

The Centenary of the Oudtshoorn Jewish Community

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A RED-LETTER DAY FOR OUDTSHOORN

Tears, Laughter and “Do you remember?” were the order of the day when 160 “*Emigres*” converged on Oudtshoorn for the centenary of the founding of its Jewish community. A full programme of cultural and religious functions did not deter informal celebratory gatherings that kept talk flowing till the small hours of the morning. One hundred years ago their forefathers had made their way to this little town “*Der Kleiner Yerushalayim Bedorem Afrika*”, where they founded a community rich in Jewish tradition and culture which has survived many decades.

The invitations to this celebration engendered such excitement that plans had to be expanded to cope with the anticipated influx. Then the Mayor and Town Council expressed their desire to pay tribute to the Jewish community in the form of a Civic Banquet where the Afrikaans community volunteered to do all the waiter and waitress duties.

Many dignitaries and their wives travelled to Oudtshoorn for the occasion: Rabbi Professor E. J. Duschinsky, *Av Beth Din*; Mr. Eliyahu Lankin, Ambassador for Israel; Mr. Mervyn Smith, Chairman Board of Deputies; and Mr. Barney Singer of the Western Province Zionist Council. On Thursday afternoon, the Mayoress, Mrs. D. de Jager, opened an exhibition, organised by Mrs. Bex Kroll, of Jewish cultural and historical items and memorabilia in the C.P. Nel Museum of part of the original St. John Street *Shul*. A most moving *Erev Shabbat Shul* service, augmented by the singing of Cantor Michael Cohen and the Claremont *Shul* Choir, was followed by an *Oneg Shabbat* at the adjoining Jewish Club. The star of the evening was Cantor Immerman who had served the community as both Cantor and teacher from 1927 to 1942. Past Barmitzvah pupils one by one stood up and identified themselves. Unhesitatingly Cantor Immerman, born blind, affectionately known as “*Der Blinder Chazan*”, recalled the dates of their barmitzvahs 40 to 60 years ago and the names of their *Maftirs*. To end the evening Madame Mabella Ott Paneto, the famous singer, originally Mabel Lewin of Oudtshoorn, who had flown in from Switzerland for the occasion came forward with a song called “Memories” which she had composed herself.

The *Shabbat* morning *Shul* service was a trip down Memory Lane. *Shacharit* was *davened* by Cantor Immerman, and *Maftir* was done by his ex-pupil Joe Batzofin, who had first sung it 49 years ago as a Barmitzvah boy. The formal banquet for over 500 guests on the Saturday evening was a grand gesture of the mutual respect of Afrikaner and Jew. Kosher, down to the hiring and transport of crockery and cutlery from Cape Town, it began with *Hamotzi*. As mentioned earlier, this function was paid for by the Town Council.

Highlights of the memorable evening included an address by Minister Pik Botha, a response in flawless Afrikaans by Mervyn Smith, a Toast by the Mayor, Councillor A. J. de Jager, and the presentation on behalf of the Municipality of a magnificent *Parochet* (*Aron Kodesh* curtain). Ex Mayor, 94 Year old Mr. Bennie Gillis, proposed a toast to the State President. A special Thanksgiving Service on the Sunday morning in *Shul* was graced by the presence of government and local dignitaries and a sermon by Rabbi Duschinsky, who ended his sermon with the following words: “The characteristic of this unique community may be found in the fact that almost all of its present members are direct descendants of the original Jewish community. Many of the former residents left for other parts of the country, Israel, and the world at large, the remaining families all

continued with the unchanged confluence of their own heritage flowing from the rivers of genuine Lithuanian Jewish traditions and western culture.

The old cemetery, kept in dignity to this day, contains epitaphs of the old founders in classical Hebrew conveying the love for Zion, for the holy language, for all that is eternal in Jewish spiritual life." A sudden shower as people emerged from the *Shul* was taken as a good omen even though it meant a quick switch of plans from a garden party at the Mayor's residence next door, to the inside of the house. What can one say at the end of an unforgettable nostalgic trip down memory lane in the presence of the descendants of the second oldest Jewish Community in South Africa but to wish the Oudtshoorn Jewish Community everything of the best for the future.

In my own humble opinion the real reason which moved the early Jews to Oudtshoorn was that here was a place where they could keep the *Shabbat* in freedom in the manner their fathers had taught them. They came, originally, from Eastern Europe where their lives had been a succession of pogroms. Even in their struggle for survival they were never prepared to compromise their Jewish identity and they maintained their culture, traditions and religion throughout their lives. In conclusion I may mention that that spirit even prevails today in a community numbering seventeen Jewish families.