

## It's Durban Calling! A bird's eye view of the KwaZulu-Natal Jewish community's economic history - Part 2

A special interview with Prof. Antony Arkin in memory of his father, Prof. Marcus Arkin

By Steve Linde - Editor-In-Chief of The Jerusalem Post

**This year South African Jewry is celebrating its 175th anniversary as an organised community. As Steve Linde, Editor in chief of the Jerusalem Post argued in the first part of his interview with Prof Antony Arkin, in Hashalom last month, "the Jewish community of Kwa-Zulu Natal has a fascinating history..." At the 150th celebrations at the Garden Shul twenty five years ago Prof Marcus Arkin, together with the late Mendel Kaplan, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency, and Raymond Ackerman, founder of Pick 'n Pay were the keynote speakers. Here is the rest of his interview with Prof Arkin in memory of his father.**

### 3. WHAT BROUGHT JEWS TO DURBAN?

In 1921, the Jewish community remained under 2,600, fewer than 2% of the province's white population and only .018% of the all-race total. In the four decades to 1960, the Jewish population more than doubled in size to 6,200, of whom 86% were resident in the greater Durban area.

Natal Jewry produced a number of major business figures. The German-born Karl Gundelfinger was perhaps the most prominent. His family firm specialized in general importation, ironmongery, wholesale and retailing. His real significance lay in his impact on economic policy. He was a strong advocate of encouraging local "infant" industries through tariff protection. As president of the Natal Chamber of Industries and later as president of the SA Chamber of Commerce he was highly influential especially after the Nationalist-Labor coalition came to power in 1924.

Aaron Beare joined the small family furniture factory in 1925. His Lithuanian forebears were cabinet makers. Serving mainly a white working class market during the depression years of the 1930's. Beare Bros began to make prudent use of hire purchase techniques. They added household appliances to their stock and gave up factory production in 1945 to concentrate in retail selling. Aaron Beare launched into a massive program of geographical expansion. He opened many other retail outlets in Durban as well as stores in Pietermaritzburg, Ladysmith, Newcastle, Vryheid, Estcourt and Dundee. By the 1960's he went national and became a listed public company.

Throughout this period, much of the import trade in groceries and tobacco products was handled by Jewish wholesalers. They redistributed these goods across the province. One of the oldest and largest was Rosenbach and Co., which was established in 1899. Founded in 1910, out of a partnership between J. Moshal and M. and I. Gevisser. Moshal, Gevisser, Ltd was to become a major public company. Another important wholesale house was A. Stiller & Co (Pty) Ltd set up in 1914, which by 1960, maintained a series of branch offices. A relative latecomer was Silver,



Sal Moshal

Garbus & Co (Pty) Ltd that was established by immigrants from Poland in 1932.

The textile and clothing industries in South Africa during the inter-war years and immediate post-war era were almost completely dominated by Jewish entrepreneurs and firms. Although the Cape remained the main centre, there were indigenous Natal firms. Samuel Peimer founded the Irish Linen Co. in 1927. It began by importing linen and Manchester Products, and then began to spin and weave its own linen fabrics in its Pinetown factory. In 1930, Natal cotton and woollen Mills became one of the first factories to manufacture blankets in south Africa. By 1960 its chief executive Victor Daitz had created a national sales organization for its products. Also in 1930, A. J. Cohen set up a small workshop to manufacture inexpensive Khaki shirts. After World War II, the firm concentrated on higher grade clothing, metamorphosing into Cambridge Shirt Manufacturers (Pty) Ltd which by 1960 had become a large concern.

For over half a century, Phillip Frame was an enormous presence both in the province and in South Africa. Born in Memel, Frame worked as a textile engineer in Lodz, Poland, before immigrating to South Africa in 1924 where he joined an uncle in Vryheid who ran a grain mill. He persuaded a wealthy Jewish shopkeeper in Vryheid, C. J. Balladan, to put up capital for launching his own textile factory. This began production in Brickhill Road, Durban, in 1928.

By 1960, the Frame organization had become a series of listed major industrial companies. From the Durban head office it operated mills and factories and sales offices around South Africa and set up its own buying organization in London under the label of SA industrial supplies Ltd. When Philip Frame died in 1979 the group's workforce numbered well over 30,000. The extent to which his industrial empire depended on his expertise and guidance quickly became apparent. It rapidly disintegrated to less than 6,000 employees by the turn of the century.

In the province's heavy industry sector, the Jewish input was more modest. In 1937, the Nathan brothers had started a scrap metal business supplying cast iron and steel to Transvaal foundries from redundant railway property. During World War II K. Nathan (Pty) Ltd had become one of the country's largest iron and steel processors. In 1948, Eugen Lazarus, a refugee from Nazi Germany established Non Ferrous Metal Works. When his sons Bernhard and Gunter joined him in the 1950's the firm's refining and metal-trading operations took on a national dimension and then an international one as a major exporter.

The construction industry also felt the impact of Jewish involvement. Founded by Nicolai Meyerowitz in 1928 the Standard Building and Contracting Co (Pty) Ltd became especially important in the putting up of large apartment and office blocks, municipal housing schemes and the building of hospital complexes. In the field of property on the marketing side the firm of J. H. Isaacs, Geshen & Co (Pty) Ltd was a major Jewish concern. JH Isaacs set up an estate agency in 1902 which grew rapidly and continued after his death in 1921 when his

son Edgar took over. In 1935 he brought in Israel Geshen as his partner. The firm's activities came to cover every aspect of the property market, supported by an imposing network of branches.

During these decades, a higher proportion of young Jewish adults were entering the professions, especially of medicine, law and accountancy, than their counterparts in the rest of South Africa. Both fewer opportunities in commerce and a higher proportion of Natal Jews being of British origin with no language barriers were probable causes. The first reliable occupational breakdown we have (for 1970) tends to support this thesis. At least 20% more economically active Jews were classified as "professional" compared to their co-religionists elsewhere in South Africa. By 1960 then the numerically small community of KwaZulu-Natal of 6169, of which 5353 lived in Durban, had now come to play a significant role in the province's economic life.

### 4. WHEN WAS THE PEAK OF THE COMMUNITY?

The 1960's and Seventies represented the high water mark of a distinctive Jewish impact on the KwaZulu-Natal economy. Since then many of the firms which were family-owned and run have gone public or have been taken over by listed companies. Three cases illustrate this trend.

**DURBAN INVESTMENT LTD:** In 1954, Alan Zulman and Abe Dubin started a small clothing factory with some ten employees. Expansion was rapid. By 1980 Durban Investments Ltd controlled S. A. Clothing Industries, Cambridge Shirts and Man-About Town. But in 1981, the group the group was taken over by Aaron Searle and his associates. The Seardel corporate headquarters was in Cape Town.

**BEARE BROTHERS:** Aaron Beare's furniture business went public in 1968. By the early 1980's it had over 200 stores and had swallowed the Game Discount chain. A year after his death in 1991, it was taken over by McCarthy Retail.

**BEACON SWEETS:** In 1931, Hymie Zulman founded a small confectionery business. By 1949, it had expanded to enlarged factory premises. By the turn of the century it was the largest user of sugar in the confectionery industry, some 30,000 tons annually, but it had passed out of the hands of the founding family and is now a subsidiary of Tiger Brands.

### 5. WHY DID THE COMMUNITY DECLINE AND WHEN?

The Jewish population of the province reached its height at around 7,000 in 1980. Some 90% lived in the Durban area. Of the economically-active portion, about 30% were classified as professional (This contrasts with less than 20% of the total white population). Some 21% were classified as administrative and managerial, 27% were in commerce, including the provision of technical and financial services, and 17% fell under the heading "clerical." Thereafter, the influx of Jews from Rhodesia in the Seventies into KwaZulu-Natal drew to a close and net emigration became pronounced. Since the township unrest of the mid-1970's, there was a significant increase in White emigration. South African Jewry as a whole shrank by 25% over the period between 1970 and 1990, and emigration from Durban was at least in that proportion. Jewish communal records indicate that between 1970 and 1991, some 39,000 Jews emigrated, of whom 4,900 later returned to South Africa.

### 6. WHERE DID JEWISH DURBANITES GO WHEN THEY LEFT THE CITY?

As can be expected, the destinations have been English-speaking countries and Israel. It is estimated that 30.7% of emigrants live in Israel, 25.2% in the United States, 14.4% in the United Kingdom, 10.9% in Canada and 17.4% in Australia.

Besides the Zionist pull of aliya, the normal push factors of all emigrants from South Africa such as crime, violence, falling living standards, education and health have all led to a continued loss to the community.

There was also considerable internal migration. Young adults after completing school or university tended to seek jobs in Johannesburg or Cape Town. Often parents would follow their offspring. There are also those still active in business who departed for the Rand or Cape because of perceived better prospects. The Jewish community of the KwaZulu-Natal province rapidly shrank from 4,095 in 1991 to 2,815 in 2000, to approximately 1,500 in 2015.

The impression from the records is that the majority of emigrants are families with children and singles in their twenties. This has significantly affected the profile of the community. Since those with transferable skills are more likely to emigrate, a higher proportion of professional occupations are represented.

The Durban community as a consequence has aged significantly over this period. While the proportion over 65 was 10.3% in 1970 and 19.9% in 1980, by 2000 this had gone up to 32%. By 2015, it is estimated to be well in excess of 40%. An ever-increasing proportion of aged in the community has led to an ever larger share of communal resources being allocated to this segment of the population.

The occupational profile by the turn of the century indicated that some 20% of those economically active were now retired. Some 33% could be classified as professional, 29% administrative and managerial positions and 18% provided technical, clerical or other services.

### 7. WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE COMMUNITY?

A sizable question mark hangs over the future of KwaZulu-Natal Jewry. Does it have any further distinctive roles to play in the economic life of the province? At a population of about 1,500 Durban has as many Jews as Ireland or Norway. The communities of these countries have frequently been singled out for their enterprise and resourcefulness. Durban-based companies such as Bio-oil, Dirivco and Don't Waste show the hallmarks of innovative entrepreneurship.

The Jews of Durban may, in fact, become a predominantly retirement community with a significant segment taking no further part in the future of Development of the region's economy. Much will depend on the future path followed by the economy itself. If the vicious circle of lack of skills, graft, low productivity and crumbling infrastructure continues, the passive retirement scenario will predominate. If, however, there are real prospects for positive growth, it is hoped the province could once again attract the inventiveness and energies of risk-taking Jewish entrepreneurs.

Note to readers: We'd be happy to hear from you if you have any comments. My email is [steve@jpost.com](mailto:steve@jpost.com). Prof. Antony Arkin's email is: [arkin@iafrica.com](mailto:arkin@iafrica.com).