The Jewish Families of Rustenburg
A century of community and legacy

The history of the Jewish community in and around Rustenburg is a tapestry of pioneering entrepreneurship and civic dedication. From its late-nineteenth-century roots to its peak mid-twentieth-century congregation, this small community was involved in the region's tobacco, mining, and cultural landscapes.

Early pioneers and involvement in the tobacco industry

The foundational chapter of Rustenburg's Jewish history began in the 1880s, driven primarily by Jewish immigrants from the Kingdom of Prussia within the German Empire. **Oskar Laserstein** arrived in 1882, establishing himself as a local mineral water manufacturer and the village bar owner. He was quickly followed in 1883 by the brothers **Kurt and Leo Machol**, who settled in Commissie Drift. Partnering with his maternal uncle, **Aaron Reiss**, Kurt founded **K. Machol and Company,** which manufactured tobacco for distribution across South Africa, London, and Berlin. **Solomon Mundel** and **Wilhelm Herzfeld** also entered the trade, producing the widely recognized "Horseshoe Tobacco" brand.



Horseshoe Tobacco Rustenburg Transvaal
Mundel & Herzfeld Pty Ltd.

Shifting demographics: the Baltic wave and trade expansion

Over time, the demographic makeup of the community shifted as Jews from Courland (Latvia) and Lithuania made their way to the Transvaal and onto Rustenburg. Predominantly traders, these new arrivals often started as *smouses*

(peddlers). Among them was seventeen-year-old **Philip Wulfsohn**, who arrived in 1897. Following the Second Anglo-Boer War, Wulfsohn settled permanently in the village and opened a general dealership under his own name—an enterprise that eventually evolved into a prominent local department store.
Jewish traders also forged economic relationships with local African tribes. Many rented land to establish rural trading stores. In 1926, the **Wulfsohn brothers** leased land from the Bakgatla tribe to set up a trading store on the farm Mabieskraal No. 620. Decades later, in 1966, **Hymie Chatzkelowitz** established a butchery on the South African Native Trust Ground at Wagfontein No. 754.
As the community took root, it became tightly knit through marriage. Prominent familial webs connected the **Mundel, Herzfeld** and **Arenstein f**amilies. The **Gillis** sisters married into the **Wulfsohn, Lederman,** and **Gawron** families, while the **Socher** sisters became wives within the **Pleskus, Weisberg,** and **Rapeport** families.



Philip Wulfsohn

The mineral boom: platinum and mine concessions

Following the momentous discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand, prospecting surged in the Rustenburg district. In 1925, Jack Frankfurth, a Viennese Jew, discovered platinum in the area. Alongside the renowned geologist and prospector Dr. Hans Merensky, Frankfurth established Waterval Platinum Ltd., launching the area's first operational platinum mine.
The birth of the mining industry created new economic niches. A number of Jewish families took out concessions to run stores on the mines, catering to the everyday needs of the migrant Black African labourers. Others operated "Native Eating Houses," providing meals to the growing workforce.
As the local economy grew around agriculture and mining, Jewish traders successfully supplied goods to both these booming industries and the town's permanent residents. Numerous businesses were located in Plein Street and included I. Lipman - hairdresser, tobacconist, news agency, fancy goods and stationary.



I. Lipman - hairdresser, tobacconist, news agency, stationary, located in Plein Street, the main shopping street

The crucible of World War II and the Holocaust

The onset of the Second World War deeply impacted the Rustenburg community, drawing numerous local men into the Union Defence Force. Their service records reflect extraordinary wartime experiences:

- **David Cohen** was taken as a prisoner of war in North Africa and interned in Italy, where he successfully escaped and crossed back to Allied lines.
- **Cecil Wulfsohn** served as a pilot with both the Royal Air Force and the South African Air Force.
- **Lionel Wulfsohn**, Cecil's younger brother, was seriously wounded while fighting at the Battle of Monte Stanco, Italy, in October 1944.
- **Derek Mundel** volunteered with the de la Rey Regiment, serving with the 6th South African Armoured Division in Italy.
- **Ernest Rosenstein**, a German refugee who had found sanctuary in South Africa, was tragically killed while flying a Spitfire on a strafing mission over Turin, Italy, on April 2, 1945.

Back home, the community reeled from the horrors of the Holocaust in Europe. **Lazarus Benjamin**'s sister, brother-in-law, and nephew were murdered in Lithuania. Similarly, the parents of the three **Gersh** brothers—**Solly, Barney,** and **Victor**—were deported from Siauliai, Lithuania, and perished in the camps; their father in Stutthof and their mother in Auschwitz. This inherited trauma later became the subject of profound literary reflection. **Aron Gersh**—a psychologist, writer, and Yiddish speaker who grew up near Rustenburg where his father Victor ran a store—authored *The Grave Situations of My Lithuanian Ancestry: An Anti-War, Post-Holocaust Experience*, capturing the lasting psychological scars and survivor memories passed down through his family.

Civic life, professional services, and hospitality

Community members stepped into civic leadership. **Wilhelm Herzfeld** served as Deputy Mayor in 1918, **Abraham Herman Wulfsohn** was a member of the town council, and **William Rapeport** served as Mayor in 1947.



The council in 1914. *Standing:* D F Gilland (Clerk), W Rullen, F Johnson (Town clerk), A Robertson, B J Lottering (Worksmanager). *Sitting:* J Black, W Herzfeld, N L Gauldie, A P Olivier (Chairman), H N J van der Merwe, O Huxtable, K Heyne.

W. Herzfeld (seated 2nd left) served on the town council and was deputy mayor in 1918



Mayor and Mayoress William Rapeport being presented to the British Royal Family 1947

By mid-century, Jewish professionals anchored the town's essential services. **Dr. Joe Been** practiced as the town's only Jewish general practitioner, his oldest brother **Dr. Ben Been** served as the Medical Officer at the Waterval Platinum Mine, and his third brother, **Dr. Willie Been** worked as the district surgeon. **Dr. Russell Gawron** served as the sole Jewish dentist in the town.

In the cultural and social spheres, the **Pastoll** family owned the town's only cinema, while **Annette Been** and **Rita Sonnenberg** shared their talents as local dancing teachers.
The scenic surroundings of Rustenburg drew Jewish entrepreneurs into the hospitality sector. **Howard Barnett Greenberg** conceived, built, and operated the popular Safari Hotel near the Rustenburg Kloof, which opened its doors in 1963. Another major resort, Hunter's Rest, was purchased by **Avi Nathan** of Johannesburg; in recent years, the resort has found new life as an annual Pesach retreat hosted by **Rabbi Ari** and **Rebbetzin Batya Kievman** of Chabad, Johannesburg. However, the local hotel trade faced steep competition following the 1979 opening of Sun City. Developed by **Sol Kerzner** (1935–2020), a prominent Durban-born Jewish businessman and founder of the Southern Sun Hotel Group and Sun International, the massive resort complex was built nearby in the Bantustan (black homeland) of Bophuthatswana, adjacent to the newly established Pilanesberg National Park.

Decline and contemporary legacy

At its zenith, the Rustenburg Jewish Congregation comprised approximately 40 families. However, like many rural South African Jewish communities, the population gradually dwindled as the younger generations relocated, primarily to Johannesburg. The historic Rustenburg shul finally closed its doors in 2002 after accommodating the community for 77 years. The small community continued to receive support from **Rabbi Moshe Silberhaft**, widely known as the "Travelling Rabbi."
Today, the community's presence in the town itself has been reduced to **Suzi Chatzkelowitz**—the widow of **Elijas Chatzkelowitz**—and their son **Raymond** and his family. Just outside Rustenburg, **Paul** and **Stephne Cohen** (founders of the sustainability organization Rucore) remain active, alongside **Michael Zefferett** and his son **Boaz Zefferett**, who continue to live on their family farm at Rietfontein.
Though small in number, the descendants of Rustenburg's Jewish families have contributed significantly to broader South African society. Conspicuous among them was **Gisèle Wulfsohn** (1957–2011), the daughter of **Cecil** and **Perla (Pearl) Wulfsohn**. As a renowned freelance photographer, Gisèle captured the complex realities of South African society from the late 1970s through the early 2000s, documenting the transition from minority to majority rule. Her work, which focused deeply on portraiture, education, gender issues, and the HIV/Aids crisis, stands as a lasting monument to the history of South Africa.



Gisèle Wulfsohn

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