

My Family – Growing up in Durban



TO UNDERSTAND the environment in which I grew up, try to picture a tight, closed Jewish community that had brought with it from Lithuania all of the vital aspects of *shtetl* life – synagogue, burial society, *cheder*, *yeshiva*, benevolent and charitable societies, cultural club – and had superimposed these onto a very foreign colonial society, in a very strange and sub-tropical African east coast environment. Add to this unusual mix the fact that these *Litvaks* who in the *shtetl* had been *untermenschen* at the mercy of every petty authority, were suddenly elevated, through the accident of a white skin, to the class that ruled absolutely over the local black Zulu and Indian majority. That ruling class itself was far from homogeneous. Natal, before the Union of 1910, was a Crown Colony owing allegiance directly to the British King. Its white inhabitants, unlike most of the rest of southern Africa, were mainly of British stock, with all the class strata and snobbery that go with that origin. These strata ranged from the wealthy farming and country club class to the postman and municipal policeman on the beat. “Club” children were educated at Michaelhouse, Hilton, Girls College; middle-classes went to Government schools – Durban Boys High School, Girls High School, Glenwood High School. Lower classes did commercial courses at Commercial High or technical courses at the Technical Colleges.

The Jewish community, whilst showing a fairly solid front to the outside world, was split both religiously and politically. On the religious side, there was the beginning of the bitter reform–orthodox split which was to bedevil Jewish communities everywhere for the rest of the century. Inside orthodoxy itself was the less acrimonious division between the *greenes* at the old Park Street Shul, who had avoided any move towards assimilation, and their more enlightened, more anglicised brethren at the St. Andrews Street Shul. Thankfully, we were part of the latter, although my father’s natural home was Park Street. We had been rescued by the Moshal connection which was to continue to play a dominating role in

our lives. Politically, the community was to a great degree solidly United Party and unthinkingly segregationist. There were some liberal rebels among the youth and in the academic world, but, generally, any thought of black–white equality was anathema. I recall a shameful incident when a party of dark-skinned Indian Jews en route from Cochin or Goa to the newly independent Israel were refused entry to a synagogue service, not only for fear of problems with the authorities, but also, I believe, because of the community's acquired colonial outlook.

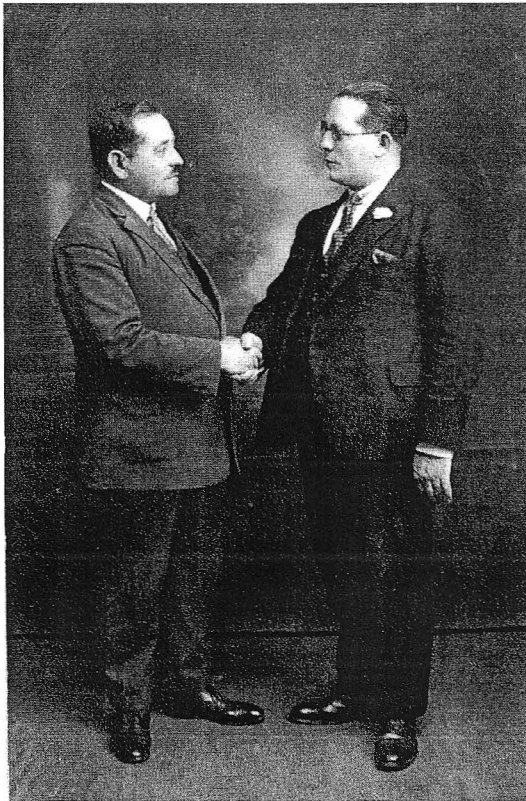
How do I describe the father whom I loved, respected and pitied? For whom I had a deep affection but with whom I had no intellectual contact whatsoever? He was a lovely man both physically and in character. Equable and loving. I can recall only one occasion on which he lost his temper with me. I had stolen part of my brother's stamp collection! To understand him it is essential to accept that he was still, and always remained at heart, a Vilna *yeshiva-bocher*, steeped in religion, in the Talmud, and in the medieval superstitions to which Russian Jewry was heir.

The Rabbi's position and learning commanded total respect. To the end of his life Morris kissed the Rabbi's hand when they met. He had no secular education whatsoever. His English was heavily accented and fragmented, his writing poor. His language was, and remained, Yiddish which was the language he used to his friends, and usually to Janie who, whilst fluent, often answered him in English. Except for phrases and admonitions and blessings, he spoke his brand of English to his children. He would do some very imaginative things to language, of which a lovely example was his rendition of what he fondly thought was an English proverb – “He who comes first should wait for de udder von”. English plurals confused him. For him “bree” was a singular and “breeze” was the plural! I understood Yiddish, as I still can, could make myself understood in it – alas, no longer – but never could speak it. He was of course a devoted shul-goer and Talmud scholar, but the mores of Africa had begun to erode some of the habits and customs.

Our house was too far to walk regularly to Shul on Friday nights and Saturday mornings, so we rather surreptitiously drove, and parked some distance from the Shul. Minor religious festivals, and “second days” began occasionally to be ignored. Whilst our home was strictly kosher, eating out at restaurants was not forbidden. An occasional slip in *kashrut* did not necessarily demand drastic ritual rectification.

Finally, and to complete this picture, my father was not an intellectual. He was content to take his lead from the Rabbi and the community leaders, and particularly from his brother-in-law, Sol. I cannot recall any sign of an independent opinion. He was desperately uncomfortable outside

his Shul or social circle. Gentiles – *goyim* – were such rare visitors at our home that I can remember only one or two such occasions. Other than the necessary business contacts, non-Jewish relationships were avoided. His world was a totally Jewish world, peopled on its fringes by people of the lower social orders – the postman, policeman, shopkeeper, clerk. The occasional necessity to meet with the bank manager or headmaster or headmistress were occasions that demanded meticulous preparation and dressing and wrenching anxiety. This was the *shtetl* Jew in different surroundings, secure only in his Shul and in his ghetto, making contact with the “natives”, the local equivalent of the Russian peasant, and timorous in the presence of all gentile authority.



Bereleib and Morris Gevisser, circa 1930

Janie, on the other hand, was far from timorous. She was the classic Jewish mother, housewife, “*balaboste*”, overly proud of her Moshal heritage, fiercely protective of and ambitious for her husband and children, and sadly and unnecessarily jealous of others in the community and in her

wider family of Moshals, Gevisser in-laws and numerous more distant relatives. Her two sisters-in-law – Gretchen, Sol's wife, and Katie, Issy's wife, were a constant source of grief and irritation.

Gretchen was a widely acknowledged and dedicated trouble-maker, glorying in Sol's exalted position and his holding of the company and family purse-strings. Hardly a day passed without a telephone call reducing Janie to tears. Katie died early and painfully. In a different way she too played expertly on Janie's susceptibilities.

Janie, however, presided unchallenged over a host of cousins, *chaverim*, and friends from the less exalted middle stratum of Jewish society. There was little social contact between our household and the Sol Moshal establishment except of course for the religious festivals, for the occasional Friday night, and for celebrations. To have some perspective on all of this, the Durban Jewish community in the 1920's was no more than about 1500 – 2000 strong, and Durban itself was small and provincial compared with Johannesburg. Its white population was heavily outnumbered by Zulus and Indians.

Janie is almost impossible for me to describe. I have said that she was the classic Jewish mother and housewife, but she was much more than that. I wish that I had the patience and ability of a Victorian novelist. She was an unforgettable personality still clearly remembered by anyone who knew her, even after all of the years that have passed. She was capable, loving, fiercely loyal, fiercely Jewish, musical, well-spoken, apolitical, totally devoted to her husband and family. Stories about her still abound in the family and the community. Two of these are classics:

I had just moved into my first flat. Janie came to visit. She saw the double bed and chastised me severely – “How can you do that?” she asked. “Your father is the shul president, we are respectable and respected members of the community. What will the Rabbi and our friends say?” “How will they know?” I ask. “I'll tell them!” was the reply. The other was her first visit to our somewhat unusual new Johannesburg home, not quite the stuff of a Jewish mother's dreams. “Who was the architect?” she asked after a slow perambulation “Ahrends, a good friend of ours”. “Is he Jewish?” “No” – “Ah” says Janie, “I thought not!”

Janie died, many years after Morris, painfully and uncomfortably as a result of a brain tumour. I still miss her.

No. 87 Madeline Road, where I grew up, was in a middle-class suburb in a narrow street on the lower slopes of the Durban Berea. The house was double-storied, and built, I imagine, about 1910. It had a Victorian wooden verandah on two sides, and was set on an half acre. The front door was rather ugly stained glass, leading into a small lobby that was

flanked on either side by a fairly large long lounge and a dining room.

Behind the dining room was the kitchen, the domain of Charlie Fizela, about whom much more later. A staircase led from the lobby to the upper storey, where there were four bedrooms, the large front room being for Janie and Morris. Ruby and Jocelyn shared one room, Leslie and I another, and a white nanny – usually named “Dorcas” or some such lower order name – inhabited the fourth rather inhospitable room that was over the kitchen. There was one combined bathroom, washbasin and toilet for all seven white inhabitants. It was no more than 2 x 4 metres, and it will be very apparent that, particularly with two teen-age girls in the house, its use and availability was critical and became a major bone of contention. For a reason that I cannot recall, I have a very clear picture of this bathroom’s floor – it was wood, covered with sheet lead to prevent water from dripping through to the lower floor. Hot water was supplied by a boiler attached to the wood and coal range in the kitchen. In the early years refrigeration was provided by an “ice-chest” on the back verandah, fed weekly with a large block of ice supplied by an itinerant vendor.

In the grounds, and away from the house, were the servants quarters – two dank rooms and a primitive lavatory plus overhead shower – presided over by Charlie. There was also a store-room, used yearly by Morris to produce his own *kosher le pesach* wine. An addition was an underground air-raid shelter built in 1940 to shield us from shells from Japanese aircraft and warships. A chicken-run completed the picture. It was an essential for every kosher home, chickens having to be taken for ritual slaughter to the *schochat*.

Charlie Fizela deserves more than a passing mention. He was a somewhat overweight minor Zulu clan chief who, in retrospect, was certainly an alcoholic. He was almost constantly drunk, mostly on home-brewed *shimiyana* – a lethal mix of fruit and anything else that would ferment, plus as much sugar as could be stolen from Janie’s stores. Brewing technique was simple. The mix was sealed in a paraffin tin, buried in numerous locations in the garden, and dug out after some weeks as required. Charlie’s brew was not only for his own use. He was a noted and valued supplier to the neighbourhood and was well-known to the police who regularly raided our premises, ritually unearthed one or two buried tins, arrested Charlie, who would return a few hours later, quite unruffled, with the news that there were a number of other tins still happily fermenting.

Drunk or sober, he was a superb cook of Jewish food, and could produce a meal for ten or twenty people at short notice with little fuss. He and Janie fought constantly and he was fired at least weekly. Janie

used to beat him hysterically on his large bare upper arms and tell him to go. The response was invariably "Missus, go way out of my kitchen". He was our cook and friend for 30 years.

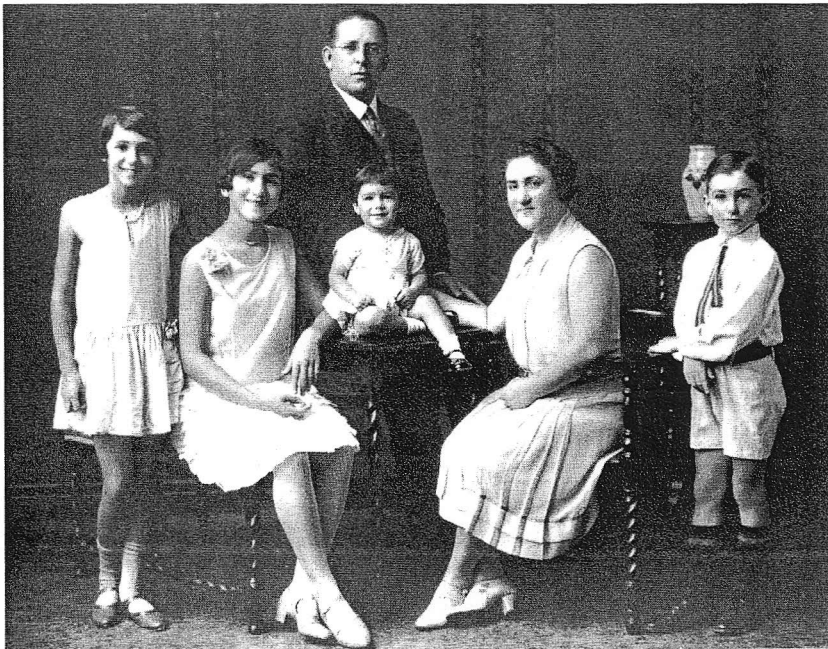
He accepted *kashrut*, presumably as a type of white man's magic, but was certainly not meticulous about it in Janie's absence. I recall secretly viewing one incident, when, after a more vocal and violent fight than usual between him and Janie, he, believing himself to be unobserved, slowly and deliberately, and with obvious malice and glee, slowly ground a half-pound of butter into a meat saucepan!

To complete the physical picture of my childhood world I must include my sisters and brother. Of course, with seven years between me and Leslie, ten between me and Jocelyn, and thirteen between me and Ruby, I am spared the memories of growing up with teenage girls. My first clear memory of my sisters is Jocelyn hidden under her bed studying for Matric, in an effort to escape her four-year old and eleven year old brothers; Jocelyn forever delicate, sleeping in a bed propped up at an angle (a much-vaunted cure for amoebic dysentery); Jocelyn demanding the sole bathroom to get ready to go on a date. Jocelyn was pretty and Janie's favourite. Ruby was a very different girl – a *Habonim* leader, a champion squash player, a drinker and smoker and poker player with "the boys". Above all, and very uncharacteristically, she was the foremost pupil of Miss Patterson's Music Academy, and at seventeen was the soloist with the Durban Philharmonic Orchestra in the City Hall, playing the Tchaikovsky concerto. I dimly recall the crashing practice cords reverberating through the house from the piano in the lounge. There was a post-concert party at Madeline Road. Ruby had brought great honour to the house and the family. It was, I believe, the only time that Janie and Morris had hosted a party at which gentiles were present, including the conductor, Edward Dunn, very upright in his corset.

Jocelyn became an elocution teacher, and Ruby a music teacher, both using the house as their studio. I know that I was at least as much a trial to them as they were to me. Fortunately, both married relatively young; Ruby to Cecil Gifter, an endearing hard-drinking mining buccaneer, and Jocelyn to Aaron Porter, a clever Benoni doctor whose Hebrew accomplishments brought much joy to Morris. Gifter's accomplishments, largely sporting, drinking, and women did not! It was intended that there should be a double wedding for the Gevisser girls, but the ongoing rivalry between them – evident until Ruby's death at eighty five – soon sank that idea. The weddings were close together and in proper, extravagant, competitive Durban Jewish style.

Leslie came into focus for me at the age of about five, when he was

twelve. I dimly remember his barmitzvah, a forerunner of the stereotype that I was to know very well. He was sporty, well-liked, not at all academic, and developed into a superb athlete and rugby player. Schoolwork was definitely not something he enjoyed and in desperation our parents sent him to boarding school – Hilton College, the school for the Natal farming aristocracy. He did well there as a sportsman but did not manage to pass any examination. He left to join the army at the outbreak of the second world war. I have only fragmentary recollections of our early relationship – of cheering him on at rugby matches and athletic meets, of running errands, of being chastised and punched for misdemeanours. There was a very strong element of hero-worship.



The Gevisser Family, 1928. From left: Jocelyn, Ruby, Morris, David, Janie and Leslie

My large and extended family was an integral and vital part of my growing up and needs to be recorded.

Janie has six siblings:

Louis, who left Durban early for the gold of Johannesburg. He produced a daughter, Florrie, who emigrated to Israel and was always remote from the family. He died at a young age, leaving his second wife, Budge.

Sol, whom we will meet again and again.

Barney, a delightfully intelligent medical doctor, who married Ida

Shapiro. They had two children – Michael a good friend although considerably younger than I, and Ann who married Kurt Jagerman and emigrated to Israel. Like Barney, both died long before their time. I miss them all. Ida, indomitable, bereft of husband and children, lives in Israel surrounded by loving grandchildren.

Tilly (Thelma), a somewhat distant lady, married an ebullient immigrant lover of good things, Willie Brittan. They lived opulently in Johannesburg and produced Irvine (of whom more later) and Barbara, a strange remote girl who married, moved to London, divorced, and is rarely seen or heard of.

Max, warm-hearted, generous, affectionate, with whom I had a warm and happy relationship. He married Zelda Levitan, a lovely, intelligent and irreplaceable member of the family. They produced two outstanding sons, John and Brian, both very well married (to Anna and Lois respectively), who in turn have provided the expanding family with many more Moshals. John was a particular favourite of Sol's, and in many ways has filled his shoes in the Durban Jewish community, and on the national Jewish Board of Deputies. Brian is a quiet, highly respected and successful businessman, also a pillar of the community and particularly of the shul.

Sarah, the “baby”, and of an age with and a friend of Ruby's. Like Ruby, she was outgoing and funny. She married Sid Cohen, a London East Ender, and bore him three children – Stephen, Tony and Richard, who died tragically at an early age. Stephen and his wife Jeanette are close friends, as was Tony but since his move to America he has moved out of our sphere. They all have children, and Sean and Leon are good friends of our family.

As the Moshal *pater familias*, Sol loomed large. He and Gretchen had two daughters, Joan and Shirley, both of whom were a close part of my early life, straddling my age by a year or two on each side. Joan was a serious liberal when liberalism was difficult. She joined the army and then did good work as a social and health worker in the Natal midlands. Her views were a strong and early influence on me. She married Edward Lipworth, emigrated to Israel and died tragically in a motor smash. Their four children live in Israel, Johannesburg, New York and Toronto.

Shirley was a sweet girl who was my childhood playmate. She had an unhappy childhood under the difficult Gretchen, trained as a nursery schoolteacher, and married a young doctor, David Jacobson. After his early death she married Courtney Redhill, a childhood sweetheart, and lived in Springs. She died recently aged 75. She had a son, Stephen, and two daughters Val and Sandy. Sandy had an unusual history for anyone of her

background. She joined *Umkhonto*, the armed wing of the ANC, and saw very active and dangerous service. She and her husband retired to a farm outside Johannesburg after the Mandela miracle. She was recently found tortured and murdered in circumstances which are as yet unexplained, but thought to be connected with internal ANC feuds that dated back to the years of the struggle. Stephen has emigrated to Australia.

The paternal Gevisser side of the family were not as highly regarded in that strange community as the Moshals, but they were numerous, warm and affectionate and were all always very welcome in our home.

Morris' younger brother Issy married Katie Sher. They had three children – Julius (Lulu), Bernard and Daphne. Julius who died recently, married Desirée Friend from Rhodesia. He had a quiet middle-management career in Acme Timbers. Their three children live in Durban and Los Angeles. Bernard, also in the family wholesaling business, married the redoubtable Zena Ash, who became famous for her "Charm School" and the training and management of Penny Coelen, Miss World. Their three children are also split between Australia and Los Angeles. Issy, after Katie's death, married Jenny Maltz and they both lived contentedly for many years in Durban.

Then there was the host of unreconstructed *shtetl*-dwellers that happily peopled my childhood and youth – Mary and Charles Lachman and their children Sidney and Hilda; Mary who will forever be remembered for her reply to the query "How are you feeling?" "Mit der hends, mit der hends!" Among the odours that stand in my memory there is still, clearly, the smell of leather in Charles' harness shop.

Hans and Fanny Manasse; Hans the Berlin sophisticate who would routinely break off a conversation when a pretty girl passed to growl "I give her von!" and Fanny the warm-hearted Russian Jewess.

Lazar and Rose Klug; Lazar the diminutive kosher butcher and Talmud scholar, the father of a daughter and two sons – Aaron and Benny.

The many-layered Hackner family, part of which was the Sam Hackner branch which was anathema. He had, according to family legend, in or about 1912, followed Morris and Issy's delivery horse-cart, suborned their customers, and then for good measure, tried to burn down their warehouse!

In Johannesburg there was a multitude of cousins – the Moss, Ustiev, and Knep families come readily and clearly to mind. All visited Durban frequently and particularly for the July "season". The Gevisser house at Madeline Road was their Durban home which during every July was frantic. I am still in occasional contact with some of the cousins like Shirley Moss (Meyer) in Johannesburg, and Henri Knep (Shnier) in Sydney.

There was of course also a large family in Lithuania before the Holocaust. They were totally unknown to me and never freely spoken of. Information had to be dragged out of a reluctant Morris and Issy. One of the Lithuanian family connections escaped to Israel and addressed a letter to "The Gevisser family, South Africa". It reached us and from its writer it became possible to confirm the awful and familiar history (Appendix iii). Julius Gevisser drew a family tree. It contained over twenty black crosses – "murdered by the Nazis".