History of Rustenburg



View of Rustenburg taken from Hospital Hill in the late 19th Century.

Rustenburg was established on the 10 December 1850 in the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) and the following year in 1851 it became the administrative centre for Afrikaner farmers (Boers) who had settled in the surrounding area.

The Voortrekkers

These farmers were members of the Voortrekkers, having left the Cape Colony during the Great Trek (1835-1846). They belonged to the group under the leadership of Andries Hendrik Potgieter (1792-1852). In 1838 the group left Natal following an ambush by the Zulus at the Battle of Italeni. Potgieter's party settled on the banks of the Mooi River where the town of Potchefstroom was founded.

Each Boer in Potgieter's group received 2 farms, known as 'burgherrecht' farms, which were more or less 2 500 hectares each. These farms extended from Potchefstroom located on the Highveld to beyond Rustenburg which lay in a fertile valley at the foot of the Magaliesberg mountain range. Paul Kruger (1825-1904) who later became President of the ZAR settled on the farm Boekenhoutfontein in the district of Rustenburg. He was friendly with the local Bafokeng tribe. In the early 1800s the Bafokeng and other Tswana communities in the area were conquered in a series of wars by the Matabele, an offshoot of the Zulu Kingdom. Having a common enemy, the Boers and the Bafokeng worked together to defeat the Matabele in the area. The Bafokeng bought land rights from the Boers which Kruger helped facilitate.

In 1858 Rustenburg received official status, following the appointment of a magistrate (landdrost). From mid-June 1858 every resident possessing a stand in the village was compelled to pay £6 pounds per stand in tax. The town was divided into wards and residents were eligible to vote for ward representatives.

Between 1877 to 1881 the town was governed by Great Britain following the annexation of the ZAR to the Crown, by Sir Theophilus Shepstone (1817-1893), Secretary for Native Affairs in Natal. Following the restoration of the ZAR in 1881, economic activities in Rustenburg started to accelerate.

Comfortable dwellings were built and the residents concentrated on cultivating flowers and growing vegetables. Farmers in the area cultivated predominantly tobacco and citrus including Outspan oranges. The first co-operative for selling tobacco was formed in Rustenburg. By 1929, 8.2 million pounds of tobacco was produced in Rustenburg.

British and Indian Settlers

In 1875, a German Lutheran Minister, Ferdinand Zimmerman bought land at Kroondal near Rustenburg where he planned to house his Black and Coloured congregants. The project failed and by 1892 plots were sold to German laymen who established a settlement and mission station. They farmed tobacco, wheat, maize, oats and citrus. From 1883 onwards English businessmen from Pretoria, started to establish themselves in Rustenburg. They specialized in retail and wholesale trade and the handling of produce. As the Convention of London of 1884 safeguarded the rights of Indians to live anywhere in the ZAR, a significant number of them settled in Rustenburg. In 1877 the Bhyat family who emigrated from India settled in the town. Mr Suliman Ebrahim Bhyat (1865-1934), was a successful businessman who concentrated on selling saddlery, blankets and foodstuffs. He and his wife, Fatima Bhyat nee Areff (1869-1971), were personal friends of President Kruger and during the Anglo Boer War supplied Kruger with goods from their store.

Jews Arrive

In the 1880s Jews predominantly from the Kingdom of Prussia, German Empire, settled in Rustenburg. Oskar Laserstein emigrated in 1882 and was a mineral water manufacturer in the village. Kurt Machol and his brother Leo emigrated in 1883 and settled in Commissie Drift. In 1891 K Machol and Company was established on the southern slopes of the Magaliesberg and manufactured tobacco for distribution in South Africa, London and Berlin.

In 1894, when the National Bank of the ZAR opened a branch in Rustenburg, Oskar Laserstein and Kurt Machol were its first customers. Dr Albert Machol, a cousin of Kurt Machol, emigrated to Rustenburg in 1893 and was a general practitioner in Rustenburg for 9 years. During the Second Anglo Boer War (1899-1902) he provided medical assistance to the Boer Commando.

During the war, some of the Jewish inhabitants supported the Boer government and remained in Rustenburg. Others left for the Cape Colony and at the end of the war they required permission to return to Rustenburg. Those who remained in Rustenburg required a pass to live in the area.

The discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand led to prospecting activities in the Rustenburg area. Mica and copper were initially prospected. In 1921 Union Steel Corporation mined 400 tons of chrome ore.

Finding Platinum

Jack Frankfurth, a Viennese Jew, was interested in prospecting and mining. In 1925 he signed a prospecting contract with Willem Combrink, owner of the farm Waterval No 557, Rustenburg and platinum was discovered. Frankfurth was approached by Dr Hans Merensky (1871-1952), geologist and prospector who was credited for discovering the platinum reefs in Lydenburg, Potgietersrus and Rustenburg regions. The two men signed a proposition and Waterval Platinum Ltd was formed which was to become the first platinum mine in the area. Once mines were built in the area, a number of

Jewish families were involved in running concession stores on the mines which catered for the basic needs of the migrant Black Africans who worked on the mines. Some Jews operated ‘Native Eating Houses’.

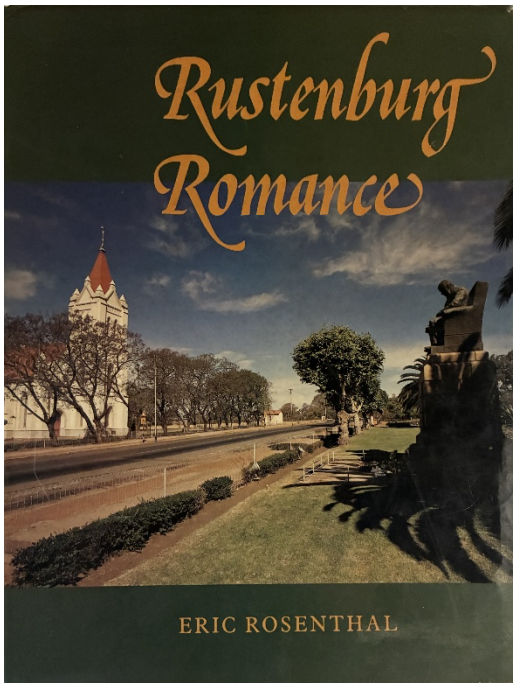
The economy of Rustenburg subsequently revolved around the mining industry, with a significant decline in agriculture which was partly due to increased pollution from the surrounding mines.

Country resorts

Due to its temperate climate, a number of country resorts were established, particularly catering to people from the Witwatersrand. They included Hunter’s Rest, Safari Hotel, Sparkling Waters and Wigwam. Howard Barnett Greenberg (1910-1976) served as the manager of the Safari Hotel when it opened in 1962 in the foothills of the Magaliesberg near the Rustenburg Kloof.

Hunter’s Rest was purchased by Avi Nathan of Johannesburg and to date it is managed by his son Ari Nathan. In recent years the resort has been used as a Pesach retreat by Rabbi Ari and Rebbetzin Batya Kievman of Chabad, Johannesburg.

However, over time, the hotel industry in Rustenburg has declined, particularly following the opening of the Sun City resort in 1979 by Sol Kerzner (1935-2020), a Durban Jewish businessman, founder of Southern Sun Hotel Group and Sun International. The resort complex was built near Rustenburg in the Bantustan (black homeland) of Bophuthatswana next to the Pilanesberg National Park which was also established in 1979.



Sources:

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