

Robertson — a Jewish history

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Robertson shul, now a holiday home

By Gwynne Robins

The Cape SAJBD has been closely related to the Robertson Jewish community over the years.

Not only did the Robertson congregation send a delegate to the historic conference in Bloemfontein in 1912 — at which our National South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) was established — but it was Morris Alexander, the founder and chairman of the Cape Council in 1904, whose visit to Robertson in 1912 resulted in the formation of the Robertson Zionist

Association, and whose visit in 1935 — during a time of increased antisemitism and Grey Shirt activity — resulted in the affiliation of the Robertson Hebrew Congregation to the Cape SAJBD.

Among the treasured possessions of the Cape SAJBD on display in the Samson Centre is a gilded silver Torah shield of folk-art design, given to the Cape SAJBD by the Robertson Hebrew Congregation. In its centre, there are Tablets of the Law engraved with the Ten Commandments, flanked by two gilded filigree pillars and two small rampant lions, and above the Tablets, a filigree crown is attached.

Since they first came together as a minyan in 1881, the Robertson Jews have played a role in this fertile valley at the heart of the wine route — known as the valley of wine and roses — whether as ostrich feather buyers and farmers, as bookkeepers, butchers and bioscope proprietors, as tinsmiths, tailors, teachers and traders, as hoteliers and doctors, or as wagon makers, and even as violin makers in the 1980s. They were part and parcel of the Robertson economy.

Philip Buirski and Lewis Rosenzweig served on the Robertson Municipal Council in the 1920s. Abraham Josefowitz, the rabbi's son, became deputy mayor in 1972. Norbert Pinto was the first person to start growing coriander in the 1950s, distributing seeds free to other farmers to persuade them to do the same, and selling his coriander — which was formerly imported — to the Robertson Spice Company.

Sadly, it was also Robertson that provided the first South African and the first Jew to be killed in action in the war against Hitler. This was Sydney Lazarus, who was shot down by the Italians near El Wak and is buried in Nairobi. His parents, Lewis and Ethel Lazarus used to farm in Robertson.

The Robertson Hebrew Congregation was established 115 years ago, in 1895, when the community built the Knesset Israel Synagogue with a Talmud Torah. The Hebrew School later moved to a building the congregation built at 54 Victoria Street as a mikveh. Today, evidence of the mikveh at this property can be seen by a different, higher roof at the back of the building, which is supported by much thicker walls than the rest of it, which was added in the 1960s.

They also bought the pre-existing burial ground that was first used in 1885, to bury Lewis's two infant sons, Leon and David Rosenzweig. The first Jewish wedding in Robertson was solemnised by Rev. Rabinowitz of Cape Town in 1895. At one time, the community supported a Burial Society, a Philanthropic Society, a Junior Zionist Society, a young Israelite Club and Literary Society, and a Zionist Association.

The cemetery was damaged in floods in 2005 and was restored by Rabbi Stuart Serwator and Becky Saacks, one of the town's longest-standing Jewish residents, with headstones laid flat (although there was an incident of vandalism in 2018). From 1996 to

1999, Rabbi Serwator was the last teacher at the Robertson Hebrew School.

Over the years, as the children left to go to the big city to study and settle and their elderly parents followed, the numbers dwindled, until by 1967 they could no longer gather a minyan. In 1975, they entered into a discussion about their future with the Cape SAJBD. Although they still had 10 members two years later, only four were living in Robertson, so they proposed that the Cape SAJBD set up a trust fund from the proceeds of the sale of the congregation's property that would be used to maintain the synagogue, look after the cemetery and go towards the Cape SAJBD's bursary fund for tertiary education of Western Cape Jewish students in financial need.

The shul was sold in 2009 by the Cape SAJBD to a member of the public who turned it into his holiday home but maintained all the original structures. The ladies' gallery became a bedroom, the lounge was in front of the Ark, a fireplace was installed and a picture of Anne Frank mounted along the staircase. As for the contents of the shul, the pews and lectern went to the Hermanus shul, and the Torah shield was donated to the Cape SAJBD.

The following year, Cape SAJBD chairperson Li Boiskin and director David Jacobson visited the Robertson Museum to hand over a JNF tree certificate and a cheque from the proceeds of the sale of the synagogue and rabbi's house.

They were accompanied by Becky Saacks, who lived in Robertson for 57 years, and devoted much of her time to researching the history of the Jews of Robertson and the surrounding areas. Becky also founded, developed and ran the Robertson Museum and its collections since 1972, and was instrumental in the Municipality purchasing Druid's Lodge in 1976 to turn into a museum. It was Becky who suggested that money be given to the Museum in honour of the Jewish community that had been in existence there since the 1880s.

The Cape SAJBD even had a connection to the Museum, which had been officially opened by the Board's Honorary National Life Vice-President Dr Frank Bradlow when it relocated to Druids Lodge in 1985. His connection was as a scholar and authority on the well-known artist, Thomas Bowler, and his consequent association with Bowler's close family, who previously owned the house.

Current Executive Director of the Cape SAJBD, Stuart Diamond has remarked that the Cape SAJBD has an incredibly good relationship with the Robertson community, and a local member of the community cares for the cemetery. "After COVID-19 has come to pass, we will push on with cleaning and maintenance. If you have family buried in the cemetery, please contact us. We will continue to take care of all Jewish cemeteries, funding dependent, in the Cape boundaries as a commitment to our Cape communities."

The Country Communities Subcommittee of the Cape SAJBD looks after the cemeteries of the defunct country communities. For queries, contact stuart@ctjc.co.za.

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