

## My Childhood in Durbanville, South Africa by Avra Scher

I recall the Durbanville of my youth as a tranquil and quaint village enhanced by the natural beauty of surrounding mountains, forests and fields of seasonal plants and shrubs.

Our family, parents, Nokkie (Nathan Harry) and Vicky (nee Surovsky) Scher, children, Colin, Neil, Avra and Roy.

Our home, 24 Van der Byl Avenue.

The Durbanville Shul, Gladstone Street, established in 1927, was a focal point of our lives. Even though we were a small community, the Shul had a tremendous impact on my life. The Scher families and Durbanville were synonymous. If one mentioned that one lived in Durbanville, the general response was 'you must be a Scher'. Likewise, if someone heard the family name Scher, the conversation continued, "no doubt you are from Durbanville". There is actually a 'Scher Street' in Durbanville.

Our Dad grew up in Durbanville. His parents were Abie and Golda (nee Berman) Scher. Their home was 1 Queen Street. They were extremely generous and hospitable people. They opened their home to *landsleit* who came from *Der Heim* and made them welcome to eat and sleep at them until they found a way of moving on.

Reverend Dorogov accepted the Scher hospitality. He lived with them for 18 years! He taught the young children in the community. Dad learnt *Gemara* and *leining*, fluent and clear reading from the Tanach.

Dad was a central figure in the Shul. He was responsible for the reading of the Torah, *Kri'at HaTorah*. I recall that after Shabbat / Chag dinner, Dad would sit and practice the reading for the following day. He was also the *Shaliah Tzibur*. He felt uplifted whenever he took this role upon himself.

The position of Chairman of the Shul was shared between Harry Sacks and Dad.

Traditions in the community included a tea at the home of the Chairman on the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashanah. Our Mom set up a table with the most beautiful and delicious cakes and biscuits.

Another communal get together was the Simchat Torah dinner which was held in the Shul Hall. Each family contributed to this event.

Our Mom, Vicky, was extremely active in the Women's communal services. Besides the above mentioned get togethers, there were activities for Purim, Yom HaShoa, Yom HaZikaron and Yom Ha'atzmaut. The women were affiliated with Bnot Zion organization. They held many events to raise funds.

The highlight event that I remember was the Exhibition 'the cycle of Jewish life and the history of Zionism and modern Israel'. The idea was unique. The setting was in the entrance to the Durbanville Library. The background work took much organization, research and cooperation. Families were asked to bring Judaica, artifacts and clothes with a unique style that were manufactured in Israel (for example Maskit sewn and embroidered products etc.). LP records with Hebrew songs were also part of the Exhibition.

Our dining room table was covered with books relating to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, pogroms, Theodor Herzl, the beginnings of Zionism through World War I, rise of Hitler and Nazism, World

War II, Shoah, Anne Frank's Diary, to the declaration of the State of Israel. The International Edition of the Jerusalem Post was a weekly newspaper in our home.

I sat for hours and hours, poring over these books. Together with my Mom, we decided what I should copy and write as explanations for the exhibition.

The response was phenomenal. People came from the surrounding towns to see the Exhibition. Many were Gentiles and were introduced to the Jewish life cycle, from Brit milah, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, Wedding with *Chuppah*, etc. They looked through the literature and were overwhelmed at the background to our Jewish lives and heritage. The public were introduced to the Jewish way of life, Shabbat and the various *Chagim* each with its own symbols, traditions and foods. They heard and read reasons for celebrating these festivals.

My Mom's Dad, Boris Surovsky, was a very talented and artistic man. He created the *menorot* that are placed on either side of the *Aron HaKodesh* in the Durbanville Shul. These were made in memory of his wife, Rivka. His beautiful *Ner Tamid* is also still shining in the Shul to the present times.

The parents organized a 'teacher' (not a qualified person) to teach us in our 'cheder'. These lessons introduced us to basic Hebrew, reading and writing, reading from a Siddur and a few explanations about each week's Torah reading / *Parashat HaShavua*. Our teachers were not the most enthusiastic personalities. I couldn't imagine then, that one day I would enjoy studying Hebrew, after aliyah in December, 1979, at WUJS (World Union of Jewish Students, Arad).

The Shul committee encouraged Hebrew teachers (sometimes they were Israeli families) from Herzlia School to come *daven* in our Shul over the *chagim*. At one stage they invited a young medical student, who was a boarder in Cape Town from Port Elizabeth, to participate in the *tefillah*. This man was not destined to be a doctor and he turned to studies that really spoke to his heart, the Rabbinate. He became a prominent Rabbi in South Africa. I am referring to the late Rabbi Desmond Maisels z"l. He maintained a connection with our family even after my parents aliyah to Israel.

As a little girl, I remember sitting on my Zaida Abie's lap in Shul prior to the start of the Service. He opened the Siddur on the page which had the *aleph bet* in big letters and a row of the vowels. He held my hand and we went from letter to letter. He was delighted when I pronounced the letter correctly.

The Scher families were mainly a farming community. We loved our visits to our farm "Spes Bona". Prior to Pesach, Dad would bring home a huge straw basket filled with grapes. The Scher industry went into action, preparing wine for Pesach. Mom would make her special grape jam.

We enjoyed drinking fresh milk from our farm. Who knew about bought white cheese, cream and butter? All those products were homemade!

Mom used to drive to Cape Town and buy kosher slaughtered chickens and meat for us and the other immediate families. The meat was placed and salted on a wooden frame which had an opening to drain the blood. The koshering process in action.

The annual Shul braai / BBQ was a hugely successful fundraiser. It was held on one of the farms in the district. My Mom was THE ticket seller. We, the children, were encouraged to share and participate in most events. At the braai, I used to walk around with a straw basket and sell raffle tickets.

Pre Simchat-Torah was a big event in our home. The boxes of slabs of chocolates were placed on our dining room table. We prepared string tied packages for each family. I wrote each one's name and placed it on the relevant pile. We were delighted that we could choose our favourite flavours for our package. Each child received a paper flag and I would happily join my siblings and cousins and walk around the bimah, flying my flag and feeling part of the chag.

Our cousins were our friends. Some of us were in the same class in junior school, then we met at Cheder in the afternoon. We were often seen walking in the village, on our way to each other. Besides the above activities, we shared much time socializing, playing tennis, swimming in our pool, listening to records etc.

In November 1970, a heartbreaking tragedy befell our family. My Mom and Zaida Abie survived a horrendous car accident. Bobba Golda, Auntie Hannah (Hanke Scher) Raichlin and Auntie Judith (Judy Bruk) Scher were killed. Five of our first cousins, one only a baby, through to teenagers were orphaned from their mothers. Our lives were turned upside down and since then there is a distinctive line dividing the before and after in our lives.

Dad's sister, Sox Herr and family moved from Potchefstroom, Transvaal to help take care of the families.

A year later the Abie Scher family donated a Sefer Torah to the Durbanville Shul in memory of the deceased from that accident. A ceremony that is ingrained in my memories of Durbanville. Dad read from that Torah.

Years later, my brother Neil, organised that the Sefer Torah be brought to Israel. Once again, Dad held it and brought it into the Beit Knesset in Ramot, Jerusalem, where most of the family reside. Subsequently, all great grandsons and great great grandsons of Abie Scher have read their Bar Mitzvah Torah portions from this Sefer Torah in Israel.

We joined the Bnei Akiva Youth Movement and our Sundays were spent sharing these activities together.

Durbanville, then a quaint village with no traffic lights and no supermarket, but with a warm and embracing small community certainly left an indelible mark on my childhood.

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## **My Childhood in Durbanville, South Africa by Avra Scher**

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### **A Word about Avra Scher:**

Grew up in Durbanville, Cape, South Africa. Aliya, December 1979. Children Lior and Netanella, born in Jerusalem, Israel. After studying at WUJS Ulpan, Arad, I moved to Jerusalem. Worked with the Young Judaea Year Program.

Studied Scientific and Technical Photography, Hadassah College of Technology, Jerusalem. Medical (all departments, surgery, research labs etc) and Ophthalmic Photographer, Shaare Zedek Medical Centre Jerusalem.

The last few years I have been working in daycare with new born babies.