

From Shadows to Strength: Rediscovering My Grandfather's Legacy in South Africa

By Daniel Schwab

I never met my grandfather, Ralph (Rudolph) Schwab. For most of my life, I didn't even know his name as he died before I was born, in 1971 from a hit and run car accident on Corlett Drive, Johannesburg. We never talked about him while I was growing up in Johannesburg. I went to a Jewish day school, played football, had an amazing childhood... and somehow, I knew almost nothing about my father's side of the family.

It sounds strange, but I didn't really believe in the Holocaust growing up—not because I was denying it, but because it just didn't *compute*. My world was too safe. Too idyllic. Too shiny and privileged to fathom that just one or two generations earlier, people in my family were being hunted, dispossessed, scattered across the world. How could that be true, when I was playing soccer at Balfour Park, playing golf with my grandfather Lucke Matus¹, or listening to my gran Masie Matus tell me stories in her gentle, warm voice, like everything was normal? My life felt royal, almost. Glenhazel was my little Jewish kingdom. King David Linksfield from nursery to matric, a community built on Jewish pride, Zionism, and being part of something vibrant and good. The cognitive dissonance was too big. So, I tuned it out.

A New Beginning in South Africa

It wasn't until I was well into adulthood, married with children of my own, that I stumbled across the letters in 2008. More than 2,500 of them, stashed in my parents' garage, having never been read for 40 years, letters written by Ralph, the grandfather I never met, the man whose life I knew nothing about. They were typed on thin paper, each carefully preserved with carbon copies, like he knew—somehow—that one day someone would need them.

Suddenly, the fog began to clear. While I was helping my parents move from the home in which I grew up on Watson Road, Glenhazel, I found the stash of letters tied up in brown paper wrapping inside a regular box. Since no one had opened this package for 40 years, it was dusty and could have easily been mistaken as junk. For a few seconds I considered just throwing it into the garbage, but an internal voice told me that this was something important and should be investigated further. I remember the first time I opened the package, it was as if I was being transported back in time. Most of the letters were in German, but I saw the dates and names of people and places. I landed up spending days trying to decipher what those letters said. At some point I started doing research online and found different groups on Facebook and elsewhere who were willing to help with translations. After several years of personal efforts, I

¹ My mother Carol's father, Lucke was a significant personality in my life **Lucke (Louis) Matus: Founder and First Chairman of Highlands Park Football Club**. Following is a brief bio of Lucke Matus (also known as Louis Matus) was a pioneering figure in South African football and is recognized as the founder and first chairman of Highlands Park Football Club, one of the country's most storied professional soccer teams. Matus became a foundation member of Balfour Park in 1935. After concluding his playing career, he transitioned into administration, taking up the role of chairman of the Balfour Park football section from 1937 to 1951. His leadership extended beyond the club, as he also served on the Southern Transvaal Football Association Executive Committee from 1947 to 1959. Matus had a vision for professionalizing the sport in South Africa. In November 1959, he spearheaded the formation of **Highlands Park Football Club** as a professional entity. Matus's initiative marked a significant shift in the local football landscape, as Highlands Park FC quickly became a prominent force in the newly formed National Football League (NFL).

Citations: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highlands_Park_F.C._\(1959\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highlands_Park_F.C._(1959)), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highlands_Park_F.C.
<https://www.highlandspark.co.za/history>, <https://www.scribd.com/document/79633183/Jewish-Football-South-Africa>

received help from the Holocaust Museum in Johannesburg, the Kaplan Kushlik Foundation, Yad Vashem and the South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town culminating in a book, travelling exhibition, documentary short film and a life time of service to the cause of telling my family's story.

It was revealed in the letters that at the age of 25, Ralph arrived in South Africa in 1936, escaping Nazi Germany just before the worst unfolded. He came alone. A young man, terrified, heartbroken, trying to survive. And yet, somehow, he managed not just to survive but to *build*. A new life. A new community. A future.

Ralph integrated fast; working wherever he could such as a Laundromat in Cape Town when he first arrived and then once settled in Johannesburg, he drew on his skills as a builder gained while in a Jewish refugee camp in Holland as he wandered around Europe before arriving in South Africa. Eventually, he built homes and lived in them while building the next one, moving from home to home. Grampa Ralph learned the customs, found his place in the South African Jewish community while at the same time making tremendous efforts to get his parents and brother out of Germany to anywhere possible. Unfortunately, due to governments shutting the door to all Jews trying to leave Germany from 1938², Ralph's family members were prohibited from doing so and as a result, his parents, brother and many other family members were tortured and gassed in the labour and death camps of Poland and Germany.

Left on his own and realizing that he needed to build a life for himself, Ralph married in 1941 and had his first and only child, Norman (my father) in 1942. This significant milestone in his life led to further communal activities. Ralph helped found and lead Johannesburg's first Reform synagogue, served as its chairman, while at the same time, founding a company called Rentokil which became a commercial success.

Community, Faith, and Adaptation

The letters are a masterclass in quiet resilience. Ralph came from an observant Jewish family in Germany—traditional, steeped in ritual. But in Johannesburg, he embraced Reform Judaism. Not because he gave up on tradition, but because that's where he found warmth and inclusion and a chance to rebuild Jewish life with others like him. His faith evolved with his circumstances. It wasn't about dogma. It was about survival, hope, and connection.

The synagogue wasn't just a place to pray—it was a hub of life. It gave him purpose, a sense of continuity, and a way to process his grief and longing for the family he'd left behind. His letters chronicle the formation of an entire post-trauma Jewish community trying to make sense of a broken world.

Overcoming Hardship and Finding Support

Life in South Africa wasn't easy. Not for Ralph. His letters are filled with financial stress, job uncertainty, and an aching homesickness. He lived frugally, sent money back to support others, and put community above comfort.

² The rejection letters from the SA Department of Home Affairs and rejection from the USA are included in the collection of letters.

And yet—there’s a thread of gratitude that runs through everything he wrote. The German Jewish community in South Africa—largely made up of immigrants and refugees like him—was a lifeline. They helped each other find work, spread news from abroad, and offered a shoulder in hard times. It was mutual aid in its purest form. Ralph’s strength was remarkable, but it wasn’t self-contained. He drew on the kindness of others. That part really hit me.

While growing up, I often felt like I didn’t *need* help. I was proud, confident. But the letters reminded me that no one builds a life alone. We all stand on other people’s shoulders.

The Letters: A Lifeline to the Past

One of the most emotional images that has stayed with me is this: according to my father, Norman (Ralph’s only son) every week, Ralph would get dressed in his best clothes and sit down at his typewriter to write letters to his scattered family and friends. He wasn’t trying to impress anyone. He was trying to stay *human*. To hold onto relationships, news, laughter, memories—even as the world tore itself apart. Clearly, he wrote these letters while experiencing tremendous emotional loss and at some point wrote to one of his family members overseas that he was thinking of burning the letters so that his son Norman and other generations would not have to suffer the type of pain he had felt.

He made carbon copies of *every single letter he sent* and kept all the replies, making this collection of personal letters one of the largest of this period. This wasn’t just documentation, it was a sacred act. A refusal to let time and distance be erased was what mattered. I now understand that this wasn’t just about staying in touch; it was about staying *alive* in the emotional sense. I sometimes think: if I hadn’t found those letters, would I *really* know who I am? Despite the tremendous personal nature of these letters, my father and I decided to reveal this story to ensure that Holocaust denial should not take root in our societies and to hopefully avoid any type of antisemitism by showing words can eventually turn into actions with horrific consequences.

Rediscovering My Grandfather—and Myself

Discovering Ralph’s archive changed the trajectory of my life. It didn’t happen all at once. At first, I was just overwhelmed. Then I was intrigued. Then completely consumed spending thousands of hours taking care of and investigating the letters with the aim of revealing the story.

I started translating them. Studying them. Sitting with the grief and hope that lived in every paragraph. I realized how much of *me* comes from a man I never met. His stubborn optimism. His sense of justice. His belief in community and dignity and standing up for what’s right.

And that led me to look more honestly at other relationships in my life. Like my father.

Growing up in Glenhazel, Johannesburg in the 1980’s, we clashed from time to time. He was secular, proudly so, and I rebelled by becoming religious. It wasn’t pretty. I didn’t appreciate his sacrifices, or the pain he carried. But as I became a father myself, something shifted. I saw him with different eyes. I saw a boy who had been bullied for being Jewish in a Marist Brothers Inanda Catholic school in Johannesburg. A boy who had to fight—literally fight—to defend his

identity. A boy who didn't have the guidance he needed (his parents divorced when he was 8 years old and was sent to boarding school), not knowing his grandparents or uncle. He did his best anyway.

I started to see the love in all the things I used to overlook. The way his friends adored him. The loyalty he inspired. The decency he tried to pass down, even if he didn't always know how.

A Safari Adventure with Norman

There were also light and happy moments described in the letters. One of the most vivid glimpses into Ralph's life comes from a 1956 letter describing a safari with Norman. They travelled over 1,200km to Victoria Falls, marvelling at antelopes, giraffes, elephants, and buffalo. Ralph was awestruck by the falls, wider and taller than Niagara. The journey was exhausting but filled with wonder, a testament to Ralph's embrace of his new home and his desire to share its beauty with his son. Despite Ralph being perceived by others as a stoic difficult personality, the love and affection he demonstrated in the letters for his son Norman, his parents Max and Martha and younger brother Hans, showed a completely different, soft and emotional side of Ralph; as if they were two completely different personalities.

Reflections on South Africa and the Restitution Struggle

Ralph's parents, Max and Martha Schwab, followed his journey from afar, their letters filled with hope and pride. Max's 1937 letter wished for Ralph to carry on the family legacy. Martha, before her deportation, entrusted family documents to a friend, perhaps dreaming of reunion. Their tragic deaths — father Max in Oranienburg, mother Martha in Auschwitz and brother Hans in Sobibor and many other family members, were losses Ralph carried with him as he built a new life.

Ralph's tireless pursuit of restitution for his family's confiscated assets, detailed in correspondence with lawyers in Germany, reflects his determination to seek closure. These efforts culminated in 1967–1968, with settlements, yielding small payments despite the tremendous efforts he undertook over a 15-year period. Ralph's frustration with the "paper war" and German bureaucracy is palpable, as he notes the delays were most likely intentional to discourage additional claimants. In one of the letters Ralph opines that although his efforts were painful emotionally and took a significant amount of his time, he did not regret the effort as it was done not out of motivation to get paid. Rather it serves as a symbol that would forever stand as a testimony that he, and we should never forget what was done and how it impacted our family.

Bridges Between Generations

Now, when I speak at exhibitions or community events, or when I talk about my family's story, I'm not just sharing history. I'm building a bridge. A bridge between generations. Between privilege and persecution. Between memory and denial.

One of the most profound experiences has been meeting people with similar histories, descendants of refugees and survivors, in particular the few that I met in Hanau in 2010 who knew my family and interacted with them personally. There is an immediate, unspoken bond

that forms; a sense of recognition and understanding that transcends background or geography. These connections remind me that the legacy of resilience is not just personal, but a collective tapestry woven from countless, intertwined journeys.

If there's one thing I hope people take away, it's this:

One can't truly know who you are until one understands where you come from. And you can't understand where you come from unless you ask, dig, and listen—even to the silences. And one can't understand where you come from if you don't ask, don't dig, listen—even to the silences.

"If we wish to live and to bequeath life to our offspring, if we believe that we are to pave the way to the future, then we must first of all not forget."

Prof. Ben Zion Dinur, Yad Vashem, 1956

Media & Further Reading

 Youtube Channel - [Letters of Loss and Refuge](#)

- BGU Youtube Podcast Video: [Beit Protea Speech by Daniel Schwab \(YouTube\)](#)

 BGU Spotify Podcast: [The Zion Trail: Episode 4 -From Ashes to Hope: A Family Odyssey](#)

[Carte Blanche Holocaust Letters Documentary Part 1](#)

[Carte Blanche Holocaust Letters Documentary Part 2](#)

Exhibition Photos: [Letters of Loss and Refuge Daniel Schwab walk through tour](#)

Press Coverage:

- [South African Jewish Report: "Treasure trove of letters spotlights Jewish life in Nazi Germany"](#)
- [A Cache of Family Letters and the Historiography of the Holocaust: Interpretive Reflections - Shirli Gilbert Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, University College London, London, UK Published online: 20 Nov 2022](#)
- [In the Shadows of the Shoah and Apartheid: Recovering Traces of "Difficult Pasts" of German-Jewish Refugees in South Africa by Steven Robins 19 / June 2021](#)
- [From exile to everyday life with antisemitism](#)
- [Letters of Loss & Refuge](#)
- [An evocative glimpse into Letters of Loss and Refuge September 1, 2017](#)
- [Letters of Loss and Refuge: an exhibition at Sydney's B'nai B'rith Centre March 15, 2019](#)

Critiques & Recommendations:


- [Project MUSE](#)
- *Jewish Literary Journal*: Book Review: From Things Lost Dr Shirli Gilbert
- [Shirli Gilbert, From Things Lost: Forgotten Letters and the Legacy of the Holocaust. Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2017](#)
Gur Alroey American Historical Review

 Podcast: [Spotify Interview](#)

 **Where to Buy / Loan the Book:** Online bookstores [Amazon](#) & Loan from [libraries globally](#) and [ebook](#)

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This article is adapted from "The Forgotten Letters: Surviving the Holocaust in Africa," drawing on the personal correspondence and legacy of my grandfather, Ralph Schwab. It honors the memory of those who rebuilt their lives in South Africa and the enduring strength of our community.

References:

- 1 [University of Southampton, Letters Of Jewish Refugee](#)
- 2 [South African Jewish Report, Treasure trove of letters spotlights Jewish life in Nazi Germany](#)

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A Word about the Writer:

Daniel Schwab is an entrepreneur, innovation specialist, and storyteller dedicated to uncovering his family's forgotten history and Holocaust education. Born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa, and based in Israel since he was 19 years old, Daniel is the founder of Brightmerge, Schwab Advisors and Voltesure Ltd. Daniel explores the intersection of family legacy, technology, and cultural resilience. His work shines a light on some of the untold stories of the Jewish diaspora in South Africa.