

The Story of Sam Perch by Stanley Loon

By 1920, when the whole of Eastern Europe was being involved in revolution and counter-revolution, the Jews were helpless victims of pogroms and other atrocities.

When the stories infiltrated into South Africa, a Capetonian, Isaac Ochberg, was deeply concerned about the hundreds of parentless children who were known to be wandering around even hiding in the forests and foraging in every conceivable place for anything they could find to eat.

He therefore approached the Government for permission to bring as many Jewish orphans as he could gather in Eastern Europe to South Africa. After many protracted consultations, the Smuts Government finally granted permission to bring 200 Jewish orphans to South Africa on the condition that the entire Jewish community made themselves responsible for the project and that at no time would these children become a burden to the State.

Ochberg went to Poland and during June and July, 1921, he moved from one devastated village to another picking up homeless children and took them to special depots where he had people waiting to take care of the children. Most of the children were in a shocking state, starving, clad in rags and verminous. Many were ill from the trauma of the horrible experiences which they had had, and many were still in shock from seeing their parents murdered or having to watch their mothers being raped.

By August 1st, he had gathered together as many as he could, and then came the tragic and heartbreaking task of having to select those who could be taken and those to be left behind. Having performed his grim task, he left Warsaw with the 200 selected children and made his way with them to Danzig. A boat he had chartered then took them to London and from there they boarded the Edinburg Castle to Cape Town where they arrived on 19th September, 1921. Hundreds of weeping, cheering people greeted these wretched refugees when the ship docked.

100 of the orphans went to the Oranjia orphanage in Hope Street, Cape Town and 100 went to the Arcadia orphanage in Johannesburg. Two of the orphans who went to Oranje were brothers Yser and Szepsel Perechodnik who came from Pinsk, then Poland and now Belarus. Their names were anglicized to Oscar and Samson Perch. Sam was about 7 years old.

About 1928, Sam left the orphanage and went to the Transkei where he worked at a trade store. He must have stayed there for some time for when he came back to Cape Town, he was fluent in Xhosa. Oscar and Sam went to Riebeeck West where they started a General Dealer business called Perch Brothers. Riebeeck West was the home town of Jan Smuts and the store was originally owned by the Smuts family.

Later, Sam returned to Cape Town and built a small building which was the start of Central Stores on the Old Paarl Road in Kraaifontein. In 1946, he married and settled down with his wife, Bella in Boston Estate, Bellville. They had 2 children, Elian and Ivan.

In Kraaifontein, he served on the local council and served two terms as mayor there. He was a public speaker of note and many times at ceremonies in Bellville, he was called to propose toasts at weddings, celebrations and other functions.

In 1969, tragedy struck when Bella passed away from a parasitic cystic disease of the brain. She was 45. Sam went into deep depression and for the first and only time told his sons about the terrible pogroms he lived through in Poland and losing both his parents to starvation. His health deteriorated and he died in August, 1974.

Last year in July, I went to a lecture on the Ochberg orphans. I learned that my great aunt was an Ochberg orphan. She married my grandmother's brother. Another brother adopted another orphan who paid the ultimate price in Tobruk in June 1942. He is buried in the El Alamain war memorial cemetery. The day after the lecture I ordered the book "The Ochberg Orphans and the horrors from whence they came" by David Solly Sandler. When the book came, I turned immediately to the chapter of my great aunt. I was stunned to see, on the page before, a picture of the Perches with Rabbi and Queenie Zucker. It is from here that the story of Samson Perch came.

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Another reference book was "THIS WAS A MAN" by Bertha I Epstein, Isaac Ochberg's daughter.

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