

South African Friends of Beth Hatefutsoth
Safeguarding the history of 'Jewish Life in the South African Country Communities'

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WITBANK

Witbank, a major coal mining centre in Mpumalanga, is situated 115 km east of Pretoria and 100 km north east of Springs. The name, of Afrikaans origin, means "white sill" or "slab" and refers to an outcrop of light coloured rock near the present railway station.

Around 1878, Woolf Harris, a Lithuanian Jew, who had studied geology in Scotland, was prospecting in the Witbank district near Vandyksdrif. He discovered coal deposits there at a time when there was little demand for the mineral. However, with the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand and the construction of the Delagoa Bay Railway in the 1890s, coal became greatly in demand. In 1896 the Witbank Colliery Ltd was established by the Neumann Group together with Samuel Stanford. Sigismund Neumann, was a Jewish mining magnate whose group of companies controlled several of the biggest mines in South Africa. Witbank was laid out in 1903 by Witbank Colliery Ltd on the farm "Swartbos". The colliery controlled the town until 1906 when a health committee took over its affairs. A village council was elected in 1910 and in 1914 the town achieved municipal status. Two thirds of South Africa's coal is produced by the twenty two collieries in the Witbank district. Because of the accessibility of coal and water, some of the country's most important industries have been there.

Other Jews in the area prior to 1896 were Susman Cahn and Solomon Esakov, both from Lithuania. Michael Katz arrived before the Anglo-Boer War as did the Meyerson family whose two sons, Herman and Joseph were commandeered and fought for the Boers for seven months. Another Jew in the town at the time was Mr Sussman who served in the Middelburg Commando under Piet Trichardt.

Several dates have been cited for the establishment of the Witbank Hebrew Congregation, i.e. 1905, 1907, 1908 and 1909. However, it is known that the first minyan was held in 1905 at the home of Mr and Mrs Esakov and there is a photograph

taken in October 1905 labelled the Witbank Hebrew Congregation. The Esakovs were the most prominent Jewish family at the time, and services continued to be held in their home until 1908, when they took place in the Masonic Hall. Susman Cahn acted as baal tefillah. In 1909 Marcus Berkowitz was president of the congregation.

The synagogue was built in 1913 and was the first place of worship in the town followed by the Anglican Church in 1917. The foundation stone was laid by Emil Nathan, a member of the Legislative Assembly, with the service being conducted by Rabbi Dr J L Landau, rabbi of the Johannesburg Hebrew Congregation, and Rev S Manne. The historic Park Synagogue in Johannesburg was in the process of being demolished at the time, and one of its chandeliers was donated to the Witbank Synagogue. The chandelier was moved to the new Witbank synagogue when it opened in 1974. With the demise of the small community at Ogies in the early 1930s, two of their sifrei torah were given to the Witbank Hebrew Congregation. The foundation stone of the new synagogue in Clarendon Street, was laid by Chief Rabbi B M Casper on 11th August 1974. The ceremony was conducted by the resident minister, Rabbi Gordon with the cantor and choir of the Wolmarans Street Synagogue of Johannesburg. Selwyn Sanders, son of Louis and Muriel Sanders, was the first boy to have his barmitzvah in the new shul in 1974 followed by Michael Nahon, son of Leon and Nicky Nahon, in 1975.

The Witbank Jewish cemetery was established around 1908, the first grave being that of Jacob Barman (Yaacov ben Avraham) who died on 13 April of that year. As at 1982 there were 160 graves. In 1998 a restoration project was initiated by Mr Louis Shill to repair the graves and surround the property with a fence with lockable gate.

The Witbank Hebrew Hall was opened in 1938 by Rabbi Dr J L Landau, Chief Rabbi of the Federated Synagogues of the Witwatersrand. It stood on the corner of Kruger Street and Botha Avenue adjacent to the first synagogue. The building was destroyed by fire in 1972 and replaced by the Philip Shill Hall in 1974.

It is likely that all resident ministers performed shechita as part of their duties until 1970. In 1971 Rabbi Gordon slaughtered only poultry and kosher meat was obtained from Springs or Bethal.

Jewish education was provided in many different forms for the community. The Witbank Hebrew School was started around 1914 when Rev Hershman was the spiritual leader of the congregation and thereafter was run by successive resident ministers. For a period of approximately ten years, from the late 1930s, a teacher/principal was also employed for the school. The communities of Witbank and Middelburg assisted one another with teachers when necessary. Bible study groups were initiated by Rev Goldberg in 1936 and there is reference to a Bible Study Circle, the Chevra Ein Jacov, Mishna and Gemora in 1937. A new building for the Witbank Hebrew School was opened on 14 August 1938. In 1961 Rabbi Engel reintroduced Bible Studies for

members of the congregation on Saturday afternoons. In 1973, the Witbank Hebrew Congregation hosted an all day conference of teachers and ministers of the Transvaal Country Communities where methods and programmes for religious education and Hebrew were discussed. With the building of the new synagogue complex in 1974, the school was renamed the Sam and Gertie Young Talmud Torah. The Kineret Nursery School was opened in 1958 but had to close in 1962 as no teacher was available. By 1969 there were only three Jewish children of nursery school age in the town.

Although they did not live in the Witbank area, many Jews played an important role in the establishment in the coal industry there. As mentioned previously, Sigismund Neumann was a founder of Witbank Colliery Ltd. This venture grew into the major mining and industrial centre of Witbank. In 1936 the Lewis and Marks group combined their expanding coal interests to form Amalgamated Collieries of South Africa Ltd which included the Schoongezicht Colliery near Witbank. Around 1949 David and Sydney Hayden opened the first mechanised coal mine in the Witbank district, "Witbank South".

Other than in mining and shopkeeping, the early Jews in the town included a tailor, a shoemaker and a repairer of harnesses and saddles. A number of the concession stores on the mines were owned by Jews who lived in Witbank. Later occupations included farmers, dentists, doctors, chemists, hoteliers, lawyers, accountants, photographers and insurance agents.

Over the years the SAJBD was active in dispelling anti-semitic propaganda in the town as it became apparent. On Saturday 17th July 1982, swastikas and slogans were daubed on the walls of the Witbank synagogue.

Many of the Jews who lived in Witbank became prominent in secular affairs apart from their strong involvement in Jewish affairs. Solomon Esakov, a founder of the Witbank Hebrew Congregation and its president from 1912-1915, served on the congregation committee for many years. He was, in addition, the first Jewish town councillor of Witbank from 1907-1912 and was appointed to the first health committee which was the forerunner of the village council and municipality. Isaac Schech was the municipal attorney for 25 years from the 1920s and greatly assisted the municipal council in the development of the town. He was also instrumental in arranging the naturalisation of all the Jews from Russian and Lithuania who had settled in Witbank. Rev W Woolf was a member of the Witbank School Board from 1925-26, the vice president of the HOD from 1926-27 and a town councillor in 1928. Jacob Elias Manasewitz was chairman of the Witbank Zionist Society in 1929 at the same time serving on the town council.

Other Jews served on the town council and went on to become mayors of the town. Barney Joffe served as mayor from 1926-27, 1928-29, 1930-34; Mr J Katz from 1950-51; Dr Maurice Markiles, also the president of the congregation from 1935-36, served as mayor from 1936-37 and 1939-40; Dr Morrie Maselle from 1947-49; and Joseph (Yokkie) Shill from 1983-84 and 1989-90.

Well known personalities in the town included Gertie Young, who held executive office in many Jewish organisations for approximately 70 years, and Leibl Yudaken, (Yudaiken) a Yiddish poet who came to South Africa in 1924 and lived in the town for a few years before moving to Springs. His brother Isaac Yudaken developed a section of the town and has a street named after him. Louis Shill, born in Witbank in 1930, was chairman of many public companies under the Sage umbrella. He served as vice chairman of Amalgamated Banks of South Africa Ltd (ABSA) and as director of several other companies. He was appointed minister of National Housing and Public Works and served from 1993-94. Mr Justice Morris Woolf (Mokkie) Friedman was appointed acting judge in the Transvaal in 1986, was seconded to Bophuthatswana, where he was appointed a judge in 1987. As at 2001, he is Judge President of the High Court of SA (North West Province). He was also a keen Zionist having served as vice-chairman of the SAZF in 1979 and chairman in 1983. He was a member of the Zionist General Council and on the executive of the World Labour Zionist Organisation. In 1985 he chaired the Herzlia Commission, involving SA and the British Commonwealth in the reconstruction of the Zionist Movement.

Settlements where Jews lived.

The following places in the Witbank area had a Jewish presence at one time:

Blackhill, a railway siding south west of Witbank;

Brugspruit, a settlement in the Witbank/Bronkhorstspuit district

Clewer, a settlement south west of Witbank.

Coalville, a settlement comprising a concession store and post office, which services the Tweefontein United Colliery. It is situated 24 km south of Witbank;

Klipfontein, a settlement to the south of Witbank;

Minnaar, a railway station south west of Witbank;

Vandyksdrif, a railway siding and settlement south of Witbank, in the heart of the coal mining region;

Wakefield, a railway siding west of Witbank.

Jewish organisations.

The Witbank Zionist Society was established by 1905, and floundered for many years.

The first secretary was Mr W Behr. The smaller settlements around Witbank also participated in the Zionist Society, Mr M Lipson of Brugspruit being on the executive from 1906-08. In 1912 a new society was established and thrived. It participated in all major fundraising drives. Originally, both men and women were members of the society and in 1913 the society had sixty seven members.

The Witbank Jewish Dramatic Society was in existence by 1917 when it produced "Jewish King Lear".

The Witbank Jewish Helping Hand and Burial Society or Chevra Kadisha was in existence from at least 1923 when Israel Slomoi was chairman. It is likely that it was founded many years before that date.

HOD –Witbank Lodge was established in 1924. The first President was Bro J E Manasewitz. The consecration of the lodge was described as one of the most outstanding of its kind. A special train was hired from Johannesburg and stopped at all stations en route to Witbank to pick up HOD members and their families. In 1944 this lodge was renamed the M M Ussishkin Lodge. The lodge was a strong outpost of the Zionist movement , collecting large sums of money for Zionist campaigns, with the result that overseas emissaries always included Witbank on their visits. Prominent members of the lodge included Messrs Barney Hope, Les Gafinowitz, Sam Young and Vic Burman. In 1964 the lodge's membership of 72 included members from Middelburg, Ogies and Bronkhorstspuit. The lodge was officially closed in 1982 as it was no longer able to muster a quorum.

Witbank Young Israel Society was in existence by 1929.

Witbank Women's Zionist Society came into existence sometime before 1936. Their activities included the publishing of a cookery book and the production of plays such as "How to be a Jewish Mother" and "The Wooden Dish". Because their membership overlapped, the Women's Zionist Society and the Union of Jewish Women worked together on a number of projects and the meetings of the two societies were held concurrently in the 1960s and 70s. Regular Goodwill afternoons were held with guest speakers from Johannesburg. A Ladies Cultural Society, first mentioned in 1936, operated under the auspices of the Witbank Women's Zionist Society. The cultural society was still active in 1980.

Habonim was recorded in Witbank in 1936 and 1937. It amalgamated with the Witbank Bnei Zion to form Ichud Habonim Bnei Zion in 1963.

The Witbank Zionist Youth Society was established in June 1937, at the home of Mrs Gertie Young, with Rev Goldberg presiding. Mr L. Katz was the first chairman.

The Witbank Jewish Ladies Guild was established in 1938. The founder and first chairman was Mrs Gertie Young. This was the forerunner of the Witbank branch of the Union of Jewish Women to which they became affiliated in 1951.

The Witbank branch of the South African Jewish Orphanage was in existence by 1939.

Comradeship of Youth, a youth organisation, was active in the years 1943-44 despite opposition from the Zionist Youth Society.

Witbank Women's ORT -OZE was established in 1950 with Mrs Gertie Young as hon. Treasurer. The branch applied for membership to the SAJBD in 1951.

The Union of Jewish Women (Witbank) was established in 1951 with Mrs Gertie Young holding the position of chairman for 25 years and Hon Life Member from 1964. It had its roots in the Witbank Jewish Ladies Guild which started in 1938. The Union of Jewish Women was admitted as a constituent member of the SAJBD in 1953. In later years, as the membership of the Union of Jewish Women and the Witbank Women's Zionist Society overlapped, meetings were held concurrently. In 1981, with the decline in the Jewish community, this branch of the Union of Jewish Women was deregistered.

South African Yiddish Cultural Federation (Witbank) was established in 1952, the first chairman being Mr I I Behrman.

Witbank Bnei Zion was started around 1957. Annual activities included concerts and picnics. Events on a national level, i.e. the disintegration of the United Zionist Party Youth Organisation by 1961 and the merging of its junior youth movement, Bnei Zion, with Habonim, meant that from 1963 the Witbank Bnei Zion was known as Ichud Habonim Bnei Zion.

The Witbank Youth Congregation was established in 1959. The youth held Sunday breakfast minyanim as well as regular Saturday morning services and a study circle for Jewish studies and conversational Hebrew. Mr D Gavshon was chairman in 1961.

The Federation of Synagogues "Schlichim" was established in the 1960s for children between the ages of 8 and 12 who met every Sunday morning at the Hebrew Hall for two hours of fun-filled activities. The aim of the group was to forge a strong Jewish identity, both cultural and religious.

Witbank Jewish Youth Club was established in 1968 with the assistance of the SAJBD Youth Department and youth leaders from Johannesburg and Springs. Meetings were held every Sunday evening in the Hebrew Hall and activities included games, debates and social functions.

List of Ministers

Rev Hurwitz (first minister) 1912-1914

Rev I Hershman 1914- c.1925

Rev Woolf 1926-1929

Rev Becker 1929

Rev Phillip Rosenberg 1929-c.1930

Rev M Diamond 1932-1935

Rev L Goldberg 1936-1938

Rev L Zieve (Zive) 1938-1942

Rev N Menachemson 1943-c.1944

Rabbi Dr M Chigler 1946-c.1948
 Rev W M Bernstein 1948
 Rev David Garb c.1949-1956
 Rev Shalom Barron 1956-1961
 Rabbi G M Engel 1961-1970
 Rabbi M Gordon 1971-1976
 Rev Caplan 1978-1982
 Rabbi S Udwin 1983
 Rabbi Moses 1984-1985

Population statistics.

| YEAR | JEWS | WHITES | TOTAL |
|------|------|--------|---------|
| 1904 | - | - | - |
| 1936 | 350 | 2 772 | 8 259 |
| 1951 | 370 | 5 289 | 16 098 |
| 1980 | 132 | 38 939 | 152 797 |
| 1991 | 61 | 46 476 | 173 281 |

Community figures for Witbank indicate:-

1911 – 12 adult Jewish males
 1943 – 343 Jews in Witbank, 8 in Blackhill, 16 in Coalville, and 4 in Minnaar
 1953 – 320 Jews in Witbank, 21 in Blackhill, 7 in Coalville
 1964 – 280 Jews in Witbank, 8 in Coalville
 1970 – 13 Jews in Coalville
 1971 – 203 Jews in Witbank
 1973 – 7 Jewish families in Vandyksdrif
 1980/1 – 80 Jews in Witbank, 5 Jews in Vandyksdrif
 1998 – 19 Jews in Witbank

List of Jewish families.

Aaron
 Abrahams
 Abrahamson
 Adams
 Amaler
 Arkles
 Aronowitz
 Balkind
 Barnet (Barnett)
 Barron
 Bartkunsky
 Bayhack
 Bean

Bear
Becker
Beckman
Begak
Behr
Behrman
Begak
Behr
Behrman
Beink
Beitz
Benjamin
Berelowitz
Berkowitz
Berman
Bernitz
Bernstein
Bertz
Berz
Binum
Blackstone
Bleckman
Blieden
Bloch
Block
Blomson
Blum
Blumberg
Blemenfeld
Bolel
Bortz
Boyer
Bresgi
Brouze
Brozin
Buchman
Burman
Cahn
Caplan
Chigler
Cohen
Collis
Cooper
Cresner

Danilewitz
Davidowitz
Deiner
Dember
Dembo
Diamond
Dorfan
Drabkin
Druzin
Duke
Dworetz
Dworetzky
Dworkin
Dworsky
Ellert
Endlin
Engel
Eisen
Esakov
Esakowitz
Etzman
Falk
Fedder
Fedler
Feinstein
Feitelson
Feldman
Feldt
Finkel
Fleishman
Florence
Fox
Frank
Freundlich
Frewin
Fridjohn
Friedman
Froman
Gafinowitz
Gallis (Gaylis)
Galvid
Ganetsky
Garb
Gavronsky

Gavshon
Gersman (Gershman)
Gesner
Ginsburg
Glasser
Glick
Gluckman
Godlieb
Gold
Goldberg
Goldman
Goldring
Gollach
Goodman
Gordon
Gotlieb
Gottlieb
Grauman
Green
Hack
Haifer
Harris
Hayman
Hendler
Herman
Hershman
Herson
Heydt
Hillman
Himmelhoch
Hirschfield
Holtz
Hope
Horwitz
Househam
Hurwitz
Idels
Isaacs
Iseroff
Israelson
Isserow
Jacobs
Jacobson

Jaffe
Jaffit
Janet
Jankelson
Joffe
Joselovic
Josselowitz
Joseph
Kadish
Kalk
Kallenbach
Kaplan
Kappilowitz
Kaptus
Katz
Kavonic (Kavnoik)
Kessler
Kilov
Kilow
Kirsh
Kirson
Klass
Klatzky
Klawansky
Klein
Kleitman
Kopelowitz
Kramer
Krawitz
Krensky
Kruger
Kumin
Kupritz
Lager
Lakier
Lang
Lazarus
Leichowitzky
Lerner
Levin
Levitan
Levitas
Levitt
Lewsky

Lichtenstein
Lief
Lipman
Lipschitz
Lipson
Liss
Liwidsky
Loew
Lublinsky
Luntz
Malkin
Maltz
Manasewitz
Mann
Margo
Margow
Markiles
Marks
Markuschowitz
Marsh
Maselle
Max
Melamdovic
Melamed
Melman
Menachemson
Mervitz
Meyers
Meyerson
Michaels
Miller
Milner
Milwidsky
Morris
Moses
Myer (s)
Nafte
Nahon
Newfield
Noll
Nurick
Orelowitz
Orkin
Owersky

Peltz
Perel]
Phillips
Pitum
Poliakovsky
Pope
Prusof
Pulveritz
Rachman
Rajak
Ravid
Reeb
Resnick
Rich
Roberts
Rom
Rosen
Rosenberg
Rosenthal
Rosmarin
Ross
Ruthenberg
Sacharowitz
Sacks
Samuel
Sanders
Sandler
Sarovitch
Saskolsky
Schaffer
Schech
Scher
Schiller
Schlosberg
Schlugman
Schneider
Schraibman
Schulman
Schwartz
Segall
Shak
Shalkoff
Shapiro
Shatz

Shein
Sher
Sherman
Shill
Shiller
Shippel
Shlom
Shlugman
Shorkend
Sifren
Silkiner
Silpert
Simon
Siskind
Slivkin
Slomoi
Slonim
Sloot
Slugman
Smith
Smulowitz
Snipelisky
Snoyman
Sochorowitz
Sofinsky
Solomon
Speer
Stein
Stoler
Stumpf
Subel
Suskind
Susman
Sussman
Swartz
Swersky
Swirsky
Swilling
Szwarc
Tapuach
Tatz
Taub
Taylor
Tobias

Toderowitz
Trakman
Trentin
Tyler
Udwin
Wager
Wainstein
Wasserzug
Weiler
Weinberg
Weiner
Winer
Wolf
Wolk
Wolpert
Wolson
Woolf
Yalowitz
Yates
Young
Yudaken
Yudelman
Yudelowitz
Zieve (Zive)
Ziman