



Ca. 1920
The Josefowitz family

The Josefowitz Story

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(as told by Solly Epstein, including his personal recollections)

My Zeide, Samuel Judel Josefowitz, came to South Africa in 1913 from Kupisik, Lithuania. He left his pregnant wife Rosie Gittel (nee Gaffenowitz) behind in Lithuania. She had a



1918

My Bobbe Gittel with my mother Ettie and my uncle Abe on their arrival in Cape Town after the war

daughter, my mother Hessie (called Ettie), and was pregnant with my uncle Abe (Abraham Solomon Josefowitz) who was born in 1913. The intention was that the family would follow him to South Africa after the baby was born and they were able to travel, but World War I broke out in 1914 and they were unable to travel. They were forced to flee the war, and took refuge in the Ural Mountains of Russia until the war was over. They returned to Lithuania after the war and came to South Africa in 1918. This was the first time Zeide saw his son Abe.

At the same time, his two sisters and his brother emigrated to the USA, settling in the New York/Worcester/Buffalo area. In 1953, Zeide went by mail ship to New York and saw his brother and sisters for the first time in 40 years. One sister was Ella (Raphael) who lived in Worcester, while his brother Joseph (Joe) lived in Buffalo. The other sister was a shadowy figure, and for most of her life she was confined to a sanatorium.

Judel, as Zeide was called, had lost his father at the age of 16 and was forced to work to help support the family. He taught children Hebrew and studied inter alia at the Ponevez Yeshiva. When he came to South Africa in 1913 he lived with his brother-in-law in East London who had a trading store there, while he looked for a position as a minister. He was not only a chazan and teacher, but also became a shochet (ritual slaughterer) and a mohel (circumciser).

His first post was to Zastron, where he boarded with the widow Immerman who had a blind son named Abe, aged about eight. The shul services were held in the house, and he soon became aware of the fact that Abe was able to memorize the services just by listening to them. He set about teaching the young Abe, and was amazed at Abe's memory. He only needed to be told something once and he would remember and be able to repeat it from memory.



1913

Judel with his brother-in-law Mr. Geffen in East London

Zeide was appointed as the minister of the Robertson Hebrew Congregation in 1922, and at that time Abe was already at the school for the blind in nearby Worcester, and they kept in contact. Abe Immerman became known as The Blind Chazan (Der Blinde Chazan) and one of the most well-known, well-loved personalities in the Jewish community. He could

identify Zeide by his footsteps, and would call him "My Rebbe". When Zeide became too old to do the services for Rosh Hashana, Cantor Immerman would come to Robertson to daven.

Zeide's duties included being a shochet, mohel, chazan and cheder teacher. He was also involved in the very active Robertson Young Israel Society, of which my mother Ettie was a committee member. The Society collected money for the Zionist movement and sent parcels of clothing to the Jewish community in Palestine.

My mother Ettie and my uncle Abe attended the Robertson Hoerskool. My mother was a very good student and won the Dux Honorum prize each year. Abe played for the school's First Rugby Team, which included Lulu (Louis) Chait from Bredasdorp. Abe in later years was the club captain of the Robertson Rugby Club, and still later a Boland referee. The problem was that the schools played their matches on Shabbat. Zeide stood for and was elected to the School Board, and persuaded the Board to tell the school to play their rugby matches on Wednesdays instead.



*Tel Aviv 1954
Abe in his Boland referee blazer.
He cut short his overseas tour in
Europe when Bobbe died.*

Zeide and Abe were Freemasons and had many non-Jewish friends. Abe was instrumental in building the Masonic Temple in Hope Street, Robertson. As a young child, I remember seeing the farmers bringing fruit, vegetables and flowers to the shul house before Rosh Hashana. One of the farmers who was a friend of Zeide's was Schalk Rabie. He was a big man with a reddish face and a long white beard. By coincidence, I discovered a year or two ago that his granddaughter Diane Coetzee is the curatrix of the Robertson Museum. She reminded me that her brother was a member of the school's First Rugby Team, which I captained in 1960.

Many congregants lived in the surrounding villages of Swellendam, Ashton, Montagu, Bredasdorp, Bonnievale and even as far as Oudtshoorn. They came to Robertson for the yonteivim and stayed in my parents' Commercial Hotel for the duration of the holidays. The Kahns came from Oudtshoorn, the Idelsons, the Goldblats, the Slanders, the Harry Abramowitzes from Montagu, the Blumbergs from Buffeljachtrivier (Leon, Kada, Norman, Lionel, Patricia, Rodney, and later Leon), and from Swellendam the Strausses and the Buirskis. Zeide's nephew Percy (Pinchas) Rosenthal,



*1984
Ettie Epstein, Martin Epstein,
Cantor Abe Immerman*

While I am at it I will try to remember the men in the shul when I was a boy. Right front in the box was **Meyer Blumberg** (he was the ba'al shachries). My parents bought the Commercial Hotel from Meyer Blumberg and Kalie Zurnamer in 1944.

Next was my dad **Reuby Epstein**, who had married my mom Ettie Josefowitz in 1938. He had emigrated from Aniksht in Lithuania in the early 1930s. Unfortunately his parents (my grandparents Schneuer Zalma and Toibe Chana) and my uncle and aunt (Mordechai and Jonina) and their two-year-old daughter were murdered by Lithuanian Nazis in July 1941 and buried in a mass grave in the forest. My father only received this sad news in 1945 when the war ended.

My brother **Issy and I** sat next to my father.

Others in the shul were **Benzion Schachat**, who was very frum and had a long grey beard. He spoke only Yiddish. He ran a small shop and had two daughters who never married.

Sam Abramowitz who owned the main shop called Bon Marche in Church Street. He had one son, Donald, who ran the shop after he died, and married Lucia. They had two sons, Joseph (a dentist), Rael (a business manager), and a very artistic daughter, Sorrel. Sam also had a daughter Rosalin, whom I never met, and Mary, who was in cheder with me but was about four years older.

Harry Saacks, the family doctor, who was very much respected. He used to travel to farms in the middle of the night to treat patients. He was married to Stella (nee Myers). His son Dennis was my age and in my class in school. We were the only Jews in a school of 2,500 NG Kerk Christians. Dennis had one sister Phyllis, who was mentally challenged (but very sweet and friendly) and was looked after by her carer, Helen, who took excellent care of her.

Lesley Saacks (brother of Harry, who was married to Becky, the famous historian). They had two sons, Mark and Lionel.

Louis Rosenzweig, a bachelor. His father Asher appears in a photo of a cheder class in the 1880s, which is displayed at Beth Hatefutsot in Israel. Louis (the first) built and owned the Commercial Hotel in the late 1880s. Asher owned the Plaza Cinema, and Louis worked at the Nestle factory. Louis was a keen radio ham. In the early days of the silent movies they sent sheet music with the rolls of film, and in the Plaza Cinema, Esther Millin played the piano while the films were screened.

David Sandler (wife Ray) was an attorney in Montagu. He had a wide-ranging practice which consisted mostly of criminal defenses. He was still practicing when I did my articles in Robertson at Muller, Baard and Conradie in 1966 and 1967. David had a son Darryl who later had a service station, Darryl Sandler Motors, at Howard Centre in Pinelands. His daughter Cecily married Bernard Maisel from Maitland and emigrated to Manof in Israel.

Solly Kramer was married to Edie Groll. He was the local tailor and they had one daughter, Sheila, who married Ivan Sofer and moved to Malmesbury.

Meish Lipschitz was a bachelor who owned the local butchery which he eventually sold to Norbert Pinto. In later years, Meish lived in the annex of the hotel and spent his days speculating or playing cards with Asher Rosemzweig and others in the hotel.

Aaron Idelson owned the Montagu Baths hotel which was very popular with Cape Town Jews. It had a hot spring which earlier fed the private enclosed bath tubs, and later the swimming pool as it does today. Aaron's brother was a famous chazan, and Aaron himself had a magnificent voice which he delighted in displaying in shul and elsewhere.

Harry Abramowitz, brother of Sam, had a shop in Bath Street, Montagu, and they lived in a magnificent Victorian house which is still there today. As children, we used to play in the large back garden. As you will read below, his son Ralph, aged about 14, drowned in the river. Their daughter Marge married Manne Sher of Middelpoort. Their son Sir Anthony Sher (1949-2021) was the British stage actor, playwright and author.

Norbert Pinto came to South Africa from Germany after the war. He worked as a blockman for Meish Lipschitz in the butchery which he later bought and renamed N. Pinto Slagter Butchery. This developed into a very big business. He bought a farm where he raised pigs, and was a pioneer in cultivating coriander. He eventually sold his farm and butchery and retired to Sea Point. In the early 1950s they brought out Mrs Pinto's elderly parents from Europe. They lived in a cottage on the banks of the Hoopsrivier in Warren Street. Norbert's daughter Inge obtained an LLB degree and married a doctor Bruk and lived in Cape Town. His son Ralph was the same age and in the same class as my brother Issy. We went to cheder together. Also in the cheder were Sheila Kramer and Mary Abramowiz. Ralph had an electrical business in Sea Point. At a relatively young age he and his wife Judy retired to the Algarve in Portugal, where he revived the dormant Jewish community. They had one son Jose who now lives in Australia.



Ca. 1937

BACK: Ettie, Bobbe, Abe, Zeide
FRONT: Katz cousins from Port Elizabeth

As kids we used to cycle to the Breede River to swim, much to the dismay of our parents. We were told the sad stories of Ralphy Abramowitz (son of Harry and Annie of Montagu) and Isaac Groll (brother of Edie Kramer) who had drowned in the river. My godfather, Isaac Schatz (a speculator), was killed when his car collided with a train at the crossing to the river.

Meyer Blumberg had three children. Louis Blumberg became a renowned surgeon and practiced in Cape Town. Naomi, who was an opera singer, married Dr Sagor and lived in Worcester. She was unfortunately killed in a motor accident on Du Toit's Kloof. I only remember the other daughter Sylvia very vaguely.

Japie Goldberg was a farmer. He lived in a double-story house in Paul Kruger Street. His son Percy became a renowned potato farmer in the Transvaal. They used to tell the joke about Japie that when he braked to stop his car he shouted "Whoah!!" as he used to do when he rode a horse and cart. Japie was the ba'al shachries and ba'al tekiah. When he died, Meyer Blumberg took over these functions. The Goldbergs had their golden wedding celebrations in the Zionist Hall behind the shul house. I remember thinking how old the happy couple were, and now my wife Valerie and I are a few months away from our 60th.

Zeide sometimes had great difficulty getting my brother and me to come to cheder. To my great shame, I remember him coming onto the rugby field and pulling us off to come to cheder.

Boys from the outlying villages used to board with Zeide and Bobbe for some months in order to learn for their bar mitzvahs. Phillip Rabie was in the shul house in 1943 on the night I was born. Also present were the Chait brothers from



1944

Reuby Epstein with Solly (left)
and Issy (right)

Bredasdorp and many others. Phillip was the son of Charlie Rabie of Bonnievale. Phillip is in his late 90s and living in the USA. Charlie also had a daughter Marcia who married Manne Jaffe of Saldanha, and another daughter Julia.

At Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur the Jews from the area flocked to Robertson and stayed in the Commercial Hotel. As kids we had a great time meeting all our friends whom we saw once a year. Zeide conducted all the services and blew the shofar as well. He had a good voice and was very musical. He davened with the niggun he brought from Lithuania. Some of the tunes still pop up in my head from time to time.



My family were fanatical Zionists. Zeide collected money for Palestine throughout his life. As mentioned above, he was the head of the Robertson Young Israel Society which, in 1927, presented him with a silver becher bearing the inscription: "Presented to Rev. and Mrs Josefowitz by the Robertson Young Israel Society in appreciation of their good work – 18.12.1927".



My Bobbe, Rosie Gittel Josefowitz, died in 1954 and is buried in the Robertson Jewish cemetery. Her best friend Rosie Millin died the same week, and they are buried next to each other. My uncle Abe was on an overseas tour in Europe, which he had to cut short. As an 11-year-old boy, I saw my uncle crying bitterly in the entrance to the shul. It is a scene that I will never forget. We were a very close family. My mother took to her bed and it was some years before she recovered. Zeide moved out of the shul house and into our house next to the hotel.

As the years went by, the community dwindled as old people passed away and parents followed their well-educated children to the city. By the mid-1970s we could no longer muster a minyan, and the family went to the Wynberg shul for the chagim. At that time my brother and his wife Joyce (Woolf) were living in Wynberg and I was living in Plumstead. Our minister was the then Reverend Mirvis whose son Errol is now the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. My children, Gordon and Martin, and their cousins Avron, Steven and Leora, attended the childrens' services conducted by Errol and his brother Jonathan.

The family used to go to Muizenberg every summer for the entire month of January. At first they stayed in kosher hotels such as the Rosewood and the Imperial, but later they hired a house for the month. Zeide and Reverend Frank were great friends and used to go down for a swim at 6:00 a.m. in their dressing gowns. Rabbi Weinberg from England was the rabbi at Muizenberg for some years, and became a friend of Zeide's. He and his wife came to Robertson when they needed a break.

While I was still at home before going to university and there was no longer a minyan, Zeide and I used to daven together on Saturday mornings. He taught me the maftir and haftarah for each shabbat. When I left, my sister Chana took my place. Chana later obtained a BA degree at UCT and became an Afrikaans teacher at Yeshiva College in Sandringham in Johannesburg. She later emigrated to Israel and married a torah scribe in Jerusalem, where she still lives. She had five sons and two daughters in 10 years. She is now a great-grandmother at 77. We ask her how many children and grandchildren she has, but she says she is not allowed to count.

In February 1974 my brother and I were practicing as Epstein and Epstein attorneys in Wynberg, and Valerie and I and our two sons were living in Plumstead. My mom and dad and Zeide were on holiday at the Imperial Hotel in Muizenberg. I got a call on the 22nd to tell me that Zeide was ill. I went out to Muizenberg and took him to a local doctor who diagnosed that he had had a heart attack. He arranged for Zeide to be taken to Groote Schuur Hospital, and I followed in my car. Zeide was admitted to the emergency, but there was no doctor to attend to him. I remonstrated with the doctor on duty but was told that they had more urgent younger patients to attend to. Eventually he was admitted to a ward and stayed there overnight. The next morning when I visited him, I was told that he had suffered a heart attack and that given his age, the picture did not look good. He passed away later in the day and was buried in Pinelands. On his grave there is a plaque from the community, thanking him for his 62 years of service. I suspect that it should read 50 years.



*Ca. 1974
Samuel Judel Josefowitz*



Zeide's grave in Pinelands No 1



1922/23

Robertson Young Israel Society Committee

Front row from left to right: {unknown}, Reverend Josefowitz, {unknown}, Rose Sandler ??

Source: SAJM archives



1932 EERSTE RUGBYSPAN

Agter : Lulu Chait; Abie Josefowitz; Johan Nothnagel; Willem Conradie; Dick Preiss; Wynand de Wet; Dirk du Plessis; Hansie Bruwer.
Middel: Hendrik de Wet; Barnie Kloppers; A. P. Malherbe (Hoof); Barnie Schmidt; J. H. Loubser (Afrigter); Bobby Logan; Bertie de Jager.
Voor : Ben Reynecke; Goppies Groenewald.

1932

Lulu Chait and Abe Josefowitz in the back row on the left



EERSTE VOETBALSPAN 1960

Eerste ry : A. Olivier, J. Hamilton (afrigter), S. Epstein, Mnr. G. Slabber (hoof), F. Payne,
Mnr. J. de Wet (afrigter).
Tweede ry : H. Bruwer, H. Grobler, J. Conradie, L. Bruwer, J. Joubert, H. du Toit.
Derde ry : J. van Zyl, C. Wolfaardt, D. Saacks, A. Jacobsz, T. Winterbach, S. Coetzee.

1960

Solly Epstein in the front row, third from the left