



# CHOL – Community History On-Line

A forum for those involved in preserving the footprint of Southern African Jewish community life in digital form

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## Some Communities of Cape Town – origin – migration – and now?

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## Cape Town Synagogues

In this Newsletter we touch on the development of some of the Cape Town congregations, and the shuls they built. This compilation is based mainly on contemporary sources and on the personal memories of members in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Ivor Kosowitz in Perth; Zeev Woolf Mankowitz in Jerusalem; Haim Pogrund in Israel; Steve Albert in Cape Town and others help to tell the story of the origins and fates of the synagogues in the City.



Fig 1: The Great Synagogue, Gardens, Cape Town

## Introduction

**The Cape Town Hebrew Congregation** was the first in South Africa. It was founded by English and German Jews in 1841. It used British Jewish rituals and tunes. Rabbis were sent from England. Most Jewish families in South Africa however, came from Latvia and Lithuania between 1880 and 1920. They needed to build houses for worship and to study in the way they were accustomed in Eastern Europe.

This story relates mainly to the 'new' congregations of fervently pious and religious Jews established at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in District Six. It describes the atmosphere and shows how they developed and integrated and built their original shuls and then moved closer to the mother synagogue with new buildings in the Gardens, Cape Town – and then what happened next.



Fig 2: **Constitution St** *Beth Hamedrash Hachodosh*:  
est 1902 moved to Vredehoek 1939-1993



Fig 3: **Roeland Street** *Agudas Achim*: est 1895  
moved to Schoonder Street 1951 – 2001

Ivor Kosowitz wrote: 'My late dad was from Lomza in Poland, which had an important Yeshiva and was a centre of Jewish learning. For those growing up in Cape Town in the Jewish community, in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, it was a Golden Age. Yiddishkeit was all around us. It was like living in a *shtetl* in Poland, Latvia, London, and Miami ..... all at the same time. Those were the best of times and the worst of times. For South Africans, it was the height of the Apartheid era.

'Most functions, weddings, Barmitzvahs etc at that time, were held at Rosecourt, or at the Zionist Hall. Later, the more modern Cranston Hall was preferred. Cy Sacks and his band entertained us all with songs of the day as well as the klezmer music of the old county.

'Cape Town had one of the best Jewish-Zionist schools in the world, Herzlia. Headmaster was Meir Katz who did so much for Jewish Education. As well, there were all the Zionist Youth Movements – Habonim (the builders), Bnei Akiva, Betar (religious Zionist), Hashomer Hatzair (socialist).'

I was interested to find out the story of how the congregations got started, how they developed and what happened to them. Three mighty synagogues in the Gardens area (pictured above) were all 'new builds' of the various original congregations started as soon as enough people had arrived in Cape Town who wanted to create one. Of these three, only the Great Synagogue remains as a synagogue.

## The Great Synagogue, in the Gardens – opened 1905

The English and German community founded the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation in 1841. It got off to a shaky start. Not everyone agreed with the direction of travel. By 1847, with only 28 members, they were encouraged to invite a minister from England and establish a house of prayer. In true Jewish fashion, a few of the stalwarts split off to create their own *minyán*! Eventually a house was converted on the corner of Bouquet and St John Streets and Rev Pulver came out from Cheltenham. He was not pleased with what he found and resigned after only two years.



It was touch and go whether a community would survive for the next 12 years. Then the charismatic 31-year-old Rev Joel Rabinowitz arrived from Birmingham in 1859. He rounded the troops, raised the money and in no time, they had bought a piece of land higher up St John's Street, now called Hatfield Street, and built a fine little shul which opened in 1863, called *Tikvat Yisrael* (Hope of Israel). (The watercolour) is by Jay A Waronker from his book on world Synagogues - see link at the end).

Fig 4: watercolour of the first synagogue

The community used English prayer books and rituals. It still stands today – as the entrance to the South African Jewish Museum. Next door, the English Community built the magnificent Great Synagogue, in the Gardens, which opened in 1905.

The 'Gardens Shul' as it is known, was, and still is, the Mother Synagogue in South Africa. Most rabbis and cantors came from Britain. The choir was the best in the city. One of the most honoured rabbis there, was Professor Israel Abrahams. The services followed the British custom using British prayer books with melodies from the 'Blue Book' used throughout the British Empire / Commonwealth.

The fervently pious 'eastern European Yiddish speaking Jews however, who were arriving weekly from Eastern Europe, at the turn of the last century, found that this was not the way they were able to function. Settled in the area around the Castle, later designated District Six, they quickly founded their own religious associations – not one – but several.

The two largest were The New Hebrew Congregation *Agudas Achim* (established in 1895) which built an impressive building in Roeland Street and the ultra-orthodox *Beth Hamedrash Hachodosh*, (established in 1902) which built a more modest building in Constitution Street. We will look at these two early congregations in more detail and follow their move from District Six to the Gardens.

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## Constitution Street Shul *Beth Hamedrash Hachodosh* - opened 1903

Orthodox Hebrew Congregation, established 1902 – to Vredehoek 1939

This description of life in the ultra-religious Beth Hamedrash was taken from a report written in 1965 by Leon Feldberg:

The Constitution Street Synagogue was built in 1902 in the style of the *Beth Hamedrashim* (houses of study and prayer) of the old country. It was always busy. It was full, from morning until evening. The activity here was as it had been in the **Shtetl** – praying and studying. Here was the place for the very observant and for the scholarly. They took upon themselves the role of guarding strictly the observances of Judaism. Although they longed for a rebbe, the lack of money was an obstacle and they made do with some long-serving retired prayer leaders. In 1908 they appointed a most respected and learned Rabbi, namely Rabbi Moses Chaim Mirvish (whom we will see later was a great asset to the whole country).



Feldberg goes on to say: 'The residential district of the recent immigrants – the Castle district of Cape Town – had the semblance of a Lithuanian townlet and its centre was the 'Beth Hamedrash.' The Shul was open in the whole forenoon when services followed each other in rapid succession. In the evenings between *Minchah* (afternoon service) and *Maariv* (evening service) the Synagogue presented a scene of animated activity. The hard-struggling Jew, be he shopkeeper; pedlar, trier or artisan, would foregather at the conclusion of the day in the *Beth Hamedrash* and between services he would sit at one of the 'Shiurim' or lectures delivered at long tables with benches all around.

Fig 5: brochure of the Beth Hamedrash Hachodosh

'The immigrants even brought with them the 'caste' system which used to exist in the *Shtetl* and this was reflected in the particular groups which attended the Shiurim. There was the

learned class and the ignorant, the *lamdonim* and the *Amei-haartzim*. The learned people sat around the Rav's *Shiur* – the *Gemorah* – and then in descending order of importance there would be *Mishnah*, *Ayin Yakov*, then *Chumash*, and later a *Tehillim* circle was formed.

'Scores of people, all returning from a hard day's work, would sit and listen and concentrate on the intricacies and legalistic complexities of Jewish lore, and would discuss heatedly principles of religion and philosophy. This daily intellectual stimulus filled their lives with interest and excitement. Religion was fervid, and in some respects the congregants were fanatical. Everything which had to do with the 'English' shul (ie The Great Synagogue, Gardens) was considered *treife*; Zionism was not much in favour. A man's piety was measured by the length of time it took before he finished praying the *Shmonah Esrei*.'

**Clare Wollach** (Friedland) writing in Israel in 1992, says her family, with other Jewish immigrants settled in spacious double storied houses with decorative ironwork balconies, overlooking the Castle, in Hannover, Parkin, Caledon and Mount Streets of District Six: The early populations of the area consisting of Jews, Cape Coloureds, Malays and some urban Blacks really cared for the area and looked after the picturesque shops and park areas. Over the years it became the haunt of drug addicts, dagga dealers, drunks, shebeens and prostitution. Jews still maintained their businesses there, but it was a very rough place indeed.

Clare's grandfather Chaim Yitzhak (Hyam Isaac) Cohen was very active in communal affairs. He was the first Gabbai of the *Beth Hamedrash* orthodox synagogue in Constitution Street. As far as he was concerned it as an authentic replica of a 'real synagogue' in Eastern Europe, and not a 'Gothic Cathedral' like the Gardens synagogue whose rabbis were trained in England at Jews College and wore clerical collars like the Christians. They would rather conduct services at home, than put a foot in there. (Later generations of the family however found the services at the Gardens synagogue pleasing.)

She says her grandfather's generation preferred the orthodox shul because it was familiar to them. They could identify with the ambience and the customs down to the last details for example putting little mounds of snuff on the arms of each seat to refresh the worshippers or the little snacks of sponge cake, brandy or herring after the service. 'As children' she says, 'we used to sit with my grandfather whose entire body was wrapped in his fringed Tallit and we shuddered when, as a Cohen (or priest) he fell to the ground during special prayers or blessed the congregation from in front of the Holy Ark.'

**Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz**, in their book, *The Jews of South Africa*, described how it differed from other Cape Town congregations of the time, they said: 'On entering the Beth Hamedrash, one became conscious of a pervading atmosphere totally alien to that of the other two synagogues. Heavy much-thumbed tomes of the Talmud lay strewn along the long tables. To be shaven was almost as serious a breach of decorum as to enter a synagogue with the head uncovered.'

**ND Hoffmann** the noted Yiddish writer and publisher wrote: It was built in the style of the Bet Hamidrash of the old country. There was no President's box, but it was always busy. Often a loud cry to heaven would rend the air; another congregant would be found crouched over the Gemara dreaming sweet dreams of the home country. In the good times one Minyan followed another in quick succession in the crowded shul. As evening fell, it would gradually become a little quieter, and the prayer reader and the psalm sayer would go off to their homes.

The Bet Hamidrash was full from morning until evening. The activity here was as it had been in the Shtetl - praying and studying. Here was the place for the very observant and for the scholarly. They took upon themselves the role of Naturei Karta; to guard strictly the observances of Judaism. Their efforts were, unfortunately, not valued. Despite this, the congregants wanted a Rabbi, a spiritual leader. However the lack of money was an obstacle and they made do with some long-serving retired dayanim. One of them lived on charity and received a small allowance, and another, a puny little man who did part-time work as a secretary, taught Talmud for a pound a week. In 1908 they appointed a most respected and learned Rabbi, namely Rabbi M. Ch. Mirvish. This Beth Hamdirash is now (c1916) in a more secure position, and they meet all their expenses, even though members do not have to pay high fees. The congregants are satisfied with the status of the shul. They are happy with the knowledge that they are keeping faithfully the tenets of Judaism.

## Rabbi Moses Chaim Mirvish

The congregation *Beth Hamedrash Hachodosh*, of Constitution Street was the most 'old-worldly', most orthodox, and the least affluent of the three main Cape Town communities (Gardens, Constitution Street and Roeland Street), nevertheless, they brought out in 1908 the remarkable **Rabbi Moses Chaim Mirvish** to become their spiritual leader

Mirvish was the first fully qualified rabbi (with Smicha) in South Africa. He had graduated from the



Yeshiva of Telz which in those days was the most famous yeshiva in Lithuania. Yet although he grew up in the atmosphere of the Talmud, steeped in the life of a self-contained Jewish community long before emancipation came to the countries of Eastern Europe, he had also lived through the period of *Haskalah*, enlightenment, which witnessed a fundamental change in Jewish outlook. He was far sighted and could offer practical solutions to Jewish life transplanted from Eastern Europe to the tip of Africa.

Rabbi Mirvish was a crucial figure not only in his own Litvak congregation, but also in the development of the Cape Town community as a whole. During his years as Rabbi of the *Beth Hamedrash Hachodosh* from 1908, he was active in wider community affairs, helping to create the basic social and religious structure of the Cape Town Jewish community, and in turn, this influenced developments in other parts of the country.

Fig6: Rabbi MC Mirvish

He founded the *Beth Din* (Ecclesiastical Court) in the Cape, and for many years was its head. He also founded the Cape Board of *Shechitah* (ritual slaughter). He was one of the founders of the Cape Executive of the Jewish Board of Deputies, and a member of its executive board for many years. He was a founder of the *Bikkur Cholim* (Sick Relief Society), and a Foundation member of the Jewish Aged Home. He was always an active Zionist - even before leaving Lithuania was active in the pre-Herzl *Chovevei Zion* movement - and while in Cape Town he became a leader of the *Mizrachi* movement. The South African Jewish Times (29 August 1947) noted that: 'History was made by Rabbi Mirvish in 1917, when at a Conference he helped to define South African Jewry's attitude towards the Balfour Declaration.

Always active in education, he was Chairman of the United Hebrew Schools in the Cape, founded a Talmudical study group for the young, and was an examiner of Talmud Torah's in both Cape Town and its hinterland. After the First World War, he was active on the committee for the assistance of Jewish War and Pogrom victims from Eastern Europe.

In his overall impact on the South African community, Rabbi Mirvish was a human bridge between the two cultures: the old world of European, particularly Lithuanian Judaism – and the new realities of South Africa, especially within the Cape. He was someone who mediated between these two realities, a living catalyst in the birth and development of the South African Jewish community. He was a pioneer in his field he was conscious that every step was a precedent. Problems connected with divorce, marriage, proselytism, chalitzah and burial, arose daily and had to be tackled in a practical manner. Jewish religious life had to be adjusted to the conditions of the new country - and there were no precedents.

After his death, a special Editorial in the South African Jewish Chronicle (22 August 1947) noted that: 'Although Rabbi Mirvish devoted himself primarily to his congregation and particularly to the learned orthodoxy in our midst, nevertheless his beneficent influence stretched out to all section of the community. For he was not only a great scholar but also a leader and a man of action.

His scholarly ability was true to the old rabbinic style - he was exceptionally well acquainted with 'Shas' and its commentaries - and in addition he was possessed of an extensive knowledge of Haskalah and modern literature. To this wealth of knowledge was added a progressive approach to communal life and he imbued the activities of his community with something of his own spirit.' At various times, this progressive, more open approach to the realities of communal life, were at variance with those of members of his own congregation!

### **The move from Constitution Street to Vredehoek, 1939**

In the late 1930s, as the community grew more prosperous, the congregation moved from Constitution Street and built a truly iconic Art Deco shul on Vredehoek Avenue. It opened in January 1939. It had an innovative Succah-Hall as the roof could be wound open during Sukkot. As well as having the renowned Rabbi Mirvish, the community also employed distinguished cantors. Reverend Rabinowitz (Eli Rabinowitz's grandfather) was the first and much revered chazan who served the community from the 1920s to the 1950s. He was a learned and respected scholar and musician.

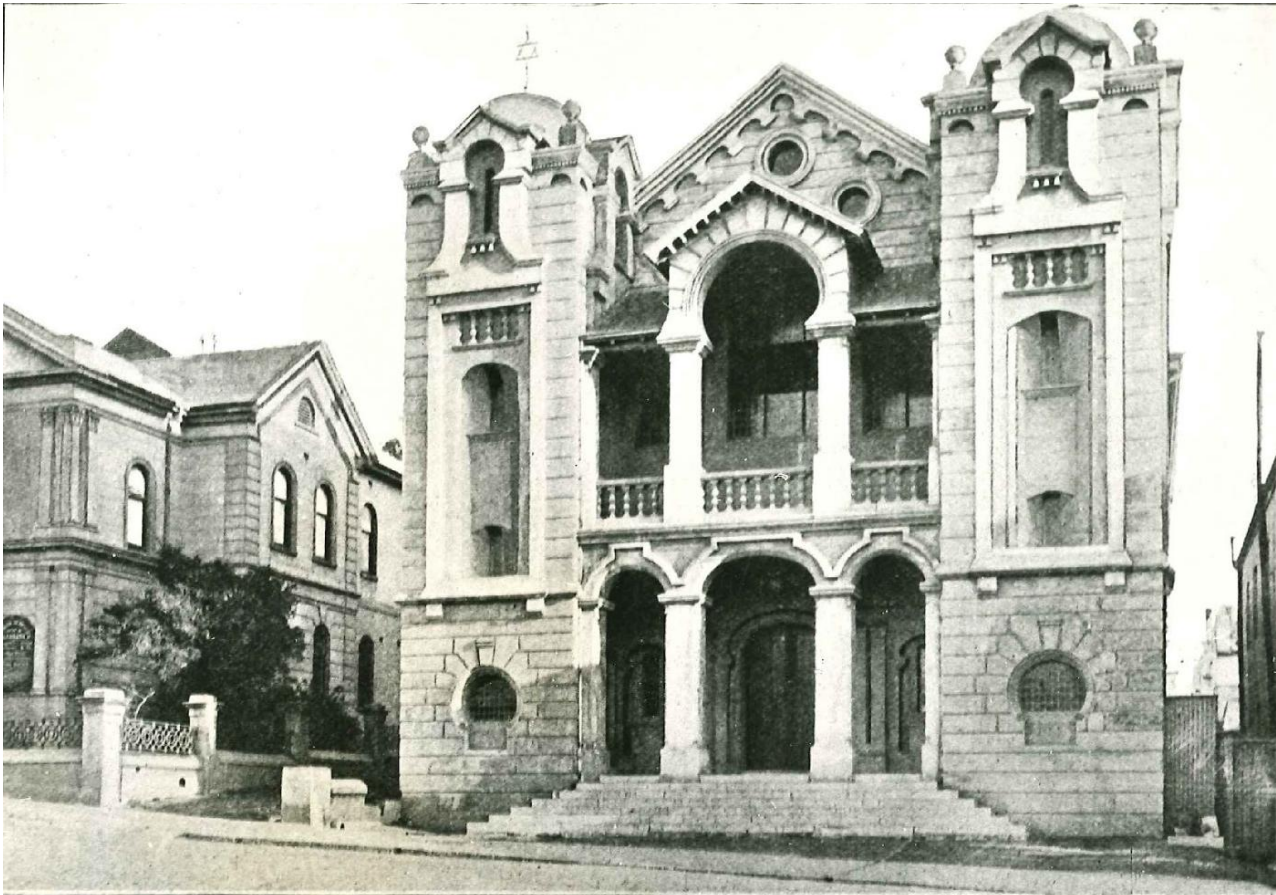


Fig7: The Vredehoek shul on Vredehoek Avenue later to be renamed 'Rabbi Mirvish Avenue'.

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**Roeland St Shul** *Agudath Achim* - opened 1902  
New Hebrew Congregation established 1895 (– to Schoonder Street 1951)

The *Agudath Achim*, the 'New Hebrew Congregation' was established by Litvak Jewish immigrants in District Six in 1895. They built a beautiful shul on the corner of Roeland and Buitenkant Streets (pictured below) which was consecrated in September 1902 by Rabbi Dr JH Hertz. It was a large and distinctive building of a typically ornate Eastern design with two imposing domed towers. Chazzan J Glushak and the choir were an integral part of services. Max Gurland and a Mr Kahn were the founding members of the Roeland Street Shul. I have found no more information on this shul.



SYNAGOGUE (ROELAND STREET).

Fig 8: Roeland Street Synagogue

**1952: The New Hebrew Congregation moves from Roeland Steet to Schoonder Street**

While the ***Agudath Achim*** community's Roeland Street Synagogue was impressive – their new one on Schoonder Street was revolutionary, modern and spectacular.

**Ivor Kosowitz writes of Schoonder Street the 1960s and 70s:**

'We belonged to the Schoonder Street (nearby to Vredehoek) which was opened in September 1952. It was known as the Round Shul for obvious reasons - it was completely round (see the picture and plan below). It was a very impressive modern design. Our Chazan there was Simcha Koussevitzky, one of the four famous cantor brothers, who had previously officiated at a London synagogue.'



Fig 9. The 'Round Synagogue, Schoonder Street 1951

'As we became barmitvah, we were invited to attend Gemorah classes after service on Shabbat mornings. The teacher was a Mr Kooperman. As he mainly spoke Yiddish, and as the Gemorah is mainly in Aramaic and Hebrew, we kids never actually learned much. However, we were introduced to 'Bob'. No not a person, but a Jewish dish made from broad beans.

'Other mainly delicious foods which we grew up with were *Taigelach*, *Imberlach*, *Pletzelah*, *Petcha* (made from calf's hooves), *Perogen*, *Kreplach*, *Helzel*, Herring and Chopped Herring, Chopped Liver, *Gefilte Fish*, *Kneidelach* – boiled and baked, Bagels, *Babkes*, *Bulkas Hammantashen* and *Kichel*. Some of these we still enjoy today. Only in South Africa, *challah* is called *kitke*. No one seems to know the origin and why this unique to SA.

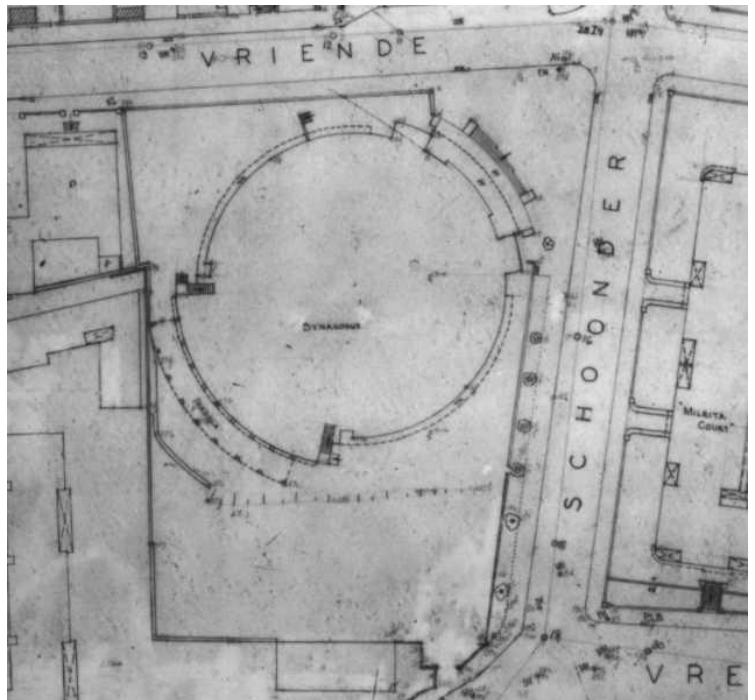


Fig 10: Plan for the round synagogue

**Ivor Kosowitz continued:** 'When Rosh Hashana came around, the shuls were full to overflowing with standing room only. I remember that every year, the Shamash, Mr Rivkin, blew the Shofar. Except for one year when our Rabbi decided to try. Well, he should have thought otherwise. He could not get even one note out properly. We, in the choir loft, above him could not contain ourselves, and just cracked up laughing ..... actually rolling on the floor! What an embarrassment. 'When we were little, we would get our box of chocolates on **Simchat Torah**, from the Round Shul. Then we would run as fast as we could to Vredehoek Shul. Once there, we slipped in by a side door to join the line to get our slab of chocolate (the box from the Round Shul was carefully packed into our tallis bags!)

‘**Sukkot** was another special festival. A large curved succah was built at the back of the Round Shul. After every service, large trays of delicious sponge cake were brought out. You could have wine and salty herring in addition to the cake. Some of us kids thought the cake was great, so we stuffed our tallis bags full of the stuff, to take home!

‘**At Pesach** time, many of us kids went to shul, mainly because our parents said we had to. Once there I doubt that many of us actually went inside. The big event, outside of course, was to play ‘marbles’ with hazel and walnuts. Who said we were supposed to eat them! The walnuts were the ‘goonies’ and the hazel nuts were the ‘marbles’. I recall that this was really big at the Vredehoek Shul too, as it had an enclosed courtyard at the front.

### **Midnight Slichot service at Schoonder Street**



‘I joined the choir at Schoonder Street and sang for ten years with our famous cantor Simcha Koussevitzky, who had joined our shul in 1953. I joined in 1965 when I was 15 and sang with them until I was 25 in 1975 shortly before I left for Australia. The choir comprised about twelve adults and fifteen schoolboys. We were all paid for rehearsals and services – I forget how much. There were three tenors, six what we called ‘Melody’, and three baritones. The boys were the sopranos. The age group of the choir was from 8 to about 60. When I joined, the choirmaster was Simcha’s son, Jeff Koussevitzky. He had no special qualifications but had imbibed the liturgy from his father and from singing in the choir with the previous choirmaster.

‘The Saturday night Slichot Service was the highlight of the year, especially if you were in the choir. We arrived at about 8pm. A 16mm black and white movie was shown, usually a B-rate western ‘flick’. We had to hire a projector in those days, and the movie was on large reels of celluloid. After that, a large spread was put on for us by the Ladies Guild.

Fig 11: Cantor Simcha Koussevitzky at Schoonder Street synagogue

‘As Slichot is at midnight, it was an effort to keep the sopranos (boys under 12) awake, and in any event they were tanked up with sugar so it was extremely difficult for the choir master, Jeff Koussevitzky, to keep them under control. (Later, the kids were ‘banned’ from the choir.)

‘One Slichot service, my friend and I smuggled a cassette tape recorder into shul and put it under the bimah. This way we recorded the service which was full of amazing choral pieces. My friend, in Sydney, and I still have this recording today, about 43 years later. So the only two copies in existence, are in Australia!’

**But wonder of wonders in modern technology – you can hear this historic service with Cantor Simcha Koussevitzky and choir, including me, by clicking the link at the end of this story.**

‘One of my best friends was Joel Lichterman, the son of the Cantor of the Vredehoek Shul. In fact, his dad Cantor Lichterman, taught me my bar mitzvah. We ended up having my barmy in the

Vredehoek shul as my mother's family were members there. Cantor Litchterman used to dig his elbow into your ribs and exclaim the word 'Grobakop' if you sang the wrong trop! Joel is now cantor in a Shul in Denver, Colorado, USA, with Selwyn Franklin as Rabbi. One of the rabbis of Schoonder Street in my time was Rabbi Duschhinsky.

'The choir was great, not the best though. The best choir was at the Gardens Shul. We had the best chazzan, Cantor Simcha Koussevitzky. Two long serving tenors were Jackie Schwartz and Les Wexler. Mr Harrison sang bass. 'One person I almost forgot to mention, was Cantor Immerman also known as the 'Blind Chazan'. He held the position of Chazan Sheini. Sadly, he was blind from a very early age but had an incredible gift. He was able to retain the whole Torah and Siddur in his memory. He also taught many their barmitzvah portions. He could tell your name just by listening to your voice. He truly had a long life having lived to the age of about 95.

### **Ze'ev Woolf Mankowitz, of Jerusalem, recalls:**

'I sang in the Vredehoek Shul choir for a good number of years. The Chazan, Cantor Lichterman was the musical director in my time, and Mr Okie Kurland was our choirmaster. If I remember correctly, we were paid eight pence a month and received a special bonus for the first night of Selichot: a group outing to the cinema so that we wouldn't fall asleep before the midnight service.

'When I was doing research in the YIVO Archives in New York on the post-war period some 30 years ago I came across an account of Cantor Lichterman's miraculous survival in Auschwitz: Singing *Ani Ma-amin* on his way to the gas chambers, he was hauled out by the Nazis who sought to exploit his musical talents.



'Okie Kurland, whose brother Ralph played first violin in the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra, was also a fine musician, and a committed Yiddishist. Our great debate when I was older was whether the Rambam knew Yiddish.

'My most profound memory of those far off days relates to Yom Kippur. The choir nave above the *aron hakodesh*

Fig12: A wedding under the chupa at Vredehoek Synagogue

gave us a direct view of the women's section and when we reached *Unetannah tokef* an insistent sobbing of the older women would accompany the prayer. No one would tell us why. I suppose they knew that life would teach us, soon enough.

'Another frequent and welcome visitor was Cantor Immerman, the blind chazzan. He was an amazing man who knew everything by memory. We used to take turns in opening the door for him, and for

many years he also taught bar mitzvah portions. He was a beloved figure in the community, always a most welcome visitor, and there is hardly a Jewish Capetonian who grew up in the last half of the twentieth century who did not know him.'

### **Haim Pogrund of Israel, recalled Vredehoek in the 1940s and 50s thus:**

'We were members of the Vredehoek congregation or *Beth Hamedrash Hachodosh*, the successor to the old Constitution Street Shul. Our family had its fixed pews, with my father and Uncle Kalman seated next to each other while my cousin Alec sat behind them in the back row. I usually took potluck on available seats until my Barmitzvah. We sat at the side, facing the Bimah, and of course also opposite our women who were upstairs in the gallery dressed in their finery and perfumed to the hilt.

'We considered ourselves to be Orthodox Jews by all prevailing standards in the South African tradition. By definition in those days, this included keeping kosher at home, having separate utensils for the Passover, lighting the candles on Friday evenings, and going to the synagogue on the major festivals, and for my folks, Yahrzeit for their parents, of course. An occasional kiddush on Erev Shabbat and on festival eves completed the process. There were no kipprot or ritual fringes to be seen, nor was there much superfluous hair except amongst the older generation.

'The services were fully choral on the festivals and shabbatot and we sang the great traditional *Litwische nigunim* with feeling. 'The *U'n'taneh Tokef* on Yom Kippur would wring the tears from the ladies in the gallery. The sobs together with the nose blowing into cologne impregnated handkerchiefs led by old Mrs Kasimov, her *Mahzor* pressed to her short-sighted eyes, amongst others, added to the gravity of the day.

'Hazzanim included Cantor S Inspector and Cantor Rudy over the years, with Lichterman holding the position in my time. Lichterman, a small man, was a little prima donna-ish, and God help anybody who opened a window on a stifling Yom Kippur day to try to raise the oxygen level a fraction. He would stop singing, wrap his prayer shawl around his neck and mouth, and throw a malevolent look in the direction of the offending window and perpetrator. This was immediately banged closed by a 'Kammite Member' who was posted among the ladies, and the show would go on.

'The *Hazzan Sheini* or *Ba'al Tefilah* was the magnificent Reverend NM Rabinowitz (right) who for countless years (1920 – 1950) sang perfectly in a voice resembling the sound made by humming on tissue paper over a comb. He read the torah without error or blemish and was totally unaffected by the surrounding *tummel*. He was known as a *feine Yid* and was also the official *Shofar Blozzer*, with the sounds undoubtedly reaching to the heavens on the Days of Awe.

'The late and venerated Rabbi Chaim Mirvish was the spiritual leader of the congregation at the time, and a more respected Jew was hard to find. Uninvolved in the political intrigues and petty rows of the Shul 'Kammite', he set the example for sincerity and integrity coupled with wisdom. They do not come like that anymore.



Fig 13 Cantor NM Rabinowitz Hazzan Sheini Schoonder street synagogue

'The elders in the shul including Messrs Koppel Sacks, Glick, Melamed, Sher and so on, would sit along the Eastern wall covered by their extensive *taleisim* and *shokkeling* like the best of them – except for the occasions when they would make their way to the toilets to relieve their continually irritating prostatism.

'Dear God! What a rumpus was created if a mistake was made in the *trop* or in the text which was being read. Desks were banged, and voices were raised in cacophony until the correction was made. *Simchat Torah* and *Purim* were the two occasions when these people came into their own. On the former, tables were loaded with chopped, and pickled herring and *Kichlach* a la Lita, and *teiglach* made by the women's committee, while the *Schnapps* flowed, and conviviality reigned. It was a rollicking party and gave a boost to the *Hakkafot* or merriment with the completion of the reading of the law and starting it over afresh. The team was completed by Mr Ritz the shammash who had been one of my surgical bootmakers, but had given it up as it were, 'to take the cloth'!

'The *Yizkor* on the day of Atonement presented the opportunity for us youngsters to tour the surrounding Synagogues, visit the museum and art gallery in the Gardens, and just sit under the oaks watching the passing show. In addition, one could take in the 'talent' in the other Shuls.'

In 1947, Rabbi Mirvish collapsed and died on the Vredehoek Shul steps causing great shock and distress. In recognition of his community work, the city honoured him by re-naming the street alongside the shul after him. He was followed by distinguished Rabbis Duschhinsky and then Marcus.

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## The Gardens Shul

Haim Pogrand says: 'Of course, the Gardens Shul had the best choir. It was a social cut above the rest of the communities – at least as far as the external trappings of the members were concerned. The president, and executive wore top hats and morning suits and old man Rabie and his cronies looked so incongruous, and not exactly fitting the old axiom 'fine feathers make fine birds'.

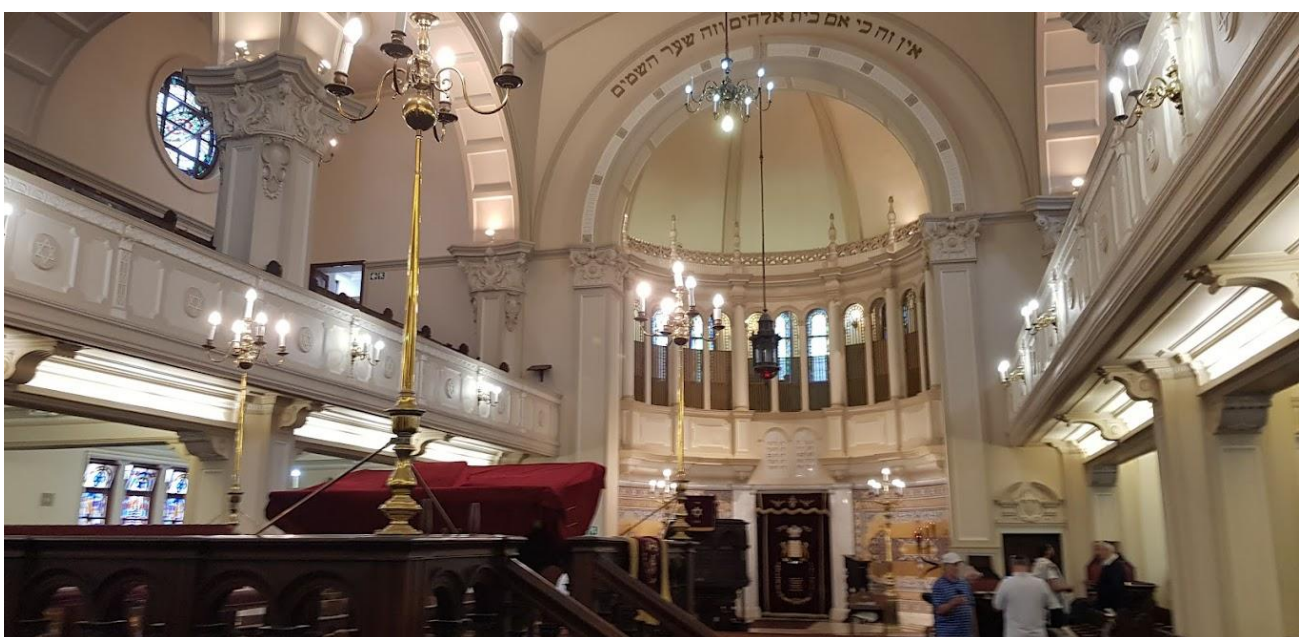


Fig 14: The interior of the Great Synagogue, Gardens, Cape Town.

Our committee at the Vredehoek synagogue, I am afraid, could only manage Homburgs, but even here Traub and company were definitely no improvement sartorially on Rabie and company.

‘The one thing however that never palled or galled was the magnificence of the Gardens Shul. It had an awesomeness, both inside and out, which I have yet to find in another relatively modern place of worship of any denomination in any place. The choir and Boris Rome added their efforts to the dignity of the prayers. No wonder it was called ‘der Einglischer Shul’ by my parents’ generation.

‘Rabbi Israel Abrahams, in his pillbox papal headgear, fine, round, horn-rimmed spectacles, and goatee would deliver his regular sermon in his impeccable English and cast an occasional glance at his prim and pince-nez’d lady in an upper front corner of the *Ezrat Nashim* which was our cue for a hasty departure!

‘The shammash here happened to be a Mr Gordon, who was a true-blue ‘landsman’ of my father from Abel as was Mr Kooperman, a member of the Gardens Synagogue and a private Hebrew teacher for those who could afford it, so that we always managed to find a temporary seat with the former’s help. Overflow, on the high festivals spilled over into the ‘Old Shul’ next door, the first Synagogue building in South Africa, and again, the atmosphere here could only be described as inspiring.

‘A tour of the National Art Gallery including the Meyerowitz carved doors, and the South African Museum to see the beautiful waxwork figures of local Bushman tribesmen, completed our visit to the Gardens, and on we would go to the Roeland Street Shul, of which a water colour by Leng Dixon, hangs just above and facing me on the wall while I write.

‘Rabbi Kirzner was the spiritual leader at Roeland Street. I remember him with clarity. He left just after the war, and the congregation transferred to ‘the Opera House’ or the ‘Round Shul’ in Schoonder Street, after most of the Jewish residents had departed the Roeland Street district for a more sumptuous lifestyle. One of the famous Koussevitzky brothers, Simcha, was the cantor at the Round Synagogue, probably the best in the country and always well worth the listening to.

‘The two Seder nights of Pesach were usually spent with my uncle and aunt Kalman and Tzippele, my father’s sister, and their family. The old people were observant to a fault and as I mentioned previously, there was an extremely strong bond between my father and his brother and sister, and I cherish the memories of the time that we spent with these wonderful people.

‘The Seder was completely traditional from the reading of the Haggadah to the stewed prunes at the end of the festive meal which was the cure for the constipation, the inevitable result of eating matzos and kneidlach for eight days at a stretch! In addition, they made their own wine, which after four glassfuls, added levity and a feeling of having just personally crossed the Red Sea in time, beating the Egyptians who were up to their usual evil machinations, and who even after suffering the ten plagues, had not been subdued!





‘At Rosh Hashanah my mother usually prepared a delicious spread of all the herrings, *kichlach* - a sweetish, crispy, biscuit to go with them, *taiglach* a biscuit cooked in syrup (below), *pletzlach* a sweetmeat made from dried apricots (right), and *ingberlach* and so forth, for a *Brocha* (reception) held at our place for friends and relatives. They would take a break from the Shul service up the road to drink a *Le'Haim* to the New Year and to reiterate the hope that it would not be worse than the one that had just passed, and how on earth could it ever have been, in a place like Cape Town! ‘

‘Nearby, in Maynard Street, was a small *shtetl* known as the *Ponevez Shul*. This was the shul we did not go to!’

## Vandeleur Street: the *Ponevez Shul* District 6 opened ? and moved to Maynard Street



(Haim Pogrud ,Jerusalem. wrote: ‘The old Poneveze Shul in Maynard Street (left) functioned for a number of years. They used a large veranda-ed mansion, situated on the right-hand side of the street going down.

Fig 15: The Ponevez synagogue Maynard Street

The original Poneveze Shul stood in Vandeleur Street in District Six and, upon departure of the Jews it became amongst other things a storehouse as well as a wholesale headquarters. It was an interesting building, small and jammed between two other buildings with a Corinthian pillared facade (of all things), it was in fact a 'shtetl'. I stand to be corrected here, but upon demolition of the historic District Six (our parents' original stamping ground), the Ponevez shul was left standing.’

Eli Rabinowitz attended two minyanim at the Ponevez shul at 45 Maynard Street. See links at the end of the article.

**Buitenkant Street, Chassidic Shul** *Beth Hamedrash Yeshurin*  
Chassidic Community established 1897 – 1953 moved to Arthur's Road Sea Point

And there was yet another orthodox shul in District Six (maybe there were more) The Chassidic shul moved up the mountain from Buitenkamp Street to Vredehoek and then round the mountain to Sea Point. Gwynne Robins, (née Schrire) said that the Arthur's Road Congregation in Sea Point had started its life in August 1897 as the *Beth Hamedrash Yeshurin* at 23 Buitenkant Street, District Six. Around 1914 it became the Chabad Shul.



Fig 16: Chassidic shul Buitenkamp Street

Not all the congregants were originally Chassidim by birth or by conviction, in fact nearly all of them were strongly *Misnagid* (the opposers of Chassidim) in outlook ... yet nearly all of them were masters of *Tephillah* (prayers) and *Niginot* (tunes) of the traditional hue...



Fig 17: Arthurs Road synagogue



Fig 18 signing the deeds for Arthur's Road

As these poor Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Eastern Europe settled down and started to move up the mountain, it became difficult to get a minyan. In August 1945 the congregation moved to Virginia Avenue, Vredehoek. The next generation in turn moved to the Sea Point beach front, and the congregational leaders under chairman Israel Kellner and vice chairman Isidore (Socher) Zeldin decided to follow suit and purchased Erf 951 in Sea Point East, known as 'Verandah Lodge' from the Dutch Reformed Church on 28 March 1953. Membership fees were kept low at three guineas - eighteen months later the congregation was still struggling to pay off the bond with R5 500 owing.

**Eli Rabinowitz of Perth** wrote on his blog:

Both of my grandfathers, who came from different backgrounds Rev Nachum Mendel Rabinowitz (a *misnaged* from Bialystok and Isidore (Socher) Zeldin a *Chassid* from Dvinsk were on the committee and were present at the signing of the document for the purchase of the building from the Dutch Reformed Church in sea point in March 1953.

## What happened next?

By the 1970s and 80s, Jewish families were on the move again. The older generations were dying out or moving to flats in Sea Point. Younger people were migrating to the suburbs or indeed much further afield like Australia, the UK, USA and Israel. In 1983 the Vredehoek congregation merged with Schoonder Street Synagogue. But even this could not assuage the haemorrhage.

**Ivor Kosowitz mentioned** that there were two attempts to merge the two synagogues. The first merger was about 1969-1970. The next was in 1983. He said: 'In 1983, when the Vredehoek and Schoonder Street shuls amalgamated, for a while, we sang in a mega choir, one Shabbat at one shul, and the next at the other.

Ivor said: Those were the wonderful days that we were privileged to have experienced. I counted recently and realised that seven of us from that choir live in Australia, three of us sing in Noranda Shul in Perth!

**The Beth Hamedrash Vredehoek** finally closed its doors in August 1993, fifty-four years after it had opened, and nearly a hundred years after its founding. It was a legendary spiritual and communal home for thousands of city centre Jews and for the many who travelled further for its services and simchas. The building still stands today and is an iconic and much-loved art deco landmark. It has changed commercial hands a few times since it was deconsecrated in 1993 and has been owned and run mainly by antique or home decor dealers. What remained of the congregation moved further over the mountain, to Herzlia School Synagogue. Many of the contents of the shul went to the Schoonder Street Shul. In 2003, the Round Shul was sadly closed and demolished to make way for a Town House complex. Steve Albert said: 'The Vredehoek shul building itself has been reasonably well maintained, and now houses an import/export, rugs and furniture dealer. Last time I visited, it had been painted rather gaudy red and blue. Many of the original fixtures were piled in odd corners around the building.'



Fig19: the Vredehoek Synagogue building as an antiques gallery. Photo courtesy of Steve Albert

**Ivor Kosowitz mused:** 'Those were the wonderful days that we were privileged to have experienced. I counted recently and realised that seven of us from that mega choir live in Australia, three of us sing in Noranda Shul in Perth!

**'I know Eli Rabinowitz.** We go to the same shul (Chabad) in Perth Australia and sing in the Jewish Male Voice Choir which is 90% ex South African.'

Today only the Great Synagogue remains in the Gardens, proudly next to the fairly new South African Jewish Museum. The Jewish community is mostly united. There are many substantial suburban synagogues that have not been part of this Gardens story. The Reform congregation is another story that hopefully somebody will write about. The Ponevez Synagogue building has had new life breathed into it, becoming the Torah High School in 2022.

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## Feedback from others who remember the congregations

Thanks to all who have sent feedback on this story and told us of your experiences in the City Bowl communities. It seems to me, looking from a distance, that once all these synagogues were close together, there was some confusion amongst Capetonians as to where their loyalties and/ or preferences lay.

Several have mentioned 'mixed marriages' where one partner's family belonged to Vredehoek and the other to Schoonder Street, leaving the couple torn in limbo. Some belonged to one but were taught bar mitzvah by the other cantor. And the children and choirboys ran from one to the other on Simchat Torah to collect chocolates from both! And some even had mixed marriages in and with the Great Gardens Shul.

**One correspondent, Dan, wrote:** My extended family were not unified in their choice of which city bowl synagogues they attended. Several members were Roeland Street devotees, who then moved on to Schoonder Street. while my unitary family chose Vredehoek when we moved home to Vredehoek and then later Schoonder Street. My sister was married in the Vredehoek shul; no doubt upsetting her in-laws who were split in their allegiance between Schoonder and Gardens shuls. There was a similar backlash when one of my aunts got married at the Gardens shul instead of Roeland Street at the insistence of her father-in-law to be.

**Dan's cousin Lionel said:** I never fully understood all the 'politics' of building the Schoonder street Shul. I do remember my mother always talking about my 'yerusha' my grandfather with a Mr Reading being very involved in helping build, finance and motivate the building of the New Round Shul. From what I remember there was a faction who felt the Shul would not be necessary as there was enough space in the other Shuls. (What crystal ball were they looking into) I had my bar mitzvah on the 7th July 1962. I was coached by Cantor Immelman and at Cheder by Mr Achron. I never had my own seat but spent most of the services standing at the back of the shul. I also spent a fair amount of time playing soccer outside with all the other kids.

Living in Vredehoek in Virginia Avenue, it was a matter of which of the three Shuls to go to. The Round Shul always, even though the chocolates on Simchas Torah were better at the Vredehoek Shul. Rabbi Marcus (of Vredehoek) lived in Maynard Street and we spent much time with his sons Barry and Shlomo. He never tried to 'poach' us to come to his shul. I think we were a bit scared of him because of his fiery speeches and banging so loudly on his biema when he spoke. We really had fun in those days. Shul on Shabbat is a must.

**Dr Leon Jacobson wrote:** I remember a small shul at the top of Mill Street known as the Ponevez shul (?spelling). It was in a house. I don't know much else. One memory. On Yom Kippur some of my more energetic friends would visit the other shuls for short periods. The "Old" Shul next to the Big Shul was used on high holidays for the overflow of worshippers. On Saturday mornings a children's service was held there. A number of marvellous ladies ran it. I remember Mrs Lurie, Mrs Penkin and Mrs Lazarus who were prominent but there were also others. I was president of this youth congregation for a year and still have (somewhere) the beautifully embroidered Tallis bag commemorating this I was given. Thanks for the memories. Dr Leon Jacobson

**Gail Loon Lustig wrote:** These are all really charming stories. How about this one? My grandfather, Isador Cohen, son of Hyman Isaac the gabbai of the Midresha Hachodesh's (Constitution Street) must have been quite a rebel since although he lived in 11 Schoonder Street with his wife and 4 daughters, he religiously went to the Garden's Shul where he had a seat. The story goes that during WW2 the two Michaels boys, Eric and Sidney sat next to him every Shabbat in their father's seat. Old Man Michaels (that's how the older generation were called) had been called up and was serving in North Africa. His sons promised to attend Shul every Saturday while he was gone. Isador took it upon himself to care for the boys and constantly showed them the place in the sidur when they got lost. Many years later, imagine his joy when Eric married his niece, Miriam! My parents got married in the Garden's Shul and yes, my mother Rita, who later lived in Bellville and had studied Hebrew all her life, would be the chief 'page finder' for the ladies in our Shul. Thanks for all this Geraldine.

**Solly Berger siad:** I was part of this communal life and still am. It is heart warming filled with nostalgia to read what has been written. I joined the Gardens choir in 1945 and except for a sojourn in Bellville for a number of years, am still singing. Was chairman for four years. I remember Donnie and Rita Loon (Gail's parents) from the KD Golf club so well. Keep going SOLLY BERGER

**Vicky Scher wrote:** The Constitution Street shul which was in District 6 became the Vredehoek Shul because the community moved out of the area. I remember the Constitution Street Shul. It was big and very dark inside. I was a small child. When they built the Vredehoek Shul a man by the name of Mankowitz who was very pious and may be knowledgeable would supervise that everything was done according to Halacha. An interesting thing was that the members of the previous Shul got the same seating in the new one. Rabbi Duschinsky was the Rabbi when we got married. We were the first Chuppa that he did in Cape Town. Cantor Lichterman was the Chazan. I have that photo.

I loved reading about all of the Shuls. And my memories of the Gardens Shul are very precious because I was a child. When Rabbi Abrahams came to Cape Town, he started the idea of children's services. Every Shabbat after the main service, we went into the Shul and sat in the front rows of the middle section and Freda Rabinowitz was the teacher. On Succot, the Succah was made of corrugated iron and two openings. Entry and exit and we would be given a small cool drink. I had my Batmitzvah there and that too was thanks to Rabbi Abrahams. When he would give a sermon, it was amazing and when he would spread out his arms with his Tallit hanging down to Bless the congregation he looked like an Angel. A side mention. When Richard Tucker the famous Tenor came to the Shul and sang from the Bimah he said the acoustics were the best. Vicky

**Gwynne Robins (née Schrire) wrote:** Many years ago, I interviewed **Esther Wilkin** who had grown up in District Six and recalled details of a traditional and religious Yomin Noraim. She said she was a product of a 'mixed marriage' – her maternal grandfather attended the Chassidic Shul in Buitenkant Street, her father sang in the Gardens Shul choir, and the children would participate in both worlds. They would go to the Chassidische Shul the first day, the Gardens Shul the second. She recalled 'When you came to the Gardens Shul, they looked you up and down – even if you were a 5-year-old to see what kind of dress you were wearing

and if there were shoes to match. But at the Chassidische Shul nobody cared what I wore, how I wore it, they were mostly immigrants. They were very fortunate if they had nice dresses to go to shul in, even if they were hand-me-downs from older sisters or cousins.' The second day they would go to the Gardens shul. 'There was dignity there. You could not say a word, but at least at the Chassidic shul you could run in and out – children were children – they thought if you heard two holy words it was wonderful. My grandfather would say "Each Hebrew letter is a song in itself. Every time you say one letter you are praising the Lord in the Eiberster." You ran about – you grew up in that atmosphere, it became part of you. The Gardens Shul was different. You had to sit down from the beginning of the service to the end. You could not run around. You could not go out'. (see link to Esther's memories at the end)

**Gwynne said:** I have written a centenary history of the Claremont Shul -*The First 100 Years 1904-2004 5664-5764: The Story of the Claremont Hebrew Congregation*, published by the shul in 2004 and edited by Esther Surdut. It is a beautiful book Eric Michaels used to look after the Gardens Shul. One day he had to see to the replacement of a broken pane in the stained-glass window upstairs right at the back of the ladies section. One of the workmen pointed out to him the lettering included in the stained glass at the bottom of the window. It contained the date and name of Eric's father who had been responsible for installing them, I think in the 1930s. Eric was not yet born then and was not aware of his father ever mentioning it. You can see it if you climb to the top of the ladies' section.

You have mentioned Rev Pulver, who ended up happily and appreciated in Australia. I published an article about him in *Jewish Affairs*. (Thanks to Gwynne you can read this on the CHOL memoirs pages see link below.)

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## Some links relevant to this article that you may like to explore:

**Vredehoek Shul** There is a wonderful recording of the final service that took place at Vredehoek on 8 August 1993. Cantor Ivor Joffe is the choirmaster. The cantor is Joel Lichterman (and maybe also his brother cantor Ivor Lichterman). Both now live in USA. Their father Jacob (holocaust survivor) was cantor at Vredehoek shul for many years. He taught Ivor Kosowitz and many others for their Barmitzvah. The keynote address was delivered by Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris. Many of the dignitaries of the synagogue were present as was blind Canter Immerman. You can see this service here:

### [Vredehoek Final Service](#)


You can read more about Vredehoek and Schoonder Street Synagogues in a vast collection of documents and photographs assembled by Eli Rabinowitz. here

### [Eli's Cape Town Synagogue collection](#)

This includes material collected by Saul Issroff on the SA-SIG site)

Ivor Kosowitz had created Facebook pages for 'I used to go to Vredehoek shul'

### [Vredehoek members](#)

**Schoonder Street Shul** To hear that famous Slichot service with Cantor Simcha Koussevitzky and choir including Ivor Kosowitz click here  [SlichotKoussevitsky1970.MP3](#)

If you ask for Schoonder Street in YouTube – you get some lovely Videos of Simcha Koussevitzky:

### [Schoonder Street Shul](#)

## Gardens Shul

**[Rev Pulver's plight](#)** Read Gwynn Robin's article about the very first minister in South Africa, Rev Isaac Pulver, and what he found in the congregation, on the CHOL memoirs page

## The Ponevez Shul

Eli Rabinowitz created a web presence for the Ponevez shul Maynard Street, with pictures of the building and priceless interviews with members. You can see it here: [Ponevez Synagogue Eli](#)  
Here is a video of the enthusiastic Aleinu at the Ponevez led by Stan Beinart [Aleinu at Ponevez](#)  
In 2022 new life was breathed into the building when the Torah High School was inaugurated in the building. See pictures here: <https://about.aish.com/ponevez-to-cape-town/>

## The Chassidishe Shul, Buitenkant Street 1897 – to Arthur's Road

See Eli Rabinowitz's pages of historical documents and pictures here including the fire 2018  
[Chasiddic shul to Arthurs Road](#) <https://elirab.me/arthurs-road-shul-on-fire/> [Restoration](#)

**Synagogues of Africa:** To see Prof Jay Waronker from the USA's book of paintings of the Synagogues of Africa. He has a website and has just published a new book on the subject. See <https://www.africansynagogues.org/> and <https://a.co/d/hblmvmI>

Read Esther's account of growing up in District six in the 1920s on the memoirs page of CHOL  
[Esther Wilkins Memoir of District Six](#)

[Clare Wollach Memoir](#) on the CHOL site on pages 4 and 5. (Clare's grandfather, Hyman Isaac, was Gail Lustig's great-grandfather. Her grandmother, Gitel, is buried in the Mount Of Olives, Jerusalem. Gail is named after her.

## Marais Road Synagogue



[Marais Road, Sea Point](#) This link goes to an 'Exhibition' on the Kaplan Centre Website written and researched by Gwynne Robins (Schrire) about the history and the ups and downs of the Marais Road Congregation in Sea Point. Jan smuts laid the foundation stone in 1934. Fig 20: Cornerstone of the Marais Road synagogue

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**CHOL Newsletter no 19 Some Communities of Cape Town – origin – migration – and now?**  
compiled by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London, May 2025

Checkout the CHOL website: [www.chol.website](http://www.chol.website) which now has on it:

- 59 [Communities](#)
- 62 [Memoirs](#)
- 166 original [Stories](#)
- 41 Videos of [Presentations](#)

also on the site are resources and journal articles and all our CHOL newsletters

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**CHOL – Community History On-Line** is a forum set up in 2020, under the auspices of the Kaplan Centre at UCT and the South African Jewish Museum – bringing together all those working on / or interested in creating an online presence relating to the **History of Jewish Communities in Southern Africa**. see [www.chol.website](http://www.chol.website) contact [info@chol.website](mailto:info@chol.website).