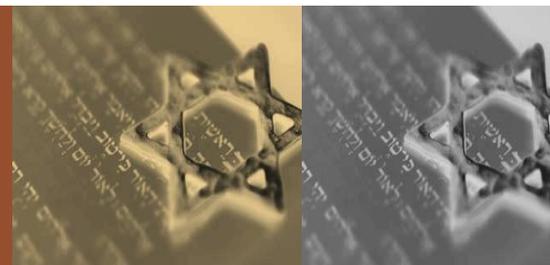


CHAPTER FOURTEEN: COMMUNITY NUMBER SEVEN THE JEWS OF SOUTH AFRICA



The specific fascination of the South African Jewish community is that it is a community that up to a couple of decades ago appeared to be healthy, strong and vibrant. However, the last years of the twentieth century has seen a great outflow of Jews from South Africa owing to fears – real and imagined that accompanied the fall of the apartheid regime and brought grave uncertainty and insecurity to the community as a whole. As a result, over a quarter of the community has left South Africa, striking out for other pastures, especially Australia, where a large emigrant community of South African Jews is in the process of putting down roots. Welcome to South Africa!

1. Who are the Jews of South Africa? Where did they come from? How many are there? What is their geographical distribution within the country?

It is difficult to determine the exact origins of the Jewish community of South Africa. The first reference to Jews in South Africa dates back to 1497, when Vasco Da Gama discovered the Cape of Good Hope. It is reported that in his extensive delegation and staff, several Jewish men were among his team of cartographers.

The second reference however, contains more detail. In 1652, the Dutch East India Company (DEIC), headed by Jan van Riebeeck, arrived in the Cape to establish the area as a central port for naval traders and merchants. The DEIC, who were to rule over the Cape until 1795, declared that only Protestant Christians could reside in the region. This came as a surprise to many, because of the tremendous financial contribution invested in the company by Jewish shareholders at the time.

When the British took control over the Cape in 1806, they were keen to further develop the region and the 'selective' approach as employed by the Dutch, was simply against their best interests. With time, the British began to offer grants and incentives for foreigners to come and live in the Cape and, as such, allowed freedom of religion for prospective inhabitants. The first group arrived in 1820. Approximately sixteen practicing Jews were among 'The 1820 Settlers' (as they are commonly referred to).

The arrival of the Jewish 1820 Settlers is considered to be the most significant in terms of the country's Jewish origins - as their establishment and settlement led to the future arrival of many more Dutch and German Jews to the Cape, who came in search of fortune and adventure, especially in the 1860s.

By 1841, the first Jewish congregation was founded in Cape Town, in the private home of one of the sixteen 1820 settlers. Eight years later (1849), a traditional synagogue



was established, under the name Tikvat Yisrael, and claimed the title of being the country's first official synagogue.

The discovery of South Africa's diamond fields in Kimberley in 1867 and the goldfields in the Transvaal in 1886 provided new avenues and opportunities for many of the Jews living in the country at this time. Traveling peddlers found their place in the rural areas of the country establishing themselves as shopkeepers and tradesmen and Jewish farmers helped to secure the wool and citrus industries.

By 1880, an estimated 4,000 Jews were living in the country. Expectations that this figure would impressively increase were confirmed, when in a 1911 nation wide census, only some thirty years later, results showed that over 40,000 Jews were living in the country. These Jewish emigrants to South Africa were primarily Lithuanian, with others coming from White Russia.

One common thread amongst these diverse emigrants was their urgent need to escape the pogroms and economic hardship of the Old World in Europe. These trends continued after the First World War as more Jews entered, especially from Lithuania, but in 1930, the South African Quota Act was legislated, severely curtailing immigration to the country from Europe. An exception was however made for German Jews, so that by 1936, six thousand German Jews, fleeing Nazi Germany, had arrived in the country. South Africa was not unaffected by Nazi ideology, and consequently, militant Afrikaaner groups, representing similar ideological beliefs, developed. The new rise of anti Semitism was followed by the Aliens Act of 1937, which prohibited any further German Jewish immigration to South Africa.

The great influx of Lithuanian Jews is a central phenomenon in understanding the makeup, diversity and homogeneity of the community today. The early "Litvaks" of South Africa, fleeing oppression and discrimination, came with strong ideals of humanitarianism and egalitarianism. Many of them had a sound knowledge of Jewish texts but at the same time they had been influenced by socialist ideals. They came from a country which had undergone many hardships both politically and economically. Some were Zionist, whilst others were Anti-Zionist, some were religious, whilst others were secular, yet despite their ideological polarization, they were collectively concerned about the elderly, the poor, orphans and the needy. Charitable deeds would soon become one of their foremost priorities.

Interestingly however, by 1930, of the total Jewish immigrants to South Africa, Lithuanians constituted only 58%, while the Poles increased to 26%. By 1970, South African Jewry had reached its peak, with roughly 120,000 Jews living in the country.

The past decades have seen a large emigration of South African Jews (which will be discussed later). Accordingly, the country's Jewish population is somewhat reduced, and whilst the task of determining exact figures is difficult, it is estimated that 85,000 Jews currently reside in the country.

Of this figure, an estimated 55,000 live in Johannesburg, 15,000 in Cape Town and 3,000 in Pretoria. The remainder is dispersed between Durban, East London and Port



Elizabeth. It is also noteworthy to mention the thousands of Israelis who have moved to South Africa in recent years. The total population of South Africa is some 47 million, with the vast majority of course, being black.

2. How can they be defined economically? What are their professions and occupations?

Since the early days, when Jewish immigrants to South Africa began to prosper as traders, businessmen and farmers, South African Jewry for the most part can be located within the middle to upper class of the economic scale.

Corruption and inefficiency have resulted in a very volatile and unstable South African economy, causing much concern and debate among South African Jewry. These fears are increased by the perpetual devaluing of the Rand (the South African currency), general inflation and affirmative action, all of which directly affect middle class white South Africans, and the Jews among them..

Many of the community's leading experts, authorities and academics have consequently left the country. These losses can never be replaced. Nevertheless, South African Jews still lead a very comfortable lifestyle, having excelled in the fields of business, law, medicine and academia.

3. What is the religious orientation of the community?

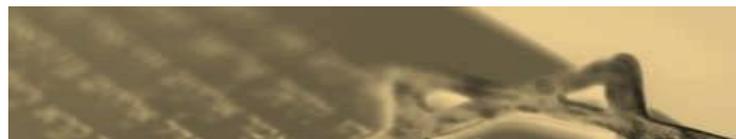
South African Jewry has been largely unaffected by the other religious trends towards liberalization that have taken place in other Anglo-Jewish communities throughout the world.

The vast majority of the 85,000 Jews living in South Africa are located in the centers of Cape Town and Johannesburg. The inherent Lithuanian spirit of the community has contributed to the strong Orthodox tendencies of the community and the Orthodox Rabbinate. There is a Sephardic minority, originally from the countries of Zaire, Zimbabwe and Rhodes: these are also located in these two centers.

The organisation and infrastructure of today's community are affected and shaped to a large extent by those of the British community (South Africa was part of the British Commonwealth of nations until 1960). Examples of this are evident in the existence of a Chief Rabbi, ceremonial procedures and prayer books.

Alongside the aforementioned British influence, much of the community's atmosphere and attitudes are connected to its Lithuanian ancestry. Consequently, South African Jewry has often been described as 'traditional,' with a profound focus on the intellectual side of the religion.

In the early 1990's, a socio-demographic survey of South African Jewry revealed that four fifths of the Jews described themselves as Orthodox. Around 13% identified with Reform Judaism while the remaining 8.8% did not identify with any particular



tendency. The estimation is that today, the percentages of Orthodox affiliation has risen.

The term 'Orthodox' to which most of the South Africa's Jews ascribe, should not necessarily imply halachic observance. It implies rather, a strong connection with tradition. For many South Africans it implies two Jewish parents who were born in Orthodoxy, and whom wish to continue a traditional home-life.

The Reform community of South Africa has undergone some name changes and today, is more commonly referred to as Progressive. Similar to other Reform communities around the world, the South African Reform community was founded in opposition to the Orthodox community.

Moses Weiler founded the South African Reform community just after 1932 and attracted many of the German Jewish immigrants to South Africa at the time, who arrived quite assimilated. Since its inception, at a time when the Orthodox leadership claimed that Reform Judaism would undermine Judaism and Zionism, it has today developed into a vibrant, attractive and meaningful framework for many of South Africa's Jews. In the late 1990's, some ten Reform Temples existed in South Africa.

It should also be noted that attempts have been made and continue to exist, to form a Conservative community in South Africa. Over the years, these attempts have been met with deep criticism and obstacles.

However, the most notable trend in regards to South African Jewry's religious orientation is that of the growing Ultra-Orthodox community. This movement, promoting the return of young, assimilated Jews to an observant lifestyle has been spearheaded by the twin institutions Ohr Sameach and Aish HaTorah, and is most prevalent in Johannesburg.

The Baal Teshuva movement has introduced the concept of the shtibl; small, modest, intimate houses of prayer. The shtibl now attracts many young individuals and is possibly the most attractive of all Orthodox avenues of expression.

4. What Jewish educational and cultural life is there in the community?

The South African Jewish community boasts a tremendously organized and structured network of communal organizations, cultural institutions and educational bodies.

The umbrella body is the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, to which most of the other organizations (including Hebrew congregations) affiliate. Among many other initiatives, the Board of Deputies is involved in Jewish and Israeli Hasbara, often needing to combat anti Jewish or anti Israel media sentiments, the monitoring of national legislation which may potentially affect Jewish citizens, the monitoring of anti-Semitism in the country. It is also involved in developing Jewish life in the more isolated rural areas of the country.



Similarly, the South African Zionist Federation stands as the umbrella organization of all Zionist societies and organizations within the community at large. These include the youth movements (Habonim Dror, Bnei Akiva, Betar and Netzer) as well as the South African Union of Jewish Students (SAUJS), which acts as the Jewish voice on all major University campuses around the country. The South African Zionist Federation is primarily involved in strengthening the community's ties with Israel, promoting the ideals and values of Zionism and representing the community on a global Zionist level.

South Africa is exceptionally fortunate in the number of Jewish Day Schools that it contains. From the end of World War Two, the role of Jewish Day Schools became very important, so much so that today, it is estimated that 60% of all Jewish youth within South Africa attend and graduate from one of these numerous Jewish Day Schools. Some schools offer a more intensive course of Jewish studies. However, across the board, all of South Africa's Jewish Day Schools comply entirely with the National educational curriculum and in addition offer Jewish History, Hebrew and Jewish Studies as core subjects.

The Jewish youth movements also offer a strong educational experience during their various activities, weekly meetings and summer camps.

There are many cultural and social bodies which cater to the needs of the Jewish community and the wider South African population. One recent example is the relatively new Holocaust museum in Cape Town. The Jewish Dramatic Society (in Johannesburg), Jewish newspapers and editorials, and the overwhelming amount of kosher delis, bakeries and restaurants (particularly in Johannesburg), all contribute in their own way, to the cultural melting pot.

5. What is the situation of assimilation and intermarriage in the community?

The deep sense of community, as well as the unique situation of the community, situated strategically as it is between the Black majority and the white Afrikaaner minority (and belonging to neither), has resulted in a low assimilation rate. Whilst it is estimated that intermarriage sits at around 7%, even in these cases, most Jewish parents would still rather send their children to a Jewish Day School and/or raise them with a firm understanding and acknowledgement of Jewish practice and ritual. Furthermore, with the many Jewish organizations and societies catering for all age brackets and interests, it is difficult to 'fall through the gap' and most South African Jews find some kind of a place in the community.

What is arguably more of a concern in this regard is acculturation. Many South African Jews nowadays are deeply committed to the building of a 'New South Africa,' free of racial prejudice and social injustice. The result in many instances is a deep South African identity, which tends to dominate any other religious and/or ethnic identity.



6. Are there any major historical circumstances that affected the inflow or outflow of Jews to and from the community?

An insight into the South African Jewish community would be incomplete without understanding Jewish life during the Apartheid years; how the community reacted, how the community was affected and the general changes within the wider society at the time.

In 1948, a momentous year in itself for the Jews, the South African Government (then headed by the National Party), endorsed the Apartheid laws. Despite the overwhelming majority of Blacks in the country, the Apartheid laws meticulously institutionalized racial discrimination with the introduction of an entire array of comprehensive laws, quotas, bans and Acts, which over time, came to dictate all facets of life – educationally, geographically, socially, politically etc.

Apart from political tension and social uncertainty, Jews for the most part were unaffected by the new laws – they still enjoyed full political freedom and were not particularly affected by any major limitations or restrictions. The Jewish community as a whole tended to remain silent during these tragic years, but many Jewish individuals were significantly involved in challenging the social and political status quo and trying to press for change. These people, involved in illegal anti-Apartheid activities, struggled for political rights for all, and through education and underground resistance, fought for tolerance, liberty and workers' rights.

Joe Slovo, Ray Alexander and Helen Sussman are three of the many Jewish activists who were firmly stood against the Government in attempts of restoring democracy and equality. The Rand Daily Mail, a Johannesburg based protest newspaper, which resolutely defied Apartheid legislation and doctrines, is an additional example or product of illegal activity. This newspaper was the project of a Jewish man. Further, in 1963, five Jews were arrested by the Government alongside several other Black activists of the African National Congress, for their involvement in the anti-Apartheid movement. Following the escalation of violence in South Africa in 1970, for the most part surrounding the 1976 Students Uprising in Soweto, Jews began fleeing the country. Many of those who chose to leave were young, deciding to study elsewhere in the hope of a safer lifestyle.

In 1985, Jews took a firmer stand on the reality in which they found themselves. In fear of being labeled 'bystanders,' and feeling a great sense of responsibility for the country's dismal present, two Jewish organizations were formed in the same year, Jews for Justice, in Cape Town, and Jews for Social Justice, in Johannesburg. These two organizations were founded in order to strengthen relations between the white and black communities, while pressing the society towards democracy and equality. It should also be noted that in the same year, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies formally condemned Apartheid.



7. Are there welfare problems within the Jewish community? Are there welfare organizations within the community?

Dozens of welfare organizations exist in the Jewish community. Going back to the Lithuanian roots of the community, welfare has always been and continues to serve as a central concern of the community.

Within the community, it is possible to find everything from Jewish orphanages, to Jewish singles dating services, Jewish homes for the elderly, Jewish homes for the mentally challenged, the Jewish Sheltered Employment Centre, and social outreach organizations.

As is the case in all communities, the South African Jewish community has a number of welfare problems. Divorce, drugs, poverty and unemployment, are a few. The community invests much of its resources and energy into the various welfare organizations, thus allowing for their services to be readily available to all.

Volunteering is another feature of the community's welfare structure. From an early age, especially at the Jewish Day Schools, Jews are encouraged to get involved in volunteer groups. This in itself has created a warm, non-judgmental attitude towards welfare on a whole.

8. What is the feeling of physical security of the Jewish community? Has there been and is there today a problem of anti-Semitism?

As previously referred to, the 1930s and 1940s gave rise to several Afrikaaner Nationalist groups in South Africa. Inspired by Nazi ideology, coupled with an incisive hatred of the British, these groups often expressed themselves in anti-Semitic acts. The National Party which came into power in 1948, similarly bore anti-Jewish feelings.

Today however, the situation is somewhat different. Perhaps surprisingly, South African Jews tend to believe that anti-Semitism is more prevalent elsewhere around the globe, as opposed to their country itself. This is possibly because of the mainstream social violence experienced on a daily basis, which does not target or threaten South African Jews alone.

There are, however, some important comments to be made on this topic.

Over the past two decades particularly, traditional right-wing Anti Semitism, stemming from the rise of Afrikaaner nationalism in the late 1930s, has become increasingly marginalized. At the same time however, growing anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish and anti-Israel sentiments have been become more frequent, especially from within the Muslim community.

In the mid 1990s, the rise of two Islamic extremist groups in the Western Province (the region of the Cape), caused concern and alarm for many Jewish citizens. The two groups are Qibla (which has ties with the Lebanese Hizballah) and PAGAD (People



against Gangsters and Drugs). Together with their rise, there has been a strong increase of anti-Jewish acts.

These incidents, centered around Cape Town, include bombings (of synagogues and other well known Jewish locations), vandalism of Jewish properties, insulting remarks and harassment. One highly distressing incident which caused much public debate occurred when a High School employed a 'Nazi-Killing-Jews' theme to enthuse its students at its annual sports carnival. Some students, dressed as Nazi officers reenacted the horrendous herding of Jews to be deloused and shot. The South African Jewish Board of Deputies was immediately involved in the matter, suggesting that a Holocaust awareness course be run for all students and educators of the school.

It has also been reported that on several occasions around the country, graffiti of Nazi swastikas, with offensive images and slogans, have been plastered over Jewish schools, buildings and synagogues. The infamous 'One Zionist, One Bullet' slogan of the fundamentalist groups in Cape Town, has also caused a feeling of harassment among Jews, whilst attending various Israel related ceremonies.

The low-key, right-wing, Afrikaaner newspaper, Die Afrikaaner, has also published many articles on Holocaust Denial, aggressive references to the financial power of the Jews and Jewish conspiracy theories. Radio 786, a Cape Town based Islamic radio station has an equally infamous reputation for broadcasting anti-Jewish sentiments, and numerous letters and articles which have been published in many of the country's leading newspapers, have expressed similar attitudes.

9. What are the main problems on the agenda of the community?

In practical terms, the community faces major problems. Chief among them are the day-to-day political, economic and social climates. The constant fear of hijackings, robberies and cold murder, is a concern to all Jews in the country and to the community as a whole. Such fears are increased by economic concerns, as affirmative action makes employment for white Jewish South Africans more difficult. Many Jews have already left the country. Others are thinking of leaving. As leading Jewish families and individuals leave South Africa, so do their business expertise and acumen, causing great strains on the community's assets and infrastructure and adversely affecting the size of the community. These factors pose an enormous problem for the community and the existence of a vibrant community life.

In addition, the desire to minimize anti-Semitism remains a major priority for the community.

Another concern reflects the shrinking of many of the smaller communities. Many provincial Jews have left for the large centers of Cape Town and Johannesburg, and it is clear that many of the smaller Jewish centers, which were once so vibrant and culturally rich, are now facing the possibility of closing down. This is a result of a lack of funding and support within the specific regions themselves. Furthermore, this trend of migration generally attracts many of the young Jewish families or singles, seeking a



richer Jewish life in the previously mentioned centers. The result therefore, seems likely to be an almost inevitable 'dying out' of the smaller Jewish centers.

10. What are the demographic trends within the community? Can anything be said about the future of the community?

It is particularly difficult to predict the future of the South African Jewish community and the subject is a cause of great concern to the entire community.

As the past decades have shown, a massive surge of Jews has left the borders of South Africa in search of a safer, more secure future elsewhere. Australia still remains one of the top destinations, alongside the United States, Canada, England and Israel. As mentioned in the above section, this outflow of Jews has considerably diminished the size and strength of the Jewish community. This trend seems likely to continue unless Jews feel that the social, political and economic climate in which they live, substantially improves.

But on the other side of the scale, there are increasing numbers of Jews who are nowadays committed to building and securing a brighter, safer future in South Africa itself. They involve themselves with outreach initiatives, inter-faith dialogues and community awareness campaigns. Many see their motivation stemming from their history and heritage as Jews who have themselves previously been the victims of oppression and expulsion. Similarly, it is believed that the ingrained values and morals of the Jewish community, offer a sense of community building and camaraderie which are essential tools in the building of the New South Africa. However, as mentioned earlier, there is a counter trend in terms of an increasing insularity of part of the Jewish community and the developing of new vibrant Orthodox and Ultra Orthodox communities, especially around Johannesburg. It will be fascinating to see which of these trends provide the larger key to understanding the future of the South African community.

11. What is the general contribution of the community to South Africa as a whole?

This is a very difficult question to answer. The South African Jewish community has had such a specific and to an extent, separate, existence as a sub-section of white South African society up to the abolition of apartheid in recent years, that it is difficult to say to what extent the community has really contributed to South Africa as a whole.

Certainly, it has played an important part in the commercial and professional development of South African society, similar to the role played by Jews in other western societies.

Jewish writers and intellectuals have certainly played a part in the cultural discourse of South Africa. Best known among South African writers is Nadine Gordimer, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature and a fine interpreter of South African society, but there have been other fine writers most notably Dan Jacobson, who left



South Africa in 1954, but who continues to write about the country and Sarah Gertrude Millin.

In addition, despite the fact that as mentioned, most South African Jews and the community as a community stood aside from partisan politics on the question of apartheid, there was a small but significant group of South African Jews who were extremely vocal and active in their opposition to apartheid. Nelson Mandela wrote in his autobiography "...in my experience I have found Jews to be more broadminded than most whites on issues of race and politics, perhaps because they themselves have historically been victims of prejudice" and he had reason indeed to thank the small and dedicated group of Jewish supporters of his struggle. It will be interesting to see the contribution that Jews make to a united South Africa.

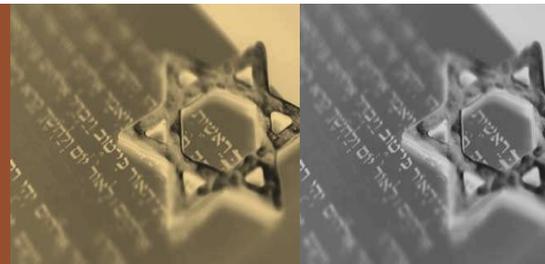
12. What is the relationship with Israel in the community as a whole?

The place of Zionism, in the hearts and homes of many South African Jews should not be underestimated or overlooked. This community has always maintained solid ties with Israel, integrating Zionist spirit and passion into many of its values and beliefs. The various Zionist youth movements have played, and continue to play, an integral role in this regard, offering many different short and long term programs in Israel, in addition to their weekly meetings and annual summer activities.

In 1948, some 700 Jewish South Africans went to fight in the War of Independence in Palestine. They joined the other 265 South African Olim who had previously made Aliya between the years of 1924 and 1948. The attraction of Aliya became increasingly popular and it is estimated that nowadays, close to 20,000 South African Jews have made Aliyah since independence. However, it should be noted that among the Jews who have left South Africa in the last couple of decades, Australia and Canada are the preferred destinations.



Introducing South African Jewish voices.



Josie was born to Lithuanian parents who came to South Africa in the 1920's. Her husband has a business in Cape Town.

"My parents were socialists when they came here and they were deeply shocked when South Africa brought in the apartheid laws in 1948. I was brought up to respect all humans as humans regardless of colour or background, but it's not so easy here. We Jews have to keep our heads down. We can't be caught up in this. I'm tempted to say that it's an internal South African problem and we Jews have to stay out of it but of course that makes it sound as if we don't belong here, and that's not what I want to say at all. The truth is that we have a very good life here but we're in a bit of a strange position, caught between the different majority groups here. We're not white in the sense that South Africans mean when they use the term – i.e. part of the Afrikaner ruling class and we're certainly not part of the black underclass. We're somewhere in the middle, part of the privileged class certainly, but not completely identified as South African, if you understand what I mean. At least, that's the way I see it. Look, we almost never socialize with anyone who isn't Jewish. All our friends are Jews. I know that that's the case for many Jews all over the world but here it's different. It's as if we're held in by invisible walls. On the other hand, we've done very well here.

It's a bit strange, I guess. I think I get this sense of discomfort from my parents. After all, I'm not sure how many other Jews here feel the same as I do. Most of them seem to be all right with the system here. Occasionally you hear some criticism in the community but most of the Jews who have come out strongly against the apartheid laws, left the organized community some time ago. It does bother me, but, quite honestly, if it was such a terrible thing, I guess I would have gone by now. There's part of me that says that this system works very comfortably for me. The fact that we have servants means that I have hardly any work to do. I live a leisured life, and to a certain extent, it's a charmed life. But I can't help feeling a bit guilty."

Anthony is Josie's son. He is a lawyer in Johannesburg.

"When you spoke to my mother forty years ago, I was only a young kid. It's funny to hear those words nowadays. South Africa is a different place now. We're after the revolution. Mandela has come and gone as president. There is equality now – apartheid has gone for ever. We're a new generation and this talk about the country being divided between strictly drawn groups who never mix, belongs to the past. At least the attitudes do. The truth is that if I look at the Jewish community today, most of my parent's generation – and most of my own as well – still mix socially almost exclusively with Jews. But many of my kids' generation are different. They see things more naturally. They talk of a world without boundaries. They don't deny that



they're Jewish, at least my kids don't. But they're a different sort of Jew to my parents and even to me. They're not hemmed in by the same way of looking at the world that we inherited. I can't say whether it's better or worse. But it's very different. They talk of the new South Africa as a place of great opportunity for all. Well, maybe. But in the old South Africa, things in many ways were easier and more comfortable for the Jews as members of an educated middle class. We had a lot of things going for us. The truth is, as we now see, that it was the expense of other people but it was comfortable for us not to confront that. So maybe as a community we're worse off in terms of society as a whole – although it has to be said, many Jews are still extremely wealthy - but perhaps we're more comfortable from a moral point of view. At least for people like my parents and me. You heard what my mother said, that she was very comfortable with her material situation but at the same time, she was bothered by certain aspects of the society. I feel now that my generation is caught between the generations of the parents and the generations of the children and I'm not sure which is best for us as people and for us as Jews. We'll see what the children say. They'll have to write their own version of what it's like to be a Jew in South Africa. What's certain is that their story will be a different one – but it's too early to say in what way that's true."

