

Memories of the High Holy Days and Succoth in the 1920's by Beulah Gross

The following are extracts from my maternal history as told to me by my late mother who came from a large, deeply religious family. They lived in Port Elizabeth in South Africa and attended the Raleigh Street Synagogue which, now known as the Synagogue and Youth Foundation, is a national monument. My great-grandfather, Avrom Eliasov, was a founder member of this synagogue.

As Mom remembered it, there was no antisemitism in Port Elizabeth then. Although Jews were a minority group, their festivals and holidays were accepted and honoured by non-Jews. In fact, non-Jews were envious, as Jews had so many more holidays and time off school and work.

On Rosh Hashanah all members of the family received new outfits which were carefully chosen. Even those families whose finances were stretched managed to give the children new clothes and something new, albeit small, for each of the adults. Those who could afford new clothes for every member of the family were 'dressed up to the nines'. The women always wore hats and all children, no matter what age, had their heads covered in shul.

Mariana, my great-grandmother, often wore one of her favourite 'best' dresses, a black, fitted frock decorated with a small motif of two flowers fashioned in shiny royal blue beads on the bodice. She always wore a gold fob watch chain pinned to one side on the front.

The whole family walked in a large group a very long way to attend the synagogue and walked home again at the conclusion of the services. They remained in shul the whole day and decorum was strictly maintained.

Small children were left at home with black nannies or taken to nearby homes of friends where they were looked after. Children attended shul from the age of about five and they were always quiet and well-behaved. Occasionally they were allowed out to play in the shul grounds but not for long. They were not allowed to run in and out of the synagogue and had to whisper requests to their parents but only if it was very important. The boys were always downstairs with their fathers and the girls upstairs with their mothers.

When the Ark was opened everyone stood, no one moved from their place and no one was allowed to leave or enter the synagogue. During Yizkor all children and adults who had not lost a relative were urged to leave the synagogue. Those left inside cried and moaned heavily during this service.

On Yom Kippur the children under thirteen whose homes were far from the synagogue went to the homes of friends to share the midday meal before returning for the afternoon service. From the age of about nine or ten they attempted to fast, not very successfully, but it was a matter of pride to compare the length of time they lasted with their friends. Sometimes they would hold their mouths under a running tap but didn't swallow and they never ate anything until they couldn't hold out any longer. They understood the concept of fasting because religion was such an integral part of their lives.

The whole service was solemn and decorous but the children were particularly impressed and awed when the rabbi prostrated himself on the bimah in supplication on behalf of the congregation.

The main meal for Rosh Hashanah always began with apples and honey followed by gefilte fish, farfel soup, chicken and vegetables. Dessert was usually two kinds of taiglach (plaited sweet biscuits preserved in syrup), almonds and raisins. Two round raisin-studded challot, called kitkes in South Africa, were also served. The adults drank kosher wine and the children had sips of watered-down wine to welcome in the New Year.

The meal before the Fast was always kneidlach soup and a small meal of meat or fish and vegetables cooked with no salt or spices to allay excessive thirst during the Fast.

The family always broke their Fast with a drink of water and perhaps some wine followed by warm *bulkelach* (rich scones filled with nuts, raisins, cinnamon and sugar and lots of butter) and tea or coffee. After a little wait to let this settle, the family sat down to a festive meal of chopped and pickled herring, soup and the ever-popular chicken and vegetables. Dessert was *imberlach* and *pletzlach* (sugared sweetmeats made from carrots and plums respectively) and *taiglach*.

Immediately after the Breaking of the Fast, the children helped Avrom build a large *succah* in his backyard and enjoyed decorating it with fruit and vegetables. It was made of narrow wooden struts and the roof, which comprised large branches and leaves, allowed light through. The *succah* was large enough to accommodate six or seven people at a time and contained a wooden table and a bench for seating. The children ate their meals in it whenever they visited their grandparents but Avrom, being a totally observant Jew, ate all his meals there and slept in the *succah* for the prescribed eight days of the festival.

Memories like this, warm, loving glimpses of a past era, are woven into the fabric of our family history and are the cornerstone of my faith in the continuity of Judaism.

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