

The Jews of South Africa and my Wife's Family by Mark Wade

I was an outsider, of French Mauritian, British colonial and Afrikaner farming stock (with roots that go back to the Dutch and French Huguenot settlers), and born and brought up in Durban, known in my youth the 'last outpost of the British Empire'.

One night at a friend's birthday party - many years ago – I met my future wife, a Sephardi Jew whose father and his family arrived as WWII refugees to southern Africa, from Rhodes Island, Greece, more commonly known as Rodos to the inhabitants. Their roots stretched back to the expulsion during the Spanish Inquisition, and earlier, thousands of years before, were the Jews of North Africa.

Their history and culture are fascinating, albeit marred by tragedies; expulsions, Inquisitions, and the Holocaust.

The South African government during WWII was not kind to them either; they had limited the number of Jewish refugees settling in South Africa to 50 a year, so they were shipped-off to Rhodesia – only to move to South Africa in the 1960s.

It was their history that I began to research, that was followed by the history of the greater Jewish community of South Africa, and ultimately my desire to create a documentary TV series on that subject.

Once I had developed the outline to the series, I spent three years trying to raise the money, a really frustrating exercise, as I was turned down by everyone, until I pitched to Natie Kirsh, and he agreed to fund the series.

My small inspiration suddenly turned into a real project, and the real work started.

I recruited Alan Swerdlow to research and write the script, and he eventually was the on-camera presenter too. We spent five months researching the history of SA Jews – and writing the script. We'd watched Simon Schama's documentary series titled 'The Story of the Jews', and hoped to model our series on his – albeit that his was a worldwide story, and with a big BBC budget – and we bought Milton Shain and Richard Mendelsohn's book 'The Jews of South Africa', the first book of our reference library that eventually ended-up being more than 80 books.

Once the script was completed, and we'd scouted locations, a film crew of seven or eight of us bundled into a mini-bus, and spent weeks on a road trip filming, meeting many interesting people and places along the way, including a 'regte boere Jood' in Oudtshoorn whose family had farmed ostriches for four generations. We did the interview with him in Afrikaans.

The opening sequence was shot at Kommetjie beach outside Cape Town, in freezing cold weather and a howling wind, and will always remain a memorable occasion.

Once we'd filmed all the material, it then took five months to edit – it was a monstrous job; we had hours and hours of footage, all shot out of sequence, and had to be assembled into eight episodes – and tell a compelling story. Fortunately, our editor, Nina-Celeste Oosthuizen, was really talented, and although she had little knowledge of South African Jews and their history, we gave her a crash course, and bolstered her knowledge by feeding her with babka every day.

On completion of the edit, the next challenge was distribution, or licensing, to one of the streaming networks, and that can only be done through an agent. That process took another 12 months, and fortunately, both SABC TV and Amazon Prime picked-up the series.*

It's now back to the drawing board again; I have four other Jewish-themed projects in development, and am on the hunt to find funding ... a thankless and frustrating task.

I married into this amazing community, first doing a Reform conversion, then an Orthodox – it's been such an interesting experience, and so many people have been so supportive (especially my wife and daughter).

** It's now running on Amazon Prime Video, and titled 'Legends & Legacies'. Those outside the continent of Africa will have to watch the series on Vimeo's pay-per-view channel.*

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