

# [Hi]stories of the German-Jewish Diaspora

A Publication Project

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## From One Racial State to Another. German-speaking Jews in South Africa

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Most South African Jews today trace their origins to Lithuania. Although this Litvak heritage dominates both historiography and popular memory, Jews from German-speaking lands also played an important role in the community's development. The foundations of religious and communal life in the nineteenth century were laid by a small Anglo-German group; in addition, German-speaking Jews made important contributions to South African economic life in this period. Most significantly, around 6,000 Jews arrived between 1933 and 1939 as refugees from Nazi Germany – the largest group of Jewish refugees on the African continent. These new arrivals established an impressive array of welfare, religious, and social institutions, some of which have had an enduring influence on both Jewish and wider South African society.

Jews fleeing Nazi persecution arrived at a fraught moment in South Africa's history. *Afrikaner* nationalism was gaining political ground, Nazi-inspired antisemitism was on the rise, and immigration legislation was tightening. External threats such as these were the chief concern of the Jewish communal leadership, overshadowing any internal divisions that may have arisen between the established community and the refugees. When the *National Party* (NP) came to power in 1948 on its platform of apartheid, Jewish leaders increasingly sought to promote communal unity. This perhaps partly explains why, although there have been some efforts to document the distinct stories of German-speaking Jews in South Africa, they have largely faded from historical view. Within a generation, they had blended into South African Jewish life.

### Early Settlers

Before the first British occupation of the Cape in 1795, the religious restrictions of the *Dutch East India Company* prevented all non-Protestants, including Jews, from settling in South Africa. In the early years of the nineteenth century, as religious freedom was gradually extended, small numbers of professing Jews of English, Dutch, and German origin began to arrive. They arrived within the context of a violent and extractive colonial project, and some among them went on to play significant roles in the colonial economy. Most notable were the Mosenthal brothers, who settled at the Cape from 1839 and helped develop the Cape wool industry by creating an efficient trading network connecting South African producers and traders with major European markets. Their activities attracted scores more German-Jewish families from their district of Hesse-Cassel. Jewish migrants from Central Europe continued to trickle in during the nineteenth century, including the family of the artist Irma Stern (1894–1966), and many distinguished themselves,

particularly in commerce. But the pull of assimilation was strong: many quickly became anglicised, and intermarriage was common. While the small group of Anglo-German settlers laid the foundations of religious life in the mid-nineteenth century and of communal leadership structures in later decades, it was ultimately the 40,000 migrants from Lithuania seeking economic opportunity at the turn of the twentieth century, who came to shape South Africa's Jewish life.

## The Arrival of the Refugees

Between 1933 and 1939, around 6,000 Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe fled to South Africa. Most came not because of any particular connection to or familiarity with the country, but simply because (for a time at least) it was one of the few places that would let them in. Unlike many other places of refuge in the global South, South Africa became a place of settlement rather than of transit: a handful of refugees left in the 1940s and 50s, but the vast majority who arrived chose to stay.

The arrival of the refugees coincided with, and exacerbated, a period of growing local antisemitism. During the 1920s, the idea of Jews' 'unassimilability' had found increasing support in South Africa, especially in *Afrikaner* nationalist circles. January 1930 saw the passing of the *Quota Act*, which radically curtailed immigration from (among others) Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Mandatory Palestine, on the basis of eugenicist ideas; although not explicitly named, Eastern European Jews were the chief target. German Jews were free of the *Quota Act*'s restrictions, but few came before the mid-1930s. Worsening conditions under the Nazi regime and fresh immigration restrictions in Palestine under British rule combined to swell the numbers of immigrants in 1936, a development that intensified openly antisemitic hostility from the government as well as the *Afrikaner* nationalist opposition.

A further set of restrictions was imposed in late 1936, and in February 1937, a new *Aliens Act* came into force, reducing Jewish immigration from Central Europe to a trickle. By the 1938 general election, antisemitism had become a central aspect of several mainstream parties' platforms. The Nazi party established local branches in the country, and Nazi-inspired political movements, including the *South African Gentile National Socialist Movement* and the *Ossewabrandwag* (*Ox-Wagon sentinel*), were finding popular audiences.

Almost half of the refugees who made it into South Africa arrived in 1936 ahead of impending immigration restrictions. Numbers dropped dramatically thereafter, and the outbreak of the Second World War brought immigration to a virtual standstill (those who arrived later were mostly immediate family members of earlier arrivals). Almost two-thirds of the refugees were male. The majority were under the age of forty; the average age on arrival for men was twenty-nine, for women thirty-six. While most men arrived alone, women tended to be married and to come with their families. The refugees came from across Germany and Austria, including major cities and small towns, and represented a diverse range of social and religious backgrounds.

These German-speaking Jews were mostly middle-class and well-educated. Before leaving Europe, two-thirds of men had held professional, executive, or managerial jobs, as compared with

15 percent in routine or manual occupations. Most fled with very little means, however, and in the early years were forced to take on whatever work they could find in South Africa – though the highly racialised organisation of the South African labour market and the glut of underpaid Black labour meant that they often found it difficult to obtain unskilled work. Only around 10 percent of the male refugees were able to secure professional or executive positions, while almost 40 percent took on routine or semi-skilled jobs. Former doctors and lawyers were grateful to work as office clerks and factory workers. Older refugees found it especially difficult to obtain employment. Women were often the first breadwinners, as it was easier for them to find work as nurses, babysitters, and cooks. Some women supported their families for years while their husbands worked to re-establish professional careers.



**Fig. 1:** German Jewish refugee Julius Mayer (1907–?) in his first job in South Africa. Mayer (first on the right) worked in a mining company's concession shop. He earned five pounds a month and used his first month's paycheck to bring his future wife, Hermina Mayer née Levy (1917–?), to South Africa; *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

Although Cape Town was usually the port of arrival, the majority of refugees eventually made their way to the country's commercial centre, Johannesburg. Small enclaves were established in the poorer districts of Hillbrow and Doornfontein, where they adapted to a much lower standard of living than that to which they had previously been accustomed. For the first few months, they lived out of suitcases, perhaps using an upturned box covered with oil cloth as a table. Some had to make do with outdoor toilets. Period furniture, oil paintings, dining room tables, and grand pianos that later began to arrive in lifts from Europe were squeezed into tiny apartments or, in desperate cases, sold for cash. Some innovative refugees converted the lifts themselves into homes by adding windows and a door, similar to the Yekkes in Mandatory Palestine.

Shortly after the outbreak of war, new legislation required all aliens to obtain a certificate and report for registration. Most of the refugees were ultimately designated 'friendly enemy aliens',

although between September 1939 and March 1941, sixty-one German and Austrian Jews were interned in camps at Baviaanspoort, Leeuwkop, and Ganspan. Many refugees were keen to support the war effort in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the country that had granted them refuge, and large numbers enlisted in the *Union Defence Force* or joined the *Active Citizen Force* and the *Coast Garrison Forces*.

## Becoming South African

Most German-speaking refugees knew little about the country that was to become their new home and were full of wild imaginings about what they would find. Relatives in Europe warned them to beware of lions and elephants, and fretted about the availability of modern accommodation. South Africa was undoubtedly a foreign land. The climate and landscape were unfamiliar, the cultures and languages alien, the seasons reversed. The refugees were anxious and insecure, and they yearned for a sense of identity and belonging in the face of the displacement and loss they had suffered.



**Fig. 2:** German Jewish refugee Hermann Abramowitz (1901–?) in the *Port Elizabeth Snake Park*, September 1937. Abramowitz arrived in Cape Town in 1934; Courtesy of Markus Hawlik-Abramowitz.

Initially, they tended to keep close-knit social circles. They established connections with any fellow German-speaking Jews they could find, from distant relatives and acquaintances of acquaintances to contacts recommended by a hairdresser. The shared ship journey to South Africa was the beginning of many lifelong friendships. They held social gatherings in one another's homes, where they spoke German and sang German songs. They settled in the same neighbourhoods and opened their own shops and restaurants.

They also established an impressive range of new organisations. In the area of social welfare, the

*Jewish Self-Help* (1936) and the *Immigrants' Help* (1938) were created to assist fellow refugees in finding accommodation and employment, and to connect them with sources of financial assistance. The *Unabhängige Kultur-Vereinigung (Independent Cultural Association)*, established in July 1936 by a group of intellectuals, writers, and artists, sought to defend German culture in the face of its appropriation by the Nazis and to advance refugees' understanding of South African culture. A local *B'nai B'rith Lodge* was founded by refugees in May 1938; the autonomous *Women's Lodge*, established in 1961, was to become a leading force in South African welfare work.

After the November pogroms in 1938, the *South African Central Committee for German Refugees* was created to help expedite the process of dealing with immigration applications for family members of refugees. *Our Parents Home*, which began operating informally in 1940 and opened officially in November 1947, was created to care for aged parents without means or work permits.

Although most of the refugees were not strictly observant, they also created their own religious organisations. The *Hebrew Congregation Etz Chayim*, founded in July 1936, quickly became a centre for German-Jewish religious and social life in Johannesburg, and its *Jewish Family Life* magazine (later *Etz Chayim News*) kept members connected until the late 1950s. The *Adath Jeschurun* Congregation, established in 1938 by a smaller group of strictly Orthodox refugees who were not satisfied with the local observance of Shabbat and Kashrut, soon grew beyond its German origins and was to have a profound impact on Orthodox religious life.

The refugees also helped to bring stability to South Africa's fledgling Reform movement, although politics within the broader Jewish community seemed to have mitigated against larger numbers joining. Some newcomers, especially those who settled outside Johannesburg, became members of existing religious congregations, while others did not affiliate at all.

The German-speaking Jews joined a community of over 72,000, mostly Eastern European Jews, concentrated in Johannesburg and Cape Town. The latter mobilised quickly to provide welfare and financial support for the new arrivals. In May 1933, the *South African Fund for German Jewry* was established by representatives from the *South African Jewish Board of Deputies* (SAJBD), the *South African Zionist Federation*, and other local Jewish organisations. Substantial money was raised and local committees were established to help the refugees find housing and employment. The *Fund* offered business loans, guarantees on deposits, student bursaries, hospital fees, and other financial assistance. Following the passage of the *Aliens Act* in 1937, the communal leadership also turned its attention to refugees arriving in other African countries. In April 1939, the *Council for Refugee Settlement in Africa* outside the Union was established under the auspices of the SAJBD. Funded by South African Jews and working from Johannesburg, the Council offered advice and financial assistance to refugees, maintained contact with major relief organisations abroad, made representations to authorities, and sent delegations to help local relief committees.

Alongside this practical assistance, however, social relations between the Eastern and Central European Jews were initially strained. Such antagonisms, of course, had deep-seated historical roots, and these hostilities played themselves out with renewed energy in the 1930s. The author

Ruth Weiss née Löwenthal (\*1924), who arrived from Germany as a child in 1936 and had a distinguished career as an anti-racist activist, wrote that “German Jews had looked down their much-abused noses at their poor Eastern European brothers. I understood that because of this, German Jews were not welcomed with open arms in South Africa by the earlier settlers. They helped financially and in other ways, but they didn't exactly want close friendships.”<sup>[1]</sup>

The SAJBD had, in fact, actively discouraged German-Jewish organisations from sending refugees to South Africa in the 1930s because of political pressure around immigration and fear of exacerbating antisemitism. The SAJBD's perceived hostile stance towards the refugees was a point of fierce criticism from some Cape Jewish leaders, among them long-established German Jews. A number of prominent figures, in particular the businessman Leo Raphaely (1869–1959), worked actively to help the immigrants and took personal responsibility for providing the necessary financial guarantees.



**Fig. 3:** The German-born activist and writer Ruth Weiss who escaped Nazism in 1936 and found refuge as a child with her family in South Africa. The photo was taken in her garden in Lüdinghausen, Germany, where she had moved in 2002; CC0, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ruth\\_weiss\\_photo.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ruth_weiss_photo.jpg).

The German-speaking Jews, for their part, made efforts to integrate themselves into their new homeland. In the highly segregated context of South Africa, this generally meant integration into Jewish and, to a lesser extent, English-speaking White society. War service had certainly helped to promote their acceptance. Within a generation, almost all had become naturalised South African citizens. They learned English well and spoke it at home, participated actively in Jewish communal life, and gave generously to philanthropic causes. Most moved quickly beyond the diminished socio-economic status of the early years and achieved success in a wide range of professions and industries. By the early 1960s, only 3 percent of men were still employed in manual occupations, while more than two-thirds held professional, managerial or executive



positions, largely in commerce.

Individual refugees also made exceptional contributions to the smelting and refining industries, engineering, medicine, the chemical industry, the millinery and fashion trades, photography, and the arts. Their rapid success and upward mobility were facilitated in part by favourable economic conditions in South Africa as well as the availability of underpaid Black labour. The strong support networks created both among the refugees themselves and by the wider Jewish community also played an important role. Perhaps most significant, however, were the resourcefulness and effort expended by the refugees to regain the security and status they had lost, and to recreate stable lives for themselves and their families.

## Racial Politics

The absorption of German-speaking Jews into South Africa came at one of the most tumultuous and divisive periods in the country's history: the rise of *Afrikaner* nationalist political power culminating in the election of the *National Party* on its platform of apartheid in May 1948. Even if apartheid was quite different as an ideological and political system from Nazism, the latter had a significant influence on South African political life during the 1930s and 40s. The connections between the two were frequently noted, especially by apartheid's opponents – and by Jews. Perhaps surprisingly, however, little scholarly attention has been given to how refugees who came to South Africa directly from Nazi Europe perceived and experienced those connections.

Even before the refugees' arrival, Jews' status in the South African racial hierarchy was not straightforward. In the early years of the twentieth century, confronting growing antisemitism, the emerging communal leadership engaged in a conscious effort to establish Jews as middle-class and White. Although the advent of apartheid in 1948 brought an almost immediate reprieve from public antisemitism – a shift motivated in part by the prioritisation of consolidating 'White South Africa' – the fear of antisemitism remained. Most Jews did not share the outlook of activists who compared South African racism explicitly with Nazism; in this respect, they were not much different from other Whites. As apartheid took root in the 1950s and the notion of the 'separate development' of the races permeated each facet of everyday life, the Jewish community increasingly narrowed its focus to internal issues like religion, education, and support for the newly created State of Israel.

Only a handful of refugees became openly involved in political opposition to the apartheid regime. A small number chose to leave in protest. Several campaigned actively for the *United Party* (UP) in the late 1930s and 1940s, and a handful became involved with the *Liberal Party* during its relatively brief existence in the 1950s and early 1960s. Compared with the *National Party*, an exclusivist antisemitic party that had supported the Nazi war effort, the UP was a more comfortable political home for South Africa's Jews. Despite more reform-minded policies, however, it was firmly predicated on White dominance, though liberal elements later broke with the party to pursue more progressive reforms. Prominent among those liberal elements was the German-Jewish refugee lawyer and politician Harry Schwarz (1924–2010), who arrived in South Africa in 1934 at the age of ten and, in the late 1960s, emerged as the leader of the UP's anti-

apartheid faction. Schwarz also continued his legal work throughout his political career, including defending anti-apartheid activists.



**Fig. 4:** The well-known anti-apartheid campaigner and South African Ambassador to the United States, Harry Heinz Schwarz, with US Vice-President Al Gore and President Bill Clinton, 6 May 1994. Schwarz was born in Cologne, Germany, and arrived in South Africa in 1934; Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:New\\_South\\_African\\_flag\\_unveiling.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:New_South_African_flag_unveiling.jpg).

For most refugees, the job of building a new life was the unquestionable priority. If parallels were evident to them between South Africa and Nazi Germany, they chose not to pay them close attention. The minority who concerned themselves with South African racism challenged apartheid via legal political routes, in parliamentary opposition, or in the social and cultural spheres, as journalists, social workers, and educators. A prominent figure in this group was Franz Auerbach (1923–2004), who arrived in Johannesburg in 1937 aged fourteen, and went on to have a distinguished career in education, including twenty years' association with African night schools and influential publications on the impact of prejudice on Black education. Other notable figures include the photographer Anne Fischer (1914–1986), who worked closely with anti-racist organisations in Cape Town, using her camera to document the lives of Black South Africans under apartheid. Several refugee women from Germany participated in efforts like the development of low-priced protein foods for mass consumption in order to tackle malnutrition among Black people. One of them, a trained social worker from Berlin, initiated schemes to provide Black school children with better meals. The involvement of refugee women in outreach and social welfare work is an area ripe for further research.

Multiple potential factors shaped the responses of the refugees, including, most obviously, the traumatic circumstances of their forced migration. For the first few years after their arrival, they had countless practical and emotional challenges to confront, from surviving on meagre



resources to finding a job and housing, learning a new language, and establishing new lifelines of social support. The persistent anxiety and fear with which they lived – borne of the existential flight from Nazism, the concern for family members left behind, and the renewed encounter with local antisemitism – also undoubtedly informed the extent and nature of their political engagement for many years.

## Distinct Histories

Despite South Africa's importance as a haven for Jews from Nazi-occupied Europe, the refugees' history has been relatively neglected. Their arrival and integration were first studied by Frieda Sichel née Gotthelft (1889–1976), herself a refugee from Germany and a trained social worker with a PhD in Sociology and Political Economy. Sichel's book *From Refugee to Citizen* (1966) established a narrative, emphasising the newcomers' contributions to South African economic and cultural life, that continues to dominate both scholarly and popular memory of this group. This narrative was on full display in parallel *Seeking Refuge* exhibitions that were held in Cape Town (2003) and Johannesburg (2005), which celebrated the refugees' lives and contributions. While the German-speaking Jews are not absent from mainstream histories of South African Jewry, we still know very little about their journeys to South Africa, the connections they maintained with family members dispersed across the globe and the homeland they left behind, their protracted battles for restitution, their encounters with local populations, and their adaptation to South African society and culture over time.

Sichel's meticulous research remains one of the most important studies about the refugees, but it was also a product of its time. As the apartheid government's grip on power tightened during the 1950s and 1960s, the Jewish community invested increasingly in what we might call 'contributionist' historiography, documenting Jews' contributions to South Africa as a way of challenging antisemitism and emphasising Jewish loyalty at a deeply uncertain time. The communal leadership's public emphasis on Jewish unity may help explain why the history of German-speaking Jews has largely been eclipsed in popular memory, as the refugees were quickly subsumed into the larger story of Jewish immigrants making good.

While South African Jews today remain vigilant about how their history is portrayed, given rising antisemitism, the story of the refugees from Central Europe is perhaps less loaded in the post-apartheid era. As refugees have begun to pass away, descendants are also taking a growing interest in personal materials left behind, including letters, diaries, and personal artifacts. Some collections have been donated to archives in South Africa and abroad, and more are in process. There are thus promising opportunities to excavate the unexplored dimensions of this Jewish Diaspora history.

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### Further Resources

*Jewish Historical Studies* 55, no. 1 (2024); special issue on South African Jewry:

<https://journals.uclpress.co.uk/jhs/issue/581/info/>

*Jewish Affairs* journal 76, no. 2 (2021) edited by the SABJD: <https://www.sajbd.org/jewish-affairs>

*Community History Online*, a forum under the auspices of the *Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies* at the *University of Cape Town* and the *South African Jewish Museum*: <https://chol.website/>

*The Life and Art of Herman Wald (1906–1970)*, online exhibition on the artist Herman Wald, who was born in Transylvania (now part of Romania) and found refuge in South Africa in 1937:

<https://www.lifeandartofhermanwald.co.za/>

*Life Stories of German Jews in South Africa* by Irwin Manoim, hosted by the *Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies* at the *University of Cape Town*: <https://www.progressivejews.co.za/german-jews>

### Notes

[1] Ruth Weiss, *A Path Through Hard Grass: A Journalist's Memories of Exile and Apartheid*, Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2014, 34–5.

### About the Author

Shirli Gilbert is Professor of Modern Jewish History at University College London and Director of the Sir Martin Gilbert Learning Centre. She is a historian of modern Jewish life, with particular interest in the Holocaust and its legacies; Jewish refugees in Africa; Jews, racism, and colonialism; and Jews in South Africa. She obtained her D.Phil. in Modern History at the University of Oxford and was a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Society of Fellows at the University of Michigan. Her publications include *Music in the Holocaust* (Oxford University Press, 2005), *From Things Lost: Forgotten Letters and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (Wayne State University Press, 2017) and, with Avril Alba, *Holocaust Memory and Racism in the Postwar World* (Wayne State University Press, 2019). She is editor-in-chief of the journal *Jewish Historical Studies: A Journal of English-Speaking Jewry* (UCL Press) and is currently completing, with Roni Mikel-Arieli, *The Holocaust and Sub-Saharan Africa: A Documentary History* (Brill, 2026).

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