

# The Cohen and Bass families in Malmesbury (1915 to 1946)

## Abraham and Leah Cohen

My maternal grandfather Abraham Sagenkahn (Avraham ben Elchanan HaCohen) was born in 1884 in Salantai in the Kovno district Northwestern Lithuania then part of the Russian Federation. He emigrated to South Africa at the age of 17. On arrival, he shortened his surname to Cohen.

In Cape Town, he met and courted my grandmother **Leah Olswang** born in 1890 who had emigrated with her parents from Shkud (now Skuodas). They were married with all due ceremony and many relatives in the old Gardens Synagogue in 1910.



In this picture of **Abraham Cohen** and **Leah Lily Olswang** on the occasion of their wedding in the original Gardens Shul, Cape Town in 1910, Malmesbury men, **Benzion Olswang** is the blonde-haired man second left from the bride and **Abraham Katz** is seated extreme left in the front row.

Abraham and Leah first settled on the farm Elandskop in Heilbron, Free State Province. Their first son Sonny and their daughter **Berthe Cohen** were born there.

Abraham's wife Leah's brother **Benzion Olswang** was a successful cattle dealer based in **Malmesbury**. He begged his sister and her husband and family to join him there, as he was unwell and being a bachelor, needed someone to care for him. So, in 1915, Abraham and Leah moved with their two children to Malmesbury where two further sons, Nathan ('Tony') and Benny were born.

**Benzion Olswang** sadly died the following year, 1916, aged 42 years.

The Cohens remained in Malmesbury where **Abraham Cohen**, became a popular figure in in the town and a respected merchant who also co-owned a flour mill.

## A Tragic Death.

Last Tuesday, the town was shocked at the intimation of Mr A. Cohen's death quite unexpectedly in the early morning. His daughter at 7 o'clock remarked on the fact of her father oversleeping, as he had not risen for his duties as was his custom at an early hour, this did not however cause any apprehension, until Mrs Cohen at 7.30 went to awaken him only to find that his silence was a permanent and lasting sleep. The house physician was immediately sent for, and pronounced life to be extinct, in fact it was believed that he had several hours before died from heart failure.

The tragic circumstances are the more emphasized, for Mr Cohen was of a strong healthy physique, and though he died at the age of 39 years, his relatives and friends who had been familiar with him for many years, could not recall a single instance of his having been confined through indisposition.

Then suddenly, in 1925, ten years after settling there, **Abraham Cohen** sadly died – also at the same age of 42, leaving Leah a young widow with four small children.

She remained in Malmesbury, and the four children went to school and attended cheder in a building alongside the Malmesbury Shul which **Benzion Olswang** had co-funded with **Abraham Katz**.

This was the long article in the local paper describing Abraham's sudden and unexpected death – and his funeral. He was only the third individual to be buried on the farm Rozenberg.

(See his gravestone here [Abraham Cohen Gravestone](#) and on the cemeteries page)

through indisposition,

The previous evening deceased attended a public meeting in the Malmesbury Town Hall, and appeared in particularly merry-mood for as a friend remarked, when Mr Cohen was beside himself with laughter at the banter and amusing antics of some of the speakers. "He is enjoying the time of his life." Generally of a cheerful disposition, no one could have foreseen on Monday evening, that within a comparatively few hours his spirit was to be wafted to the great beyond.

The Funeral which was an exceptionally large one, proceeded to the Synagogue where the Revd M Efron recited in Hebrew an apparently deep and impressive service preliminary to the body being taken to the Cemetery at Rozenburg for interment.

Both in the Mortuary & at the Grave side the Revd. Minister continued the burial rites of the Hebrew community, whilst the elder son of deceased read a portion of the Law.

The whole spectacle was pathetic in the extreme, scarcely was there a sympathiser who had not been overcome, we might almost say, among the Christian as well as the Hebrew sections of the community.

Deceased resided in Malmesbury during the past 10 years, and has been associated in business with his partner - Mr Trevis as General merchants.

Our sympathy is extended to the Widow and her young family of four in their bereavement.

This is one of Berthe Bass's most treasured photographs, of her parents, Abraham and Lily Cohen with two of their four children, herself and brother Benny, taken outside the house in Malmesbury in 1924 or 25, shortly before Abraham sadly and suddenly passed away in 1925.



## Nathan 'Tony' Cohen b.1915

Nathan, though known as 'Tony' to many – but as 'Natie' to his family, (b 1915) grew up in Malmesbury and joined the Natal Mounted Rifles in 1941 with the rank of Trooper.

He escaped a POW camp at Tobruk in 1942 and gave up the chance to become a Corporal so that he could go to Italy. There in July 1944, he was sadly killed in action, near San Giovanni, by a shell exploding beside his armoured car while eating. Three of the four crew were killed. He is buried in the Florence War Cemetery.



## Berthe Cohen

Abraham and Leah's only daughter Berthe born at Elandskop near Heilbron in 1914, is pictured on horseback in Malmesbury circa 1932 – “ 'n regte boerejoodin”

Berthe, as we have seen, had, three brothers, Sonny the eldest who studied medicine and worked in Somerset West for many years; Nathan 'Tony' (who was killed in Italy on active service aged 28) and the youngest Benny, who emigrated to Israel with his wife Felicia and his two sons in 1964.

## Louis Bass

The Bass family came from Lithuania via London, and first settled in District Six. **Louis Bass** who later married **Berthe Cohen** in Malmesbury, grew up in Cape Town and graduated in medicine at the University of Cape Town in 1932. In 1934, he was invited to Malmesbury to take up a locum position in the practice of **Dr Harry Myers** who was an ardent Zionist and planned to spend a year in Palestine. (The Myers and Bass families are still close friends)

As Harry Myers and his wife Dinah had virtually adopted Berthe after her father Abraham had suddenly died, it was only a matter of time before she met the young locum doctor. In December 1936, Berthe Cohen of Malmesbury, and the young doctor, Louis Bass, married in the Malmesbury synagogue. Rev Samuel Kibel, came out from Cape Town to marry them.

Berthe and Louis Bass first set up home in Sterkstroom, in the Eastern Cape, where Louis had taken up the post of district surgeon there just before they got married. They remained there until 1941 when Louis signed up. Berthe moved back to Malmesbury to be with her mother while Louis was in uniform from 1941-1946. After the War in 1947, Leah moved to Cape Town with her daughter **Berthe** and Louis Bass.



**David Bass**, Louis Bass and Berthe's son got in touch, and sent this story and pictures of his Cohen and Bass family. He says of his parent's wedding portrait: 'In fact, nobody took a single picture at the wedding. After spending their wedding night in Cape Town, my parents bought a fresh carnation and trooped off in their wedding finery to a local photographer's studio where this picture was taken.'

David also sent this picture below, he says: In this picture taken 44 years after my parents wedding, at my own wedding in 1980 to Shelley Kibel in Cape Town, there are five people who were also present at my parents wedding in the Malmesbury shul in December 1936



At the back is my father **Louis Bass'** elder brother Harry Bass, and my mother **Berthe Cohen's** younger brother **Benny Cohen**. In front are **Rev Samuel Kibel**, (my wife's grandfather who officiated at both weddings) and my parents **Berthe and Louis Bass**.

Their wedding portrait hangs in the Malmesbury Museum, as does the wedding announcement which featured in the local newspaper. I have many photographs taken in Malmesbury, inherited from my late Mom'. Berthe pictured in later life.

David said: My mother (pictured here in later life) grew up in Malmesbury and knew Julius



Kretzmar very well. I got to meet Julius in Malmesbury when I drove my parents out there for the opening of the Museum in the old Shul building. I still have video footage of the event, and some footage of Julius' speech. It was a scorching hot day and I still remember Julius prefacing his speech with "*Hierdie sonnetjie brand nog warm in Malmesbury*") (this old sun still burns hot in Malmesbury") Incidentally, Benzion Olswang who part-funded the construction of the shul was my mother's uncle. And Rev Efron was still in his prime when I was born and officiated over my Brit Milah.

[See the 'Images' page of the Malmesbury website for this amazing video which included the elegant Berthe with parasol giving some historic background, and taking David on a tour of the house they lived when she was a child, and the cemetery as well] <https://www.chol.website/communities/malmesbury/>

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Story and pictures from David Bass, Cape Town June 2023.  
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