

A Transvaal DorpBy Edgar Bernstein

THE FIRST MINYAN

A story of the early days in the development of South African Jewish Community

IT is winter in the Transvaal now.

The winter rains have fallen, and the winter cold has come, and it is good to have a fire in the grate these nights.

AND it is good to sit by the fire in reminiscent mood, recalling a life gone by that cannot come again; recalling faces, people, incidents; incidents which may have had no particular significance at the time they occurred, but which the passing years have touched with mellowness, and which therefore now are sweet. For do they not form part of *our* past, the unwritten book it has taken us our life to create? There are books we love dearly that are as very friends to us; but this strange book is the dearest of them all.

Sitting before the fire on such a night, stray incidents rise in the mind and slowly form themselves into a story; and the story they would tell is that of a Jewish community in a small town in the Transvaal . . . such a town as here in South Africa we do not think worthy of the title "town," and which we therefore designate a "dorp."

THE name of the town is not important; Lebanon will serve as well as any. It is a good name, culled from the Bible. All over the Transvaal there are little towns with Biblical names, for the folk who came and founded them half a century ago and more were an Old Testament folk, simple, earnest and humble before God. Their life was hard, and in many ways narrow, but their narrowness was not that narrowness some of their children have, which is responsible for so much anti-Semitic feeling to-day.

There were few Jews in Lebanon when I first came to the town—no more than four men, engaged in trading, and the wives of two of them. Of the other two, one was single, and the other had his wife still in Lithuania. He used to send her money every month, for the maintenance of herself and their two boys. He hoped to bring them out to Lebanon when his resources permitted. Meanwhile he lived alone, in a couple of small rooms behind the store. He was an elderly man, Russian by birth, rather stocky, with dark, curly hair and a dark beard greying near the temples. He was something of a scholar; had received in Lithuania a sound Yeshivah training. The married men used to call him "Reb Yechezkel," the single fellow addressed him as "Alte." He did not resent this mode of address. He said to me on one occasion, when I touched upon the point: "Nu, vos vilt ir? He is young and I am old; so he calls me "Alte." It is by me quite good."

He was a profoundly religious man, and observed the Sabbath regularly, closing his business on that day. The others had become more assimilated into the South African environment, and, though still living

This is the first of a series of short sketches, each complete in itself, which will portray the life of a small Jewish community in South Africa. The sketches will be published in the "Zionist Record" from time to time.

as Jews, they did not carry observance to this point. Also he did not mind. They were entitled to do as they liked, he told me once; a righteous man might not interfere in the affairs of his fellows, so long as they did no harm. What they did in regard to the Sabbath was a matter between them and God.

I liked Reb Yechezkel from the beginning. There was a certain similar sarcasm in our make-up, and I found that I shared with him a passion for chess. The other Jews in Lebanon could not play chess. Their chief amusement was cards, "twenty-one" at that time being the most popular game. Reb Yechezkel used to play as well, but he never got from "twenty-one" the same enjoyment as he got from chess!

We used to play a few games and talk with each other every Friday night and Saturday, save at such times as business called me away from the town. It became a recognised thing that I should go to him early on Friday evening for dinner. There were candles, and Kiddush, and always some little tit-bit which he did not have during the week, brought forward on Friday evenings "lekovod Shabbos." Sometimes it was a special Dutch cheese, sometimes it was smoked salmon—"lax," they all called it)—which was very expensive in those days, and which Reb Yechezkel ordered specially from Johannesburg. It made things very much like my childhood days at home, when mother *benscht licht* and father made Kiddush, and there was also special food on the table, and the evening was distinguished from the rest of the week by a certain atmosphere, difficult to define, that lent it a strange richness. The old Hebraic customs brought many memories to mind, and we used to exchange little droll stories of our families; a comical incident that happened ten years ago; some piquant remark uttered fifteen years back.

THE little Transvaal town grew bigger. More Jews came and settled there—a few more Jewish shopkeepers, a Jewish lawyer, a young Jewish doctor. It came to it at last that we were able to collect together a minyan for the *Yomim Hanoroim*, and of course, we got Reb Yechezkel to conduct the services. He did not have much of a voice, but he was a sincere man, with a certain charm about him, and I must confess that his *davnen* meant far more to me than the vocal gymnastics of the "Oberkantor" we have in Lebanon to-day. For now Lebanon is something of a "city" among the dorps, and it can afford the luxury of importing a Chazan with an operatic voice. And for opera he is very good, maybe; but in *Chazonuth* he isn't very im-

pressive. Old Reb Yechezkel, with his undistinguished voice and his simple, sincere manner, meant far more to the Jewish heart.

The minyan met in the home of Hirsch Kalmansohn. No other house was large enough for the ten men and six women and five children who gathered for prayers. All the Jews in Lebanon were there, whether they were of an orthodox turn of mind or not. For this was not simply a matter of religion and religious observance. It was far more than that. In that distant corner of the Transvaal, cut off from the rest of the world, far away from the countries from which we had separately come, our gathering on Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur was to us the symbol of our Jewishness, the subtle thread which wove us into the pattern of our people, wherever they might chance to be. Most of us liked Africa. I, who was born in a Transvaal town, loved Africa with a love that perhaps I can have for no other land. For there is grandeur in Africa that can be found in no other land—the savage majesty of a continent of darkness; a somnolent continent rich in mystery; a continent whose vast plains and blasted purple hills those strange men who mined King Solomon's gold may once have trod. But we Jews of Lebanon had connections beyond Africa, we had blood of a race that was civilised perhaps before Africa was known to men. And it was this blood and all it connoted that we honoured and recognised in our gathering together on the sacred days of our people.

IT was a strangely assorted crowd that gathered in the home of Hirsch Kalmansohn, the produce merchant—such a crowd as perhaps only Jews could form. Some of us came from Lithuania, some from Poland, one from America, myself from South Africa. We looked on the world with different eyes, we had widely divergent philosophies of life. Some of us knew no Hebrew. Some had known, but had forgotten, except for vague fragments. Not all of us could speak Yiddish. We conversed in a jargon that was a mixture of good, bad and indifferent English and Yiddish, with a few words of Dutch and a few Kaffir words thrown in. Not many knew the significance of the prayers Reb Yechezkel intoned. At the reading of the Torah, which we had borrowed specially for the occasion from an old Talmudist in Johannesburg, a few of us could pronounce the necessary *b'rocho's* only parrot-wise, repeating them word for word after Reb Yechezkel. Yet that strange service was marked by as fine a Jewish feeling as I have known in any South African *Schul*. And if we failed in some of the more elaborate responses, at least we managed the *omeins* in competent style!

And after the Rosh Hashonah service Hirsch Kalmansohn treated us to a feast none will ever forget. All the food in all Africa seem to be concentrated on Hirsch Kalmansohn's table that day! And there were speeches, and toasts, and fervent wishes for the future. Hirsch Kalmansohn opened with a welcome to all. He was not what one might call an impressive speaker.

(Continued on page 31).

From Town and Country

(From Our Own Correspondents.)

Benoni

At the annual general meeting of the Herzlia Club, held recently, it appeared from the report that the club had had a most successful year. Cultural meetings had been held twice a month, and there had been several social evenings, all of which had been well patronised. The members of the club showed great enthusiasm in its activities, and a comprehensive programme had been mapped out for the next few months, including lectures by Mr. B. Gering and Adv. J. Mervis, and an inter-debate with the Jewish Guild. It is possible, further, that the club will shortly initiate regular Hebrew courses.

As a result of the elections the following constitute the committee for the ensuing year: Chairman, Dr. David Morrison; vice-chairman, Mr. S. C. Ostrofsky; treasurer, Mr. M. E. Lurie; joint secretaries, Mr. I. Shiel, Miss N. Lomey; committee members, Dr. J. Penn, Dr. I. Shein, Mr. L. Noon, Mr. M. Favish, Mr. R. Miller, Misses Kelmovitz, Jacobson, Kaminsky, S and M. Isaacowitz, M. Silberman.

Bothaville

The annual general meeting of the local Zionist Society was held at the Synagogue on Monday, the 21st ult.

Mr. M. Cohen presided and reviewed the work done by the society during the last 12 months. The financial report showed creditable and satisfactory results.

The following were elected as office-bearers for the current year:—Chairman, Mr. M. Brill; vice-chairman, Rabbi G. H. Kahan; treasurer, Mr. I. Cohen; hon. secretary, Mr. Sam Tankel; committee members—Mesdames H. J. Heller, S. Hare, Miss F. Sacks and Mrs. T. W. Behr and B. Stockiner. Messrs. M. Cohen and H. J. Heller were elected auditors.

Germiston

The barmitzvah of David, son of Mr. and Mrs. I. Barris, took place on Saturday morning, 2nd inst., at the Germiston Synagogue, when the confirmand read a portion of the Law and Haftorah. After the service the congregation retired to the synagogue hall for *Brocho*.

Speeches were made, among others, by Rev. Wysheik, Cantor Rudy and Messrs M. L. Goodman, Barris (of Port Elizabeth), Bernstein (of Bloemfontein), and I. Dunsky.

In the evening a reception was held in honour of the Barmitzvah at Ginsberg's Hall, Johannesburg, at which Mr. Zvi Hareven presided. The toast of the Barmitzvah having been proposed by Rev. Wysheik and duly drunk, presentations were then made by the following: Mr. B. Cohen, President, on behalf of the United Hebrew Institutions of Germiston; Mrs. Cohen, Chairman of the Women's Section; Mr. J. Zinn, on behalf of the Combined Zionist Societies; Mr. A. S. Bernstein, Secretary of the Max Langerman Lodge, H.O.D., and Mr. Rosen on behalf of the Poswahl Society.

Harrismith

Under the auspices of the local Women's Zionist Society a cultural afternoon was held during April at the residence of Mrs. Belloch. The meeting was well attended and an interesting address was delivered by Mr. H. Chodos. At the conclusion of the meeting votes of thanks to the lecturer and the hostess were passed.

On the 16th ult. a debate between members of the Women's Zionist Society and of

the Congregation took place at the residence of Mrs. M. Freedman, the subject being "That the Acquisition of Palestine as a Jewish National Home is a Misguided Policy." The speakers in favour of the motion were Messrs. I. F. Raphaely and H. Helman, and those against were Mrs. H. Helman and Miss M. Lewis. After an interesting discussion, in which a number of speakers from the floor took part, the voting proved that the opposers of the motion had a very large majority. The Chairman thanked Mrs. Freedman for her kind hospitality.

Hermanus

The Society's Committee held a meeting on Sunday, May 27th, at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Elie Melnick. A great deal of Zionist business was transacted. A National Fund box has been placed by the Rev. Falkoff in his classroom, and it is hoped the pupils will support it. Arrangements were made for a social gathering to be held on June 17th and to invite speakers from Capetown.

Klerksdorp

On Sunday last, June 3rd, Mrs. Ethel Hayman and Dr. D. Ordman, members of the Executive of the Zionist Federation, drove down from Johannesburg with the object of reorganising the local Zionist Society. A large and representative gathering met in the Synagogue on the same evening to hear them. Dr. L. Herzenberg having welcomed the visitors from the chair, Mrs. Hayman, in an able address, illustrated and pictured Jewish life in Palestine and gave the meeting a clear insight into all that was going on there. Dr. Ordman followed with a stirring appeal for the re-establishment of the Zionist Society. They had to bear in mind not so much the practical side of the work as the bringing together and the uniting of the Jewish people in the cause. They must, in particular, instil in the young generation the ideals of the Jewish race and of the Jewish National Home. For these purposes a strong society was essential. He ended with an appeal to the youth to strive and work together in harmony, and to the elders to encourage the younger members.

The election of office-bearers was accordingly proceeded with and resulted as follows: President, Dr. L. Herzenberg; vice-presidents, Messrs. L. Dorf and F. Borer; hon. secretary, Mr. M. Rosin, jun.; hon. treasurer, Mr. M. Meyerowitz; committee, Misses E. Herzenberg, G. Rosin, A. Eisenberg, Mrs. K. Hesselsohn, Messrs. I. E. Owsianick, S. Schapow, J. Herman and H. Lurie.

The members desire through this medium to convey their heartfelt thanks to Mrs. Hayman and Dr. Ordman for their visit and for their addresses, and to the Zionist Federation for having arranged the visit.

Malmesbury.

On Sunday, the 27th ult., a meeting was held in the Synagogue to attend lectures by Miss Marcia Gitlin and Mr. Avin.

Miss Gitlin spoke of the general world situation to-day, and its effect on the Jewish position, ending up with an appeal for the Keren Hayesod, which she characterised as the main instrument in building Palestine. By supporting that fund we receive a hundredfold in return not in money, but in self-respect, security, and a feeling of equality with other nations.

Mr. Avin spoke in Yiddish on his impressions of his recent tour to the Continent and Palestine, and touched upon all phases of Jewish life in Palestine.

After some questions, Dr. Ph. Beinart moved a vote of thanks to the speakers.

Thaba 'Nchu

On Saturday, the 26th ult., a ball was held at the local Town Hall, under the auspices of the Zionist Society, for the purpose of raising funds for organisation needs.

About sixty couples attended and the sum of £11 2s. was obtained. The following is the committee responsible for this most successful function: Mesdames A. Blou, Ch. Gersohn, F. Grinker, Misses D. Gersohn, T. Gersohn, S. Neiman, and Messrs. A. Blou, L. Friedman, S. Grinker.

THE FIRST MINYAN.

(Concluded from page 19).

He was a small man, corpulent (in more heated moments his acquaintances called him "Bouch"), bald, with a thin straggling moustache. He wore old-fashioned gold-rimmed pinc-nez, and had a ludicrous habit of looking at people over the top of them. He was by nature a trifle pompous and a trifle arrogant. His Yiddish was not very good, his English not as good as his Yiddish. He spoke bilingually—though not in the South African manner. His "r's" were uttered gutturally, his vowels strangely distorted. He spoke of the significance of Rosh Hashonah for the Jews, and the significance of this particular Rosh Hashonah for the Jews of Lebanon. He wove into his speech many references to the rising tide of business, and hoped that the coming year would bring them even greater prosperity. He told in his quaint language and with ludicrous little gestures, how the service that day had moved him, and how it seemed to him that this was the "golden beginning for a new Yiddische *Leben* in Lebanon."

With an innate Jewish sense of drama—perhaps of melodrama—he paused for a moment, his hands clasped over his stomach, his beaming eyes surveying us over his glasses. "I can see that you all wonder what I mean," he said at last. "I mean that I see no reason why we should not have in Lebanon a *richtike* Yiddish community the same as in other towns."

He elaborated on the idea, pointing out how Lebanon was growing, and how, at the present rate of development, it would soon become large enough to support an official Jewish congregation.

This speech was greeted by tremendous applause. Hirsch Kalmansohn's idea went round like wildfire. Lebanon already had a proper minyan, it was a growing town, why shouldn't we begin to lay the foundations of a proper congregation? The idea was the main topic of conversation for months ahead. And when Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur was over, we began to discuss the matter in all seriousness. We ourselves were not prosperous enough to do much in the matter yet. Nevertheless, we could certainly begin, and we could begin best by starting to collect money to provide for future growth.

And that is how we did begin. A committee was formed, and set to work with gusto. But how it was formed, and what it did, is really another story.

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