn't just another "ghost" shul. Wonderful!

You need a minimum of ten men over the age of thirteen to conduct a proper service but it so often happens, even in much bigger shuls, that you just don't get that number, and then you have to be satisfied with a much-truncated version of the service.

I thought I was there to make up the required ten (ten doesn't always happen) – but when I looked around there were twenty-four of us: twenty-four rag-tag souls from different communities, mostly old men, stooped, bespectacled – but all with one thing in common: they knew their religion, knew the technicalities of it. Some wearing coats, some in jerseys, some with scuffed shoes, many with caps of various styles – all with that characteristic Jewish sense of humour, all slightly off-beat characters. The cheerfulness and the camaraderie were amazing.

We did *Minchah*, the afternoon service, and took a break. Hiersh Idesis went to stand before the Ark and gave an exposition on the weekly portion of the Torah which would be read on coming Saturday morning. He clearly knew what he was doing.

But it wasn't over yet: to my surprise and delight everyone retired to the back of the shul, someone produced glasses and a bottle of whiskey and some packets of chips and a "lekker gesels"⁽²⁾ ensued

And then back to our seats, and we completed the evening service, and locked up the building, and went home.

And I was mindful of something else: this little Shul has recently fulfilled its TRUE mission. What is a "shul" after all? The German/Yiddish word "shul" refers to what we would call "school": and the explanation is that such a building in a small village in the frozen wastes of Northern Europe would serve dual purposes due to the paucity of funds for specialized structures. It was a multi-purpose building that was constantly busy, shared by residents great and small. And so, too, in that respect, this building now fulfills that traditional dual role because it is one of the buildings used by the newly-formed International Jewish School of Cape Town. How perfect is that!?!

Something occurred to me on the drive back to Milnerton: we may have lost the Temple, but we never lost the rhythm of our cycles of worship. In some respects the shul is like a factory: not all the workers go all the time, but it is so ingrained in us that it has become instinctive that we do shifts to make sure that every service is delivered, on time, every day. We do whatever we have to do to see that it happens. And if it doesn't happen in any place, then we understand that our continued existence in that place is at risk. It becomes an existential issue - and we feel it.

There must once have been thousands of little shuls like this across Europe – set up in houses and other buildings and then repurposed as shuls, aside from the famous grand shuls which stood in big cities, beautiful architectural models of which stand in Beit Hatefutsot in Tel Aviv – I wonder how many of them still exist?

It is these humble, far-flung little buildings in remote towns and villages that Jews prayed in – far more consistently than they do today – and dreamed of their once great and glorious temple, dreams reinforced by the detailed descriptions which now themselves form part of our services, together with the telling and retelling of the stories of their heroes and villains, their successes and their failures, their strengths and their weaknesses, who populated that temple and those places in those places and those times. It is in these places that real Judaism lives and thrives.

There was a little Shul much like this in Mossel Bay, the town which both my wife and I came from (except that that one was purpose built, and perhaps there lies another story for another time): I remember how in later years I attended there with Louis

Knopp, my father-in-law, every time we came up from Cape Town. He was the backbone of that Shul, and sometimes made it his personal mission to go round from house to house in his enormous Chev Commander to pick up some of the more reluctant men to make up a minyan. "No" was not an option!

One disastrous Rosh Hashana there was no-one to officiate and I (as the only Herzlia School kid present, and therefore held in high regard and assumed to know EVERYTHING – oy vey!) – I was pushed forward to lead and to do the Torah reading. I did a terrible job. I hope I didn't upset God too much!

When Louis left Mossel Bay they closed the Shul and sold the building and today it belongs to some insurance agent and I don't think there are any Jews – certainly not practicing Jews – left in Mossel Bay.

Perhaps that's why the Ponevez shul struck such a chord in my heart.

Notes

(1) The Jews of Panevezys mostly left Lithuania through the port of Libau. They took ships to England and then transferred to British ships which took them to Cape Town.

They virtually transplanted their community, so it made sense for them to keep living together in the new land. They established their own shul here.

Rabbi Steven Burg of Aish explains that Ponevezh was a great centre of learning in Lithuania, and that this shul was built by refugees from there, not knowing that even as they were building, the Nazis were butchering their families back home.

(2) Pleasant

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Written by Harry Friedland, March 2024

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