

OUTDSHOORN – THE ‘LITTLE JERUSALEM OF SOUTH AFRICA’ by [Paul Joseph](#) C.P.A-C.A.

It was with great anticipation earlier this year that Juliet and I together with my sister Eileen Meilech set off for a day's visit to Oudtshoorn; home to three generations of our forefathers and many South African Jewish families.

The area around Oudtshoorn is eminently suitable for ostrich farming and therefore it served as the centre of the feather industry and became the greatest ostrich-producing district in the world. The plumes were very fashionable in London, Paris and New York for dresses, hats and boas. The boom lasted from about 1880 until just before World War I (1914). The demise of the industry was related to the invention of the automobile which meant that the huge plumes on hats and dresses could not be accommodated in the closed roof of the automobile.

Prior to 1880 there were almost no Jewish settlers in the area but with the feather boom, hundreds of them came to this inaccessible place to find their fortune. The ostrich industry was the major industry in the area (Little Karoo) and was controlled almost exclusively by Jews who had come mainly from eastern Europe (Lithuania). At its peak there were 600 Jewish families in the Little Karoo and 300 in the town of Oudtshoorn (1).

Safari Ostrich Show Farm

Our first stop was at the show farm just outside Oudtshoorn where we visited the gift shop with its wonderful selection of ostrich leather and other ostrich products. This farm is Jewish owned and belonged (50%) to my late first cousin from the **Fisch family**. It also contains an old ostrich palace homestead called 'Welgeluk'.

CP Nel Museum and Queen Street Synagogue

We then drove into downtown Baron van Reede Street (formerly Queen Street) to visit the museum and then the synagogue. The museum owes its origin to the private collection of colonel Charles Paul Nel, a successful businessman and collector of antiquities. He opened his collection to the public in 1937. The growing collection was transferred to the old Boys' High School building in 1972. This prevented the sandstone building with its prominent clock tower (designed by Charles Bullock and erected in 1906) from being demolished. It was declared a national monument in 1981.

The renovated museum includes a room full of Jewish memorabilia recording the involvement and history of the community in ostrich farming (2) and this we found very interesting. Within the Jewish Gallery we saw the Holy Ark from the demolished St

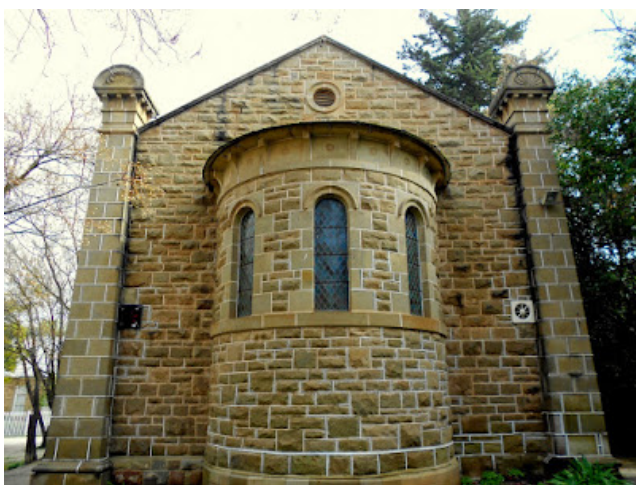


John's Street Synagogue, the '*Greener Shul*' built in 1896. It was modelled on the Ark of the principal Synagogue of Kelm in Lithuania- see below. (The Kelm Synagogue was destroyed by the Nazi German troops in August 1941).

The Holy Ark – CP Nel Museum The Ark is said to be the most beautiful ark of any synagogue in the whole of South Africa (2). The Holy Ark – CP Nel Museum

At the museum we visited the museum resource centre which houses a collection of historical material including documents, photos and publications of Oudtshoorn and the Little Karoo (including many documents about the Jewish community) and these are made available for research purposes only. There we met Hilda Boshoff archivist of the CP Nel Museum who was a major contributor to a recent 156 page publication covering Oudtshoorn during its 150th anniversary celebrations (3).

We next visited the remaining synagogue the '**Queen Street Shul**' (**The Englische Shul**).



The first Jewish congregation was formed by 1884 and in 1888 the Queen Street Synagogue was built. The architect was George Wallis (snr) who also designed the Dutch Reformed Church in High Street. The founder-rabbi of the Synagogue was Rev Myer Woolfson who served the community for over fifty years until his death in 1947. Currently there are about ten Jewish families left in the town, but these families preserve the heritage of our forefathers and the Shul still functions on Shabbat and high holidays.

We entered the Shul in the early afternoon and discovered a wall of memorial plaques including the names of our Aunt and Uncle from the Fisch family. On the outside wall of the adjoining



building, we saw an embedded sign which read 'This wing presented by MS Lipschitz (our maternal Grandfather) for a Hebrew School Sep. 1908'

Montague House

Our final stop on this memorable day was at Montague House also on Baron van Reede Street.



This 'ostrich feather baron's palace' was built in 1908 by our grandfather **Maurice S Lipschitz**. Over this period Maurice was at 37 years of age at the height of his power and owned 33 farms in the Great and Little Karoo. These were situated in the Prince

Albert, Graaf Reinet and Middelburg districts. He cultivated and farmed there with assistance of family members. He had married **Leah Velensky** and they had ten children. His stone palace was named after his oldest son Montague. The architect was named Wiener who had become well known because of his work in the old Transvaal. Besides the sandstone all the other materials were imported.

Maurice's bathroom was sensational. It had the grandest marble bath ever seen in South Africa and required four hundred gallons of water to be filled. At the back of the house there was space for two coaches and eight horses. As Maurice's house was in a central part of the town cultural activities were performed there. Jewish visitors from England and Germany stayed overnight and often music concerts and theatrical events were staged there. A hundred people could be comfortably seated in the ballroom. (3)

In later years the mansion was divided into two with the back part used as medical offices. The front part has become a restaurant for the last five years and is owned by the Esterer family from Salzburg, Austria. When we approached Bernard Esterer the owner. He was only too happy to show us around the interior of the building which is little changed from its beginnings in 1908. It was a thrill for us to enjoy a delicious lunch in the gardens of the house/ restaurant where my mother's family had lived more than one hundred years ago.



This visit to Oudtshoorn was the highlight of our trip to South Africa and we feel greatly blessed to have been able to walk in the footsteps of some very enterprising and industrious people.

References:

1) Jewish Life in the South African Country Communities Volume 111 (2007) Pages 231-232

2)Ibid – Page 233

3) Oudtshoorn – 150 Jaar by Pieter Meyer – Page 106

By Paul Joseph. C.P.A- C.A