

Roodepoort: The Benjas Family

Rolene (Benjas) Noik, Johannesburg 2018

updated and edited 2025

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*Whenever I think of Roodepoort my face lights up and memories come flooding back....*

My grandparents on my dad's side came from Lithuania and my dad, **Harry Benjas**, was born in Lithuania. Before arriving in South Africa as a young man aged between 20 and 30, he had lived in Vilnius and then in what was Palestine, for a while before coming to Roodepoort where he had his aunts: Mrs Tannenbaum, Leba Blumsohn's mother and Mrs Tannenbaum, Dave's mother. He was also related to the Boner family.

I didn't know my maternal grandparents, but my mom Rae Fisher, was born in Johannesburg in 1920 and sadly died on July 17, 1950, aged just 30. I was only a toddler of 16 months old. Dad was a shopkeeper and my late mom was a housewife. When my parents were married, they settled in Roodepoort where dad lived until he died in 1985 at the age of 80.

Roodepoort was a town, which later became a city. But to me it was my home. I was born at the Princess Nursing Home in Johannesburg but lived for most of my first 21 years in Roodepoort, except for a little while, after my mom died, when I lived with my "bobba" in Johannesburg. I was there until I got married to Lionel Noik in 1970 (We now live in Johannesburg and have two children.)

I missed my dad terribly and returned home to 18 Herbert Street, where my very special father (and a nanny) loved and looked after me. They say it takes a village to raise a child. In my case it was a town.

I had my dad's many and close relations. They were the **Tannenbaums**: Dave was his first cousin, who lived a few streets away. (Dave later married Renee and had two children, Brian who is a lawyer in America and Eleanor, who lives in Johannesburg.) **Leba Blumsohn** (nee Tannenbaum,) was another first cousin of my dad's and her family, her husband Aaron, sons David and Maurice and daughter (Cissy) Cecilia. Other friends who were like family include Issie and Rica (Joss) Josselowitz, their son and daughter, Brian and Jennifer; Barney, Lily, Pam and Joel Greenberg; the Pikes: Claude, Mary, Marie and Mary, who married my dad when I was at Teachers' Training College.

## The Jewish Community of Roodepoort

Roodepoort had a fairly big Jewish community and almost all were members of the Roodepoort shul. Names I remember are: **Ackerman, Blumsohn, Greenberg, Herson, Josselowitz** (Joss), **Myerson** (Dave and Miriam whose father Jack **Schlapo** was once the Roodepoort mayor), **Phillips, Tannenbaum, Simon, Spiro, Super, Stoppelman, Josman, Rosowsky, Marcus, Fineberg, Hockman and Klein** families, were among those who lived there.

The shul and Morris Hockman Talmud Torah Hall were already established while I was growing up in Roodepoort. When I was very young, the Rabbi was Orenstein who also taught cheder.

Later Reverend L I Friedman taught me my Batmitzvah and Rabbi Kaye officiated at my marriage to Lionel.



The Roodepoort shul

When I was young I used to go to shul regularly. Every Friday night and Saturday morning. I knew everyone at the shul and they knew me. Reverend Orenstein and his family lived very near us. Other than their daughter, Nechama, I don't remember them too well. They emigrated to Israel when I was still young.

We managed to keep kosher. I think we got our meat from Stoppelman's Butchery in Roodepoort and where Mr and Mrs Kreiness owned a grocery store.

Another memory I have is of the 'man at the shtender'. I don't think I ever knew his name, but my dad was always very kind to him. (Geoff's note: this was a man who had been excommunicated from the congregation for marrying out of the faith and was given a seat outside the main sitting area of the shul).

I remember some of the people although not all of them that clearly. Morris Klein I recall vaguely. I think he his son Herman was a doctor (he was an internationally known orthopaedic surgeon). I also vaguely remember Morrie and Sonia Sewitz who owned Morrie's Outfitters. On the other hand, I remember Greenberg's Outfitters very well as we were very friendly with owners Barney and Lily and their two children, Pamela and Joel. I bought my school uniforms there. Pam and I are close in age and were at primary and high school together.

A very distant memory I have is of Bertha Herson and her husband Meyer. She had a shop near my dad's and I bought my first school jersey from here when I was in Grade 1. It was excellent quality being made of pure wool. Unfortunately, I was allergic to wool and developed such a bad

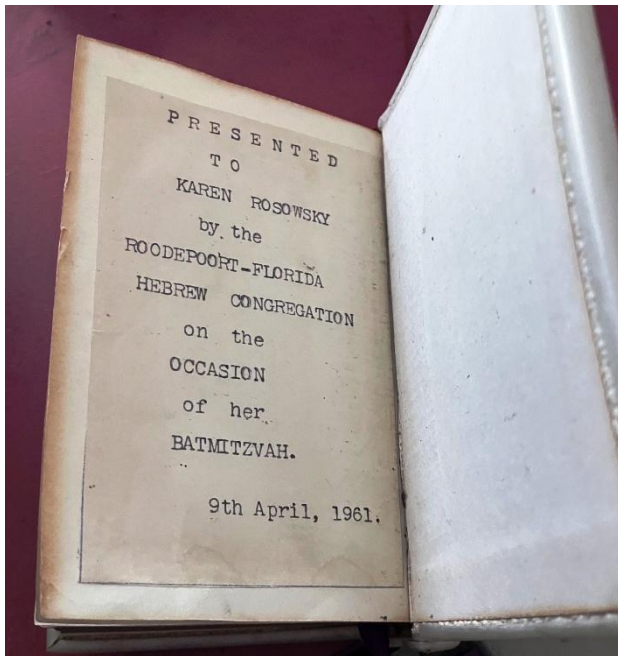
rash that I had to see a doctor who confirmed I was allergic. This memory goes back more than 64 years. Some things really stick in your mind.

### **My Barmitzvah – an historic occasion**

I celebrated the first Batmitzvah in Roodepoort at the shul, together with **Pamela Greenberg** and **Karen Rosowsky**. It was a great occasion and our picture appeared in the Zionist Record and the West Rand Times. It was an historic occasion as the Zionist Record reported:

"This was the first ever Batmitzvah service arranged by the very old Roodepoort-Florida Hebrew Congregation to 'mark the simcha of the three little local girls'. In spite of the rainy weather, almost every Jewish family came to shul to participate in the happy occasion and altogether there were almost 300 people present. The service was conducted by Reverend LI Friedman who also tutored the girls for this great event in their lives. The three Batmitzvah girls carried out their duties exceptionally well and impressed everybody not only with their knowledge but with their deportment. After the service, a reception was held in the Morris Hockman Hall where the girls made charming speeches to their parents and their teacher. A presentation was made by the chairman of the congregation, Mr JG Ackerman to Reverend and Mrs Friedman who are leaving shortly on a three-month visit to Israel where the Reverend will study the latest teaching methods,"

The West Rand Times also reported on the event under the headline, Roodepoort's "first" with a picture of the three girls and Reverend Friedman.



The three girls were each given a prayerbook on the occasion of their batmitzvah – here is a picture of Karen's book and inscription

### **Rev Friedman and Rabbi Kaye**

Reverend Friedman and his wife Jeanie became a very important part of our lives. Rev Friedman taught Pamela (Greenberg), Karen (Rosowsky) and me Rolene (Benjas) our Batmitzvah portions.

The Friedmans were special people. They loved to go to the 'bioscope" and my dad and I often used to give them a lift there and back as they didn't have a car. They eventually moved to Johannesburg due to ill health.

Rabbi and Mrs Kaye and their three children were very important assets to the community. Rabbi Kay officiated at our wedding service which was held in the hall because the shul wasn't big enough. Another great occasion for the community. There are so many wonderful memories that keep coming back now that I've taken the walk down memory lane.

People were generally kind and caring and made the time to be friendly to each other. My dad, who was at one time the shul treasurer, was loved by people of all colours and creeds. His many customers, young and old, who became his friends, called him "Oom Harry". This was evident at his funeral which was held on a Friday at the Roodepoort Jewish Cemetery. Rabbi Kaye was ill so Dave Myerson, chair of the RHFC officiated. I returned there a for a few years to visit the grave, but the cemetery became terribly dilapidated and I didn't go in for safety reasons.

The Roodepoort-Florida Hebrew Congregation (RFHC) organised many communal activities and I went to many of them. Simcha Torah was a big event: flags and chocolates for the children and wonderful eats afterwards in the hall for the whole congregation. I wasn't at the deconsecrating of the shul. It would have broken my heart if I had known about it or been there.

## **My Education**

Just before my sixth birthday I enrolled at Roodepoort Town School. My principal was Dr Abe (Jock Beron), a well-loved and respected man as well as a family friend. Dr Beron taught my dad to read and write English when he came to Roodepoort. Dr Beron believed that good readers should not be kept back and should be able to read above their grade, as long as they understood what they were reading. He was a visionary who left Roodepoort Town School to become headmaster of King David, Linksfield.

I went to Roodepoort Town School from Grade 1 to Standard 5. Then to Florida Park High School and after I matriculated, I went to the Johannesburg College of Education where I graduated as a junior primary school teacher in 1969. I lived at Medhurst residence for two and a half years, coming home most week-ends.

My first job as a teacher after I graduated in 1969 was at Klerksdorp Primary School for a term and then I got a transfer to Roodepoort Town School as Grade 1 teacher because I got engaged to Lionel on my 21st birthday. We got married at the end of year and we lived in Johannesburg. I taught at Roseneath Primary School in Hillbrow for two years until I left to have Sharice who was born on March 13 1973. Our son Ryan was born two years later on March 17 1995.

## **My Family**

I met my husband-to-be Lionel (Noik) just before I graduated. He has lived in Johannesburg all his life. We got married in the Roodepoort shul and Hockman hall on December 15 1970.





The Maurice Hockman communal hall and Talmud Torah (shul on the left)

Lionel and I have two children: Sharice Benjas Noik Belikoff. She lives in Seattle with her husband Cyril and two daughters, Courtney, 17, and Tayla, 15. Our son Ryan lives in Johannesburg. He is an IT journalist and is single.

When I was a young girl and then teenager, shul played a big role in my social life. Now, as adults we (Lionel) do not attend services very regularly. I miss that feeling of belonging I had then. I left Roodepoort when I got married, but for quite a few years afterwards Lionel and I attended shul there, even when our children were small, and until they reached school-going age we all used to attend Rosh Ha Shana and Yom Kippur services in Roodepoort so a lot of the congregation saw us regularly.

(Geoff's note: Rolene and Lionel are residents of Linksfield and have lived in the same house for about 48 years. Harry Benjas, Rolene's father was a descendant of the Boner family, his grandfather being David Boner, who was a brother of my great grandfathers, Shaul and Moshe Boner. She was a closely related to the Tannenbaum family who were also descendants of David Boner. I remember clearly the furniture store of Harry Benjas, as well as Rolene as a young child and the tragic death of her mother. On my first visit to Israel in 1954 I visited the Daichovsky family, the wife Sarah being a sister of Harry Benjas.)

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Story of the Benjas family: collected by Brian Josselowitz from Rolene (Benjas) Noik, Johannesburg 2018

Updated and edited by Geoff Boner, Israel 2024

Illustrated and formatted by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London July 2025
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