

*In the Shadows of the Shoah and Apartheid: Recovering Traces
of “Difficult Pasts” of German-Jewish Refugees in South Africa*

by Steven Robins

Abstract

This paper investigates traces of German-Jewish refugee experiences in South Africa in the 1930s and the war years that have typically been left out of mainstream historical narratives and public discourses. It will draw on refugee life histories to investigate whether the concepts of “usable pasts” and “chosen amnesia” can help explain how and why references to widespread and virulent anti-Semitism and Nazism during the 1930s and 1940s receded from public discourse in the postwar era, a period characterized by rapprochement between South African Jews and the ruling National Party that came to power in 1948. The paper will also examine whether Jews’ incorporation into the white social order of the apartheid system required “strategic forgetting” about the history of the National Party’s support for Nazi Germany, its use of anti-Semitic rhetoric in the 1930s, and its advocacy for the 1938 Aliens Act that effectively ended Jewish immigration. Finally, the paper examines whether, during the apartheid years, this history became an “unusable past.” The motivation for seeking to “recover” this unsettling past draws on Claudia Braude’s observation that recollections of these “difficult pasts” of Jewish racial ambiguity can help deepen our understandings of the history of South African racism.

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Introduction¹

An overall sketch of world historical production through time suggests that professional historians alone do not set the narrative framework in which their stories fit. Most often, someone else has already entered the scene and set the cycle of silences [...]. Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance).²

Scholarly studies of the experiences of German-Jewish refugees to South Africa have, since the 1950s, stressed a seemingly smooth and successful integration of these refugees into life in their host country.³ While acknowledging encounters

¹ Acknowledgment: I would especially like to thank Marie-Pierre Ulloa, Deborah Posel and Sean Field for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the paper as well as for their intellectual generosity, insights, and friendship. I would also like to thank the journal's anonymous reviewers for their constructive engagement with the paper.

² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 26.

³ Sarah Schwab, " 'No Single Loyalty': Processes of Identification amongst German-Jewish Refugees from Nazi Germany in South Africa," in *Refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe in British Overseas Territories*, eds. Swen Steinberg and Anthony Grenville, Series Yearbook of the Research

with pro-Nazi support and anti-Semitism in the 1930s, as well as initial financial and language difficulties, these historical narratives suggest that, during the postwar apartheid period, this group of over 6000 refugees was swiftly and seamlessly assimilated into white South African society. In the 1990s, historians began to systematically document the history of anti-Semitism in South Africa in the 1930s⁴, but not much attention was given to the socio-psychological dimensions of the unsettling experiences of these refugees during this period. For instance, it is likely that these refugees would have experienced extreme forms of racialized exclusion from public life in Germany, followed by disorientating displacement and exile in South Africa, where pro-Nazi anti-Semitism was rife in the 1930s. They would also have discovered, after the war, the devastating losses of family members in Nazi-occupied Europe. Moreover, it was also only after the war that Jews were fully incorporated into white South African society. Yet, as we will see, these socially and psychically unmooring aspects of the German-Jewish refugee experience were typically excluded from the “celebratory” narratives of successful integration.⁵

This paper is concerned with the task of searching for traces of German-Jewish refugee experiences in South Africa in the 1930s and the war years that have typically been left out of mainstream historical narratives and public discourses. The paper will draw on refugee life histories to investigate whether the concepts

Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies, Vol. 20 (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2020); Frieda Sichel, *From Refugee to Citizen: A Sociological Study of the Immigrants from Hitler's Europe who Settled in South Africa* (Cape Town-Amsterdam: A.A. Balkema, 1966); Jocelyn Hellig, “German Jewish Immigration to South Africa during the 1930s: Revisiting the Charter of the SS Stuttgart,” *Jewish Culture and History* 11, no. 1-2 (2009): 124-138.

⁴ Milton Shain, *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa* (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press, 1994); Id., *A Perfect Storm: Antisemitism in South Africa, 1930-1948* (Johannesburg-Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2015); Patrick J. Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika: The Impact of the Radical Right on the Afrikaner Nationalist Movement in the Fascist Era* (Hanover-London: Wesleyan University Press, 1991), 41-43.

⁵ Shula Marks, “Review: Apartheid and the Jewish Question. Reviewed Works: *Memories, Realities and Dreams. Aspects of the South African Jewish Experience* by Milton Shain and Richard Mendelsohn; *Community and Conscience: The Jews in Apartheid South Africa* by Gideon Shimoni,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, no. 4 (2004), Special Issue: *Writing in Transition in South Africa: Fiction, History, Biography* (2004): 889.

of “usable pasts”⁶ and “chosen amnesia”⁷ can help explain how and why references to anti-Semitism and Nazism during the 1930s and 1940s receded from public discourse in the postwar era, a period characterized by rapprochement between South African Jews and the ruling National Party that came to power in 1948. The paper will also examine whether Jews’ incorporation into the white social order of the apartheid system required “strategic forgetting” about the history of the National Party’s support for Nazi Germany, its use of anti-Semitic rhetoric in the 1930s, and its advocacy for the 1938 Aliens Act that effectively ended Jewish immigration. In other words, the paper will explore whether, during the apartheid years, this history became an “unusable past,” one that had to be erased from collective memory and dominant historical narratives?⁸ The motivation for seeking to “recover” this unsettling past draws on Claudia Braude’s observation that recollections of the “difficult pasts” of Jewish racial ambiguity “can contribute towards deepening understanding of the history of South African racism.”⁹

I have often wondered what German Jewish refugees such as my late father Herbert Leopold Robinski and his younger brother Artur experienced when they arrived in South Africa in 1936 and 1938 respectively, and immediately encountered widespread anti-Semitism and overt support for Germany and Nazism amongst National Party leaders and radical right-wing Afrikaner nationalist groups. I have also tried to imagine what my father must have felt about living in a country where the leadership of the National Party leadership that came to power in 1948 had not only supported Nazi Germany during the war, but was also responsible for pressuring the United Party Government to introduce restrictive immigration legislation in the 1930s that prevented him and his brother from rescuing their parents and siblings trapped in Berlin. I have also wondered how my father coped

⁶ Richard Mendelsohn and Milton Shain, “Constructing a Usable Past: History, Memory and South African Jewry in an Age of Anxiety,” *Jewish Culture and History* 9, no. 2-3 (2007): 49-59.

⁷ Susanne Buckley-Zistel, “Remembering to Forget: Chosen Amnesia as a Strategy for Local Coexistence in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 76, no. 2 (2006): 131-150. I am grateful to Sean Field for alerting me to this study.

⁸ For an insightful account of the concept of “usable pasts” in histories of South African Jewry see Mendelsohn and Shain, “Constructing a Usable Past.”

⁹ Claudia Bathsheba Braude, *Contemporary Jewish Writing in South Africa: An Anthology* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2001), xii.

with the psychological consequences of his arrest and imprisonment by the Gestapo in Erfurt in 1933, followed by his discovery after the war of the tragic fate of his parents and siblings who were deported to Auschwitz and Riga. How did he come to terms with all of this, and why did he choose not to speak to me or my brother about it? Did he talk about this with his fellow German Jewish refugees in Port Elizabeth, and how did they live with the losses of family members? What I do know is that my father was confined for two years to a Tuberculosis sanatorium in the Northern Cape during the war years. As we will see, according to the medical reports submitted to the Holocaust Restitution Office in Berlin after the war, this illness was a result of extreme psychological stress and anxiety my father experienced during the 1930s and the war years.



Fig. 1. Photo of my father in his later years, with his signature beret, Private Collection.

This study will seek to understand the refugee experiences of my father and his younger brother by drawing on material in the Robinski Archive, which consists of letters, photographs and documents deposited in the archives of the South African Holocaust & Genocide Centre (SAHGC) in Cape Town and the Jewish Museum in Berlin. The paper will investigate what these sources, and my own memories of my father and my uncle, can tell us about the complexities of

“successful integration” of German-Jewish refugees in a country undergoing its own racialized political transformations in the 1930s. I will analyze these refugee experiences in relation to dominant postwar narratives of integration that stressed the entrepreneurial and professional abilities, education, loyalty, civic-mindedness, and respectability of these mostly middle class German-Jewish refugees. This narrative, much like the historical accounts of the earlier arrival of East European Jews in South Africa, draws on fragments of the past to conjure up a useable narrative of a respectable and hardworking community. Although the paper focuses specifically on the role of historians, Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us that professional historians are by no means the sole participants in the production of narratives.¹⁰ The following section briefly discusses the broader contours of the dominant narrative of Jewish immigration to South Africa from the 1880s onwards.

“Celebratory” Meta-Narratives and Shadow Histories

In a 2004 review of two seminal histories of Jews in South Africa,¹¹ the South African historian Shula Marks identified three “triumphalist meta-narratives” present in much of this literature: “The familiar ‘from rags to riches’ story, based on Jewish entrepreneurial drive and their respect for learning; their seamless sense of community and closely knit family life; and the myth of South Africa as the ‘*goldene medina*’—the gold state or utopia in which Jews experienced no antisemitism.”¹² While Marks acknowledges that there is indeed some element of

¹⁰ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 25. As Trouillot notes, “We cannot exclude in advance any of the actors who participate in the production of history or any of the sites where that production may occur. Next to professional historians we discover artisans of different kinds, unpaid or unrecognized field laborers who augment, deflect, or reorganize the work of the professionals as politicians, students, fiction writers, filmmakers, and participating members of the public.”

¹¹ The two texts reviewed by Shula Marks are the following: Milton Shain and Richard Mendelsohn, *Memories, Realities and Dreams. Aspects of the South African Jewish Experience* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2002) and Gideon Shimoni, *Community and Conscience: The Jews in Apartheid South Africa* (New England: Brandeis University Press, 2003).

¹² Marks, “Review: Apartheid and the Jewish Question,” 889. Marks identifies an additional post-apartheid celebratory narrative focused on “the role of specifically Jewish values in generating disproportionately large number of Jewish liberals and radicals in South Africa.”

truth in all three narratives, she also notes that these narratives were thoroughly undermined, if not “demolished,” by two South African historians in the 1980s: Charles Van Onselen and Riva Krut. These historians drew attention to aspects of the history of Jewish immigration to South Africa that had been excised from dominant narratives.

Marks notes that Van Onselen’s seminal *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand*¹³ provided insights into Jewish involvement in the illicit economies of the booming mining city of Johannesburg in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, and drew attention to “the heterogenous origins, fractious class character and turbulence of the Jewish community of the Rand [Johannesburg].”¹⁴ Similarly, Van Onselen’s later book on the notorious Jewish criminal figure, Joseph Silver (1868-1918),¹⁵ focuses on this outlaw’s involvement in transnational organized crime, including prostitution rings and illegal liquor trade on the Rand mines. As Sally Swartz notes in a review of the book, its account of vulnerable Jewish women trapped and exploited in Silver’s prostitution networks provides “a little known shadow history of displaced Jews, surviving on the edges of society, on the wrong side of the law” (emphasis added). While critical of certain aspects of the book, Swartz suggests that it could contribute towards correcting the sanitized narratives produced in response to “centuries of anti-Semitic prejudice.”¹⁶ In fact, Swartz’s recent work has drawn attention to another “unusable past,” the relatively unknown history of Jewish mental illness in the Cape Colony in the nineteenth century.¹⁷

¹³ Charles Van Onselen’s three essays, “Randlords and Rotgut,” “Prostitutes and Proletarians” and “Johannesburg’s Jehus,” in Id., *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914* (two volumes) I. *New Babylon* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982). Van Onselen’s later essay is “Jewish Marginality in the Atlantic World: Organised Crime in the Era of the Great Migrations, 1880-1914,” *South African Historical Journal* 43 (November 2000): 96-137.

¹⁴ Marks, “Review: Apartheid and the Jewish Question,” 890.

¹⁵ Charles Van Onselen, *The Fox and the Flies: The World of Joseph Silver, Racketeer and Psychopath* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007).

¹⁶ Sally Swartz, “Review: The Fox and the Flies: The World of Joseph Silver, Racketeer and Psychopath by Charles Van Onselen,” *Kronos* 33 (2007): 269-274.

¹⁷ Sally Swartz, *Homeless Wanderers: Movement and Mental Illness in the Cape Colony in the Nineteenth Century* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2015).

Riva Krut's ground-breaking work in the mid-1980s also goes against the grain of triumphalist meta-narratives by questioning accounts of a homogenous Jewish community characterized by closely-knit family life. Instead, she draws attention to deep class and socio-cultural fractures within the Jewish community of Johannesburg between 1886-1914.¹⁸ Krut also provides insights into the ways in which middle-class German, British and Cape Jews at the helm of the newly formed Jewish Board of Deputies in the early 1900s used communal institutions to systematically remove "any taint of the 'Peruvian' [Yiddish-speaking East European] from the South African Jew," who now became defined as white, urban, English-speaking, middle-class.¹⁹ As Krut notes, the Board monitored anti-Semitism, directed East European Zionist socialism into a more acceptable politics and developed welfare and educational programs aimed at promoting Jewish "respectability."²⁰

The historical writings of Van Onselen, Krut and Swartz question the dominant celebratory narrative by throwing light on excluded, shadow histories. Similarly, Milton Shain and Richard Mendelsohn's 2007 review of three seminal historical studies of Jews in South Africa published between 1930 and 1955,²¹ notes that these influential texts conform to a meta-narrative of a "respectable past in an age of anxiety and vulnerability."²² According to Shain and Mendelsohn, these texts mirror the desire of the communal leadership and the wider Jewish community for a certain type of "usable past"—one that recorded and celebrated Jews' respectability, industriousness, upward mobility, civic mindedness, loyalty and Zionist commitment. This meta-narrative of respectability was used as a "weapon in the arsenal of the community's self-defence against burgeoning antisemitism

¹⁸ Riva Krut, "Building a Home and a Community: Jews in Johannesburg, 1886-1914" (PhD thesis, University of London, 1986).

¹⁹ Marks, "Review: Apartheid and the Jewish Question," 890.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The three texts that Mendelsohn and Shain refer to are: Louis Herman, *A History of the Jews in South Africa from Earliest Times to 1895* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1930); Israel Abrahams, *The Birth of a Community: A History of Western Province Jewry from Earliest Times to the End of the South African War, 1902* (Cape Town: Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, 1955); Gustav Saron and Louis Holz, eds., *The Jews in South Africa: A History* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1955).

²² Mendelsohn and Shain, "Constructing a Usable Past."

that included the emergence of far-right radical organizations, inspired by Nazi forms and rhetoric.”²³ However, the authors also note that such “usable pasts,” crafted in the name of a safe and secure future, came at the cost of distortions and silences about a range of issues, including anti-Semitism, class struggle within the Jewish community, non and anti-Zionism, the struggle between Yiddishists and Hebraists, and Jewish criminality. Shain and Mendelsohn observe that the 1990s witnessed the forging of a new “usable past” for a post-apartheid future—one that celebrates the role of Jewish values that seemingly influenced the liberal and radical activism of Jews, including those Jewish communists who were once *persona non grata* within the Jewish establishment because of fear of reprisals by the apartheid state.²⁴ The notion of “usable pasts” is clearly helpful for identifying what gets included and excluded in historical accounts and public discourses. This paper will now turn to a discussion of the dominant narrative of the German-Jewish refugee experience in the 1930s, before turning to a discussion of searching for traces of its shadow history.

Narrations of Refugee Experiences and National Integration

In their studies of German Jewish immigration to South Africa during the 1930s, Frieda Sichel, Jocelyn Hellig and Sarah Schwab refer to accounts of the successful integration of refugees that conform in many respects to the kind of celebratory narratives of Jewish immigration to South Africa identified by Shula Marks.²⁵ For instance, Frieda Sichel’s 1966 research on Johannesburg’s refugees, entitled *From Refugee to Citizen*,²⁶ is a systematic sociological study on how their integration was facilitated by the establishment of “a close-knit community with its own German language synagogues and newspapers as well as various self-help organizations that provided important assistance for the immigrants who arrived with little to no financial means.”²⁷ In the book, Sichel, who was herself a

²³ Ibid., 51.

²⁴ Ibid., 56.

²⁵ Sichel, *From Refugee to Citizen*; Jocelyn Hellig, “German Jewish Immigration to South Africa during the 1930s,” 126; Schwab, “‘No Single Loyalty.’”

²⁶ Sichel, *From Refugee to Citizen*.

²⁷ Ibid., 68.

German-Jewish refugee, draws on detailed empirical data to substantiate her study's findings:

This book deals with the problems involved in their migration: pulling up roots in their former homelands; retraining for life in the new country; adjusting to new economic, social and cultural conditions; taking root as citizens and finding a niche of their own in national life [...]. By and large, they were an educated and resourceful group of people, and they settled into diverse avenues of the South African economy. Some brought talents which were new to South Africa and pioneered branches of trade and industry which had not been effectively worked before. Some joined the learned professions and achieved eminence in medicine, law and academic life. Some went farming and brought Continental ingenuity to the problems of South Africa agriculture. Some were trained in the social sciences and brought improved concepts of welfare to South Africa [...]. They exhibited qualities which made for good citizenship: they were hard-working, conscientious, reliable. Accustomed in their countries of origin to cultured living, they helped to swell the audiences so necessary for the growth of music and theatre [...].²⁸

Sichel's work was very influential in establishing the dominant narrative of successful integration. For instance, in her study of the circumstances surrounding the arrival in Cape Town in 1936 of over 500 German-Jewish refugees on board the SS Stuttgart, Joslyn Hellig cites the findings of Lawrence Schlemmer, one of the researchers involved in Sichel's 1966 study:

The German Jewish refugees, according to Lawrence Schlemmer, integrated extremely well, largely because they were economically flexible and arrived at a fortunate time for the South African economy. Protests against the entry of Jewish immigrants belied the fact that the economy was ready to take off into self-sustained growth, and was ripe for large-scale entrepreneurial success. This group of immigrants, contrary to the

²⁸ Ibid., 68.

popular view, was an asset to its country of adoption. Among the refugees were gifted intellectuals who contributed substantially to the arts, and a substantial number of them were successful in business, making a considerable contribution to the economy. They provided employment for 15,000 non-whites and 8,000 whites. Of male refugees, 46 per cent participated in the Second World War, either in the forces or in the Civic Guard. No less important, however, according to Schlemmer, were the everyday skills of good citizenship brought by the refugees. Among the reasons given by Schlemmer for the refugees' successful adaptation were their high educational achievements [and] Judaism's heavy emphasis on learning, and certain patterns of mother dominance, which are an important determinant of children's occupational achievement.²⁹

Although Sichel's study emphasizes refugees' smooth integration into South African society, L. Hotz, another one of the contributors to the book, mentions in a single sentence that "the psychological climate in which the German-Jewish refugees found themselves on their arrival and in their years in South Africa was one of storm and stress."³⁰ Yet, as I will suggest below, the dominant narrative of integration screens out any references to anxiety and other psychological conditions and experiences of extreme stress. Neither does this narrative, and its endorsement in Sichel's study, engage with the many complexities, obstacles and ambiguities of these refugees' passages to whiteness and full citizenship in their host country.

Sarah Schwab observes that, from the end of the 1950s onwards, this sociologically-grounded narrative became a source of pride for Johannesburg's refugee community.³¹ Schwab also notes that "although the immigrants' attitude towards South Africa initially oscillated between integration and alienation, in later years a narrative of integration and success became the dominant form of self-description, [and] this simplistic and indeed simplifying narrative of successful integration tended to downplay the ruptures, difficulties, failures and conflicts that formed

²⁹ Hellig, "German Jewish Immigration to South Africa during the 1930s," 126.

³⁰ Sichel, *From Refugee to Citizen*, 13.

³¹ Schwab, "No Single Loyalty," 84.

part of the history of the refugees in South Africa.”³² As I will suggest later, when I discuss the refugee experiences of my father and his brother, this narrative of successful adaptation and integration also obscures the extent of the anxieties and psychological stress experienced during the 1930s and 1940s.

The narrative discussed above implies a smooth transition to civic citizenship and national belonging for the 6,500 German Jewish refugees who came to South Africa between 1933 and 1942. In certain respects, it shares some resemblance with the many studies of whiteness in North America, where it is often assumed that, following initial experiences of discrimination against working class European immigrants, the latter swiftly learned the racial codes required to “become white,” and were subsequently seamlessly incorporated into white, middle-class society in their host countries.³³ Yet, as Riva Krut, Milton Shain, Sally Swartz and many others have demonstrated, this narrative does not accurately reflect the more complicated and ambiguous character of the integration of Jewish immigrants who came to South Africa during the first half of the twentieth century.

³² Ibid., 82.

³³ Since the 1990s, whiteness studies as a field has exploded all over the world, especially in North America. Karen Brodtkin’s *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998) and Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White* (New York-London: Routledge, 1995) are part of burgeoning body of literature on the making of whiteness in the context of European immigration to North America. See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Versa, 1991); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018); Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Eric J. Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Thomas Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Russell A. Kazal, *Becoming Old Stock: The Paradox of German-American Identity* (Princeton-Oxford: University of Princeton Press, 2004); Hasia R. Diner, “The World of Whiteness,” *Historically Speaking* 9, no.1 (September-October 2007): 20-22.

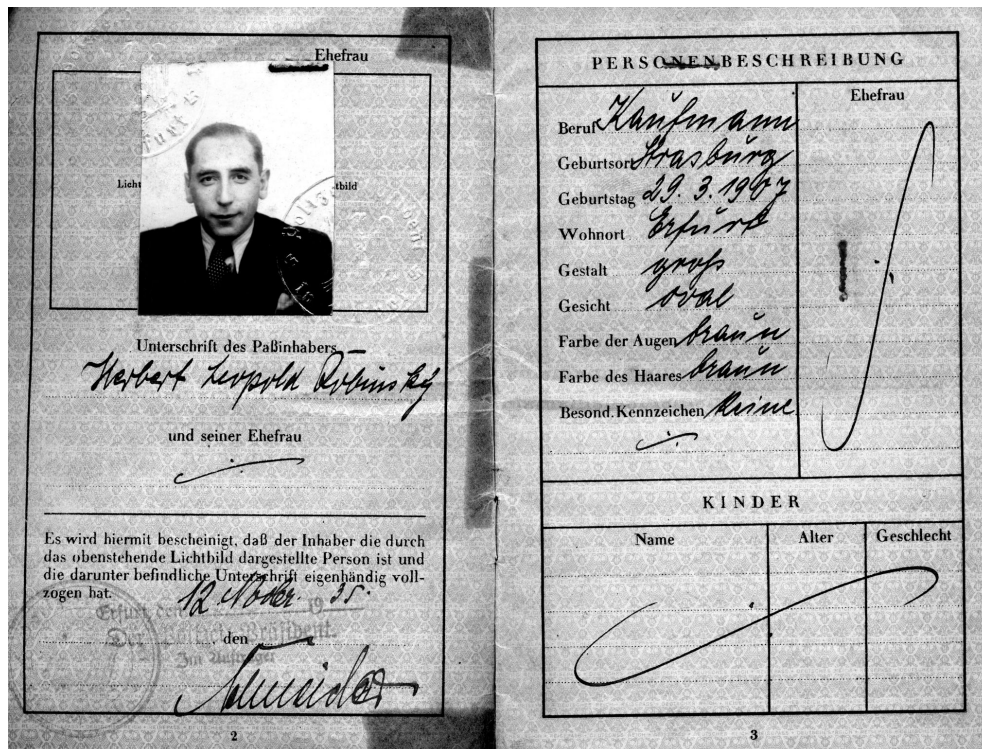


Fig. 2. My father's German passport that he used to leave Germany in 1936, Private Collection.

Following the broad contours of a whiteness studies approach, a recent study by Mitchell Joffe Hunter (2020) suggests that, despite initial discrimination and anti-Semitism directed against East European Jews who arrived in South Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by the 1920s Jews' racial status as "whites" was secure.³⁴ Hunter's Masters' dissertation, which draws on the earlier work of Riva Krut,³⁵ focuses on how, in the early 1900s, working-class Yiddish-speaking East European immigrants to South Africa came to embrace a political subjectivity, identity and ideology that endorsed, and was complicit with, the ideas and practices of white colonial identity and political subjectivity.³⁶ Like Krut's

³⁴ Mitchel Joffe Hunter, "Colonisers to Colonialists: European Jews and the Workings of Race as a Political Identity in the Settler Colony of South Africa" (Master diss., Department of Sociology, University of the Western Cape, 2020).

³⁵ Krut, "Building a Home and a Community."

³⁶ Like Krut, Hunter argues that this process of assimilation and incorporation into the white colonial social order was facilitated by the Anglo-German Jewish middle-class establishment and its communal institutions. For instance, in response to the 1902 Immigration Act, which required that immigrants had to be able to write in a European language, the leadership of the Jewish Board of Deputies and the South African Zionist Federation lobbied the colonial government for the

own work, Hunter shows how Jewish communal institutions such as the SAJBD sought to transform “unruly” East European Jews (“Peruvians”) into “proper” white colonial subjects by inculcating the middle-class attitudes, appearance, habits, comportment and behaviors of bourgeois respectability. These interventions sought to challenge popular stereotypes and caricatures of “Peruvians” as dirty, unhygienic, sexually promiscuous, barbaric, racially degraded and unscrupulous traders involved in illicit alcohol and sex work industries.³⁷ By contrast to these accounts of East European immigration to South Africa, the celebratory histories of German-Jewish refugees tend to highlight their entrepreneurial, educated, cultured, middle-class and professional backgrounds—which is seen to account for why they came to be recognized as “assets,” and were successfully integrated into white South African society. Clearly, historical narratives of East European and German Jewish immigration have taken very different directions and discursive forms, even though the narrative of successful integration characterizes both.

While these narratives of successful integration could be interpreted as assimilation into whiteness, Hasia R. Diner cautions against decontextualized and essentialist approaches that she finds in much of whiteness studies.³⁸ Diner does,

recognition of Yiddish as a European language, thereby contributing towards securing the white racial status and citizen rights of East European Jewish immigrants. Yiddish, which was initially seen as a language of Asiatic origin, would now officially be recognized as “properly European.”

³⁷ Hunter notes that the Jewish communal leadership also lobbied for the naturalization and citizenship of these immigrant Jews in ways that ended up colluding with colonial racial ideology. For instance, in the early 1900s “the Anglo-Jewish press argued that the otherwise barbaric Yidn was superior to the civilized Indian due to white skin and assimilability into settler colonialism” (Hunter, “Colonisers to Colonialists,” 154). Immigrants were also exposed to the “pedagogy of racial capitalism” and learnt the colonial habitus and justificatory discourse for the exploitation of the labor and usurpation of the land of the indigenous Black population. It was through this refashioning of political subjectivity and identity, Hunter argues, that the transition from “colonizers to colonialists” took place.

³⁸ One of the influential texts in this genre is Brodtkin’s ethnography entitled, *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race in America*. Brodtkin’s ethnography, which draws on her own experiences and perceptions as an American Jew, questions what she calls the “model minority myth,” arguing that the GI Bill and loans for houses from the Federal Housing Administration ensured the upward mobility and subsequent whitening” of American Jews. Brodtkin also draws on W.E.B. Du Bois’ (1903) concept of “double consciousness” to reflect on the persistent anxieties of Jews about “not being white enough.” Salomon Gruenwald writes in a

however, acknowledge the contribution of whiteness studies in showing how European immigrants to the United States had to “earn and learn their whiteness”:

Scholars used whiteness as a way to explain a vast and complicated phenomenon, which involved simultaneously how European immigrants suffered the stigma of being considered by the large American public as somehow akin to or like black people, and how those immigrants came to learn America’s racial rules and donned the trappings of whiteness by participating actively in anti-black behaviour and rhetoric.³⁹

Diner concludes that the whiteness studies literature all too often resorts to sweeping generalizations, jargon and buzzwords, without adequate empirical grounding or recognition of the specificities of historical contexts and contingencies, agency and internal divisions within immigrant communities. She also suggests that much more attention needs to be paid to the fact that although immigrants “learned American truths about color and race, they learned those lessons as they dealt with, and struggled over, a series of other issues, most having nothing to do with the color.” It is with this cautionary note in mind, that I will proceed to examine specific historical experiences of the Robinski brothers in South Africa.

These accounts of flight from Germany will also be analyzed in relation to the silences, excisions, elisions, and exclusions of the postwar narratives of successful integration. It will be suggested that the shadow histories of these immigration experiences—of anxiety, uncertainty and psychological trauma—have been systematically screened out of these postwar narratives through processes similar

review that Brodtkin’s ethnography provides important insights into how “Jews’ movement from racial other, to not-quite-white, to white, reveals how race in America is constructed in the discursive space opened by the binary between whiteness and blackness.” Gruenwald enthusiastically endorses Brodtkin’s conclusion that “Jews did not become white because they succeeded in spite of racism, rather they succeeded because of white racism.” See review by Salomon Gruenwald on <http://afa.americananthro.org/book-review/how-jews-became-white-folks-what-that-says-about-race-in-america/>. The review was posted by American Anthropology Association (AAA) Web Admin on Wednesday, August 8, 2011.

³⁹ Diner, “The World of Whiteness.”

in certain respects to the “chosen amnesia” that Susanna Buckley-Zistel writes about in her account of how Rwandan local communities sought to forget the causes of the social cleavages that contributed to the genocidal violence of 1994.⁴⁰ It will be suggested that, similar to these Rwandan villagers, German-Jewish refugees, the Jewish communal leadership and South African Jews more generally, chose to forget this difficult past of the 1930s and 1940s in the name of national integration, cohesion and to cement Afrikaner-Jewish rapprochement.

Searching for Traces of “Difficult” Refugee Pasts

In 1998, I wrote an essay entitled, “Silence in My Father’s House,”⁴¹ in which I addressed silences about the Shoah in my family home in Port Elizabeth as well as issues relating to the silenced pasts that surfaced in the course of post-apartheid indigenous land restitution struggles and the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which was underway in South Africa in the mid-1990s. At the time, I was writing op. ed newspaper articles on the TRC and I attended numerous hearings where I heard the anguished testimonies of family members of anti-apartheid activists who were murdered by security forces and who now demanded to know how their loved ones had been killed and where their bodies were. These testimonies on “gross human rights violations,” which were legally defined as murder, abductions and torture, were spliced onto nation-building narratives of truth-telling, forgiveness and national reconciliation and healing after apartheid that at times obscured aspects of the personal testimonies. This appropriation and reframing of the testimonies was done in the name of the “New South Africa.” Moreover, the exclusive focus on extreme forms of political violence against anti-apartheid activists also side-lined and obscured the “ordinary,” everyday suffering that millions of black South Africans endured during apartheid—experiences of bureaucratic violence, racial discrimination, land dispossession, forced removals and racialized poverty—what I referred to,

⁴⁰ Buckley-Zistel, “Remembering to Forget.”

⁴¹ Steven Robins, “Silence in My Father’s House: Memory, Nationalism and Narratives of the Body,” in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, eds. Carli Coetzee and Sarah Nuttal (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), 120-142.

following Hannah Arendt, as the “banality of apartheid.” In other words, in the name of national integration and reconciliation, the TRC unwittingly rendered mute the voices of millions of black South Africans who were exposed to these mundane, daily realities of apartheid.

Writing about the TRC had sensitized me to my father’s own silences about his family’s fate in Nazi Germany and, almost two decades later, I wrote about that silenced past in *Letters of Stone: From Nazi Germany to South Africa*.⁴² In the book, I wrote about how, soon after my father’s arrival in Cape Town in 1936, my father set about trying to rescue his younger brother, Artur, from Berlin. This proved to be extremely difficult as many countries, including South Africa, had already shut their doors to German Jews. Immigrating to the United States was almost impossible due to the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act, and in 1937 the Aliens Act effectively shut South Africa’s doors to Jewish immigration.⁴³ However, my father did manage to facilitate his brother Artur’s passage to South Africa in 1938. Artur spent a few weeks in South Africa before he had to leave for Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), where he was once again denied permanent residence, and he eventually ended up in Ndola in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). The two brothers did everything possible to try to rescue their younger sister Edith, but they were unsuccessful due to restrictive immigration laws.

⁴² Steven Robins, *Letters of Stone: From Nazi Germany to South Africa* (Cape Town: Penguin Random House Publishers South Africa, 2016).

⁴³ For a detailed and systematic account of the response of the Jewish Board of Deputies to rising anti-Semitism within the Afrikaner National Party from the 1930s to the late 1970s see Atalia Ben-Meir, “The South African Jewish Board of Deputies and Politics, 1930-1978” (PhD diss., University of Natal, 1995).



Fig. 3. My Uncle Artur and Aunt Edith in Berlin in the mid-1930s, Private Collection.

As I will discuss later, this failure to rescue Edith and the rest of the family in Berlin must surely have triggered debilitating feelings of guilt, grief and despair. I have speculated that this contributed towards my father's retreat into silence as well as the dramatic deterioration of his health, which confined him to a TB sanatorium for two years during the war. As we will also see, in correspondence with family members during the war years, he writes about losing his hair and having psychological difficulties. Were there any possibilities of speaking about these kinds of refugee experiences and emotional and psychological difficulties during this pre-trauma counselling era? It was only much later, from the 1970s onwards,

that Holocaust survivor testimony and trauma counselling became more mainstream. However, by reading between and beyond the lines of the letters from my grandmother to my father and his younger brother, I have been able to glimpse traces of these experiences of refugees who lived in the shadow of the Shoah. Before turning to a discussion of my father's silences, the following section will focus on the three stages of the refugee experience of refugees such as Artur Robinski, namely, separation from German society; liminal status as a stateless refugee betwixt and between home and exile; and finally, incorporation as a white settler in the host country.

Separation

From 1933 onwards, the Robinski family, like all German Jews, were exposed to a relentless stream of racial ordinances that impacted upon the minutiae of their daily lives. These laws contributed towards the slow and systematic stripping down of Berlin's Jews of their property, professions, livelihoods, dignity and citizenship. This also resulted in a radical rupture from intimate and convivial relations with non-Jewish friends, work colleagues, as well as exclusion from familiar social, recreational and public spaces in the city. The home, the Jewish community center, and the synagogue became some of the only sanctuaries from the open hostility and dangers of the streets and public spaces. It was this radical expulsion from public life that characterized the experiences of German-Jewish refugees prior to their departure to a life in exile.

Drawing on the diaries of Victor Klemperer and Willy Cohn, the Israeli scholar Guy Miron provides important insights into the spatial and temporal dimensions and consequences of the increasing confinement of middle class, professional German Jews to the private, domestic space of the home during the Nazi period.⁴⁴ The diary writers reflect upon the debilitating psychological effects of many years of waiting, seclusion and exclusion from public spaces and sociality, and how this

⁴⁴ See Guy Miron, "The Politics of Catastrophe Races On. I Wait.' Waiting Time in the World of German Jews Under Nazi Rule," *Yad Vashem Studies* 43, no. 1 (2015): 45-76. Id., " 'Lately, Almost Constantly, Everything Seems Small to Me': The Lived Space of German Jews under the Nazi Regime," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 20, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 121-149.

contributed to terrible feelings of loneliness, mood swings, a sense of “time standing still,” and paralyzing feelings of being totally cut-off from what was happening in the world. This enforced withdrawal into private, domestic space was also experienced as an unnerving exclusion from participation in ordinary civic life. Frieda Sichel provides similar accounts of these processes of separation in her opening chapter on “The Nazi Terror” in her book, *From Refugee to Citizen*.

It was within this context of systematic Nazi terror in Berlin’s streets and public spaces that Cecilie Robinski’s role as homemaker and convenor of the daily rituals of domestic life became so important. Her letters, which I write about in great detail in *Letters of Stone*, reveal her stoic efforts to stitch together the social fabric of a working-class family torn apart by the fragmenting force of racial laws that impinged on every aspect of their lives, confining them to the ever-constricting space of the home. Cecilie writes extensively about the family’s desperate efforts to emigrate as well as reporting on shopping for clothes, birthdays, Jewish festivals, card games and family gatherings for coffee and cake.⁴⁵ These mundane rituals and domestic routines of daily existence provide a portal into Cecilie Robinski’s resilient attempts to repair, maintain and anchor the family, and thereby provide them with a semblance of security and familial sociality within the home. These rituals of daily life sought to counter the daily terror taking place outside the home. This was the terrifying world that my father escaped in 1936 and Artur fled in 1938. The traumatic memories of this world would later be screened out of the sanitized accounts of how these refugees became “assets” to their host countries and successfully integrated as respectable citizens in their new societies.

⁴⁵ See Robins, *Letters of Stone* for detailed accounts of these daily rituals of domesticity. In her letters to her sons, Cecilie Robinski’s descriptions of quotidian domesticity would often suddenly be punctuated by a single, short, chilling sentence alluding to the latest disastrous development, for instance, the deportation of a family member. On November 31, 1938, two weeks after Kristallnacht, she writes: “Horst is in Dachau and Hermann in Sachsenhausen.” A day earlier, her daughter, Edith had written to my father, Herbert, about the impact of the Kindertransports after Kristallnacht: “The community is dissolving, and one does not know how long the school will continue to function [...]. The size of my class shrinks continuously because many children leave for Holland or other countries. Actually, one can only be happy for them, although for us this marks the beginning of the end.” In a later letter she states in a single sentence, “Norbert, Uncle Hermann and Horst are still sick,” a reference to their internment in concentration camps following Kristallnacht, when Jewish men were arrested in their thousands.

Twixt and Between

When Artur set sail from Hamburg in 1938, he had already experienced five years of racialized exclusion and separation in Berlin. Leaving Germany was both promising and full of uncertainty and trepidation. He had no way of knowing whether he would ever be able to return to Germany or see his friends and family again. His mother had hoped that he would be able to stay with his older brother Herbert in Port Elizabeth once he landed there. Cecilie Robinski's letters to Artur reveal a deep anxiety about what will await him in the unknown continent of Africa. He had left all that was familiar and had no certainty that he would be allowed to stay with his brother in Port Elizabeth.

Artur was given a temporary residence permit to stay in Port Elizabeth for two months. Despite his concerns about where he would be allowed to settle, in his October 30, 1938 letter to his former Berlin colleagues, he conveyed exuberance and hope about his newfound freedom. He describes in some detail his two days in Cape Town, which he calls "the second most beautiful city after Rio." He writes about the signs of wealth and the modern urban character of his next port of call, his brother's city of Port Elizabeth, which he describes as "a little New York."

In his letters to his former Berlin colleagues sent from Cape Town, Artur comes across as a fine observer of white South African life. He describes in detail, and with a certain degree of parody, the 1938 centenary celebrations of the Voortrekkers' Great Trek, an important ritual spectacle of the emerging Afrikaner Nationalist movement.

In the coming weeks, a huge celebration will take place, to commemorate the great journey which the Boers undertook with their ox wagons in 1838 in search of new land and to establish farms. So ox-wagons will be driven along the same roads as part of the centenary celebrations. Because these people, called Voortrekkers, once had long beards, in commemoration the Dutch [Afrikaners] will also grow beards, which looks ludicrous. The English people seem quite tolerant of this [...].

Artur seems to find these commemorative rituals eccentric and quaint. But he also perceives worrying resonances between these exuberant displays of Afrikaner nationalism and other forms of ominous flag-waving back home in Germany—a similarity that increased his fears that the Nazi threat was not confined to Europe. In 1938 he writes to his former colleagues in Berlin: “After the political experiences lately in this regard only bad things are to be expected. Why not here? The soil for this is fertile.” Artur had arrived in South Africa during the run-up to the 1938 national elections, and right-wing Afrikaner nationalists were busy targeting Jews for being pro-English liberals, harbingers of international Jewish communism, and economic parasites who sucked the blood out of poor white Afrikaners.⁴⁶

The year of Artur’s arrival also witnessed the emergence of a new paramilitary fascist movement, the Ossewabrandwag (Oxwagon Sentinel). This organization, founded by Oswald Pirow, identified Jewish money and Jews’ supposed allegiances with the British, Freemasons, imperialists and capitalists, as some of the biggest threats facing Afrikaners at the time. By 1941, the Ossewabrandwag would claim a membership of 300,000, which included its paramilitary elite unit, the Stormjaers. Pirow had also founded the pro-Nazi Nuwe Orde (New Order), and, two weeks after Kristallnacht in Berlin in November 1938, he visited Hitler at his Berghof in Berchtesgaden. Given all these dangers looming on the horizon, Artur’s relief is palpable when he writes to his former Berlin colleagues that he feels fortunate to be leaving for Southern Rhodesia.

Shirli Gilbert has noted that throughout the 1930s and during the war years, Jewish activists, rabbis, journalists and members of communal organizations such as the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) had made impassioned public statements against the rise of Nazism, with some drawing parallels between what was happening to Jews in Nazi Germany and forms of anti-Semitism and racism in South Africa at the time.⁴⁷ They spoke out especially strongly against the support for Nazi Germany amongst far-right Afrikaner nationalist groups such as

⁴⁶ Milton Shain, *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa*; Id., *A Perfect Storm*.

⁴⁷ Shirli Gilbert, “Jews and the Racial State: Legacies of the Holocaust in Apartheid South Africa, 1945-60,” *Jewish Social Studies* 16, no. 3 (2010): 32-64.

the Greyshirts, the Blackshirts, the South African Fascists,⁴⁸ the Ossewabrandwag and the Nuwe Orde, as well as amongst leaders of the then political opposition, D.F. Malan's Purified National Party.⁴⁹ Yet, as Gilbert observes, "despite the pervasiveness of Nazism in South African public discourse, there has been little scholarly discussion of Holocaust memory as it has developed there over the course of more than five decades."⁵⁰ It was only in the 1990s, that historians such as Milton Shain and Patrick J. Furlong began to systematically research this turbulent period in the 1930s, which Shain and Mendelsohn have described as an "age of anxiety" for South African Jews.⁵¹ Yet, as Gilbert noted, throughout most of the apartheid period, the SAJBD and most Jewish studies scholars turned away from engaging with this "difficult past" and focused instead on increasingly narrow Jewish concerns.

The striking resonances between Nazism in Germany and right-wing Afrikaner nationalism was no doubt a frightening reminder to Artur that he had not entirely escaped the dangers he fled. As he writes in a letter sent from Port Elizabeth to his former Berlin colleagues on October 30, 1938:

Everything that was before lies far behind and I do not know whether others feel the same way as I do. But today I am unable to understand how people can still live in G[ermany]. And when someone asks me here, how the Jews actually live in G? then I do not know what to reply. I feel great

⁴⁸ In 1934, Reverend Abraham Levy of the Western Road Synagogue in Port Elizabeth brought a libel suit against the South African Fascists leader, Johannes Strauss von Moltke. Von Moltke had used a variant of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion conspiracy theory to allege that Jews were conspiring against white, Christian South Africans. Rev. Levy ultimately won the case. For a detailed account of the court case, and the politics of Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s, see Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika*, 41-43.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁰ Gilbert, "Jews and the Racial State," 32.

⁵¹ Mendelsohn and Shain, "Constructing a Usable Past." Since the 1990s, historians such as Shain and Furlong have written extensively about anti-Semitism and far-right Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s, but during the apartheid period this past was largely forgotten, partly due to the rapprochement between the National Party and South African Jews that began in 1948. See Milton Shain, *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa*; Id., *A Perfect Storm*. For a detailed account of the impact of the far-right, pro-Nazi, Afrikaner nationalist movement see Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika*.

sympathy for all those who still have to live there, submitted to all the pressures, afraid, after [reading] each sentence in a newspaper and listening to each speech and figure of speech, to hear whether this will bring new punishments. I am asked of the state of mind of the people who have to endure such a nerve-wracking atmosphere and I do not know what to say to that. It just is to no avail [...].

Artur's letter, written two weeks after Kristallnacht, conveys a palpable sense of dread about the fate of his family trapped in Berlin. He had possibly also experienced similar displays of anti-Semitism in South Africa during his brief stay there in 1938.⁵² The following lengthy excerpt from Furlong's 1991 book *Between the Crown and Swastika* vividly conveys the virulence of anti-Semitism that German-Jews like Artur probably witnessed in South Africa in the 1930s:

On 15 November 1934 yet another leading moderate in the Purified [National] Party, A.L. Geyer, editor of *Die Burgher*, launched an outspoken attack on "Hoggenheimer," a mythical ludicrously fat and cigar-smoking stereotype of Jewish capitalism long popular among Afrikaner nationalists [...]. Under the title "The Chief Enemy in the National Struggle," Geyer contrasted "Hoggenheimer" to the Imperialist, who was obsessed with the love of another country, Britain: "But Hoggenheimer has no patriotism and no National feeling at all. Not the interests of the volk nor even of humanity, but self-seeking and own interests pure and simple control his actions. The Dark Money-Power is a tumour in the body of the capitalist system." [...]. By late 1934, the [Black and Grey] shirt movements had created an atmosphere of hysteria against Jews that could not be ignored by the Nationalists, and which explains

⁵² For a detailed account of Jewish immigration policies and nationalist politics in South Africa in the 1930s, see Chapter 2 in Furlong's, *Between Crown and Swastika*. Furlong observes that during this period, D.F. Malan's Purified National Party, the official opposition at the time, was following closely on the heels of the far-right Greyshirts in intensifying its anti-Semitic populist rhetoric. In 1937, following a marked increase in German Jewish immigration in 1936 after the passing of the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, the United Party under Jan Smuts responded to the groundswell of anti-Jewish popular sentiment by introducing immigration legislation that effectively prevented German Jews from entering the country.

Geyer's attack. In Johannesburg the streets were filled with anti-Semitic posters in Afrikaans bearing the swastika. Jewish refugees from Germany were horrified to find the streets of Cape Town similarly littered with Greyshirt newspaper posters adorned with the headline posters adorned with the headline: "[...] Jews indecently assault white girls."⁵³

Given these developments, it is perhaps hardly surprising that Artur was relieved to depart from South Africa in late 1938. While Artur had expected to find a better reception in Southern Rhodesia, this was not to be—he was not allowed to stay there, and had to move to Northern Rhodesia, where he finally settled. But even there, he encountered wartime anti-Semitism. Although he now had refuge, his identity as a German Jewish refugee in Northern Rhodesia soon came under intense scrutiny. On August 7, 1940, Artur wrote a letter to the editor of *The Northern Rhodesia Advertiser* responding to the newspaper's questioning of German Jews' loyalty to Northern Rhodesia, and to the war against Germany:

Sir—Since a few months your paper has questioned the loyalty of the German Jewish Refugees to this country. A few days ago some local groups have adopted the same outlook, and I would appreciate the courtesy of giving some space in your paper for removing some misapprehension likely to confuse and distort the facts. Your paper calls us "Germans" and "enemies," implying that we are the same brand of Germans who are out to destroy the British Empire. This is the first fallacy. We have been the first and foremost enemies of Nazi-Germany, fighting for the principles of democracy and liberalism, with the result that we became the first refugees from that country. How can a sensible man believe us to be all of a sudden enemies of a British country? [...]. No—the refugees do not belong to the fifth column. They do not throw [bombs] into crowded buildings and streets, they do not attack the British Empire in newspapers and meetings, they do not clamour for peace with the Nazis and Fascists. They are those who know best what Fascism means. They

⁵³ Ibid., 36-37.

have been at war with Hitler since 10 years, and must necessarily be friends with everybody who fights against the same enemies [...].

The suspicion of German Jews in Northern Rhodesia echoed events in Britain, where fears of a “fifth column” led to the indiscriminate internment and deportation of European Jews from both Britain and the British Protectorate of Palestine. During the late 1930s and into the war years, Artur Robinski may have experienced a sense of racial ambiguity as a result of his precarious national belonging. This was a time when notions of British racial purity and superiority were taken-for-granted, and European Jewish immigrants were not seen to be “white enough” by the colonial authorities and the white establishment. In 1939, a year after his arrival in South Africa, and in the aftermath of the November 1938 Kristallnacht pogrom, 300 German Jews and 100 Jews from the Baltic states arrived in Northern Rhodesia.⁵⁴ This doubling of the country’s Jewish population triggered anti-Semitic sentiments, and the question of Jewish immigration was hotly debated in the Legislative Council. As Hugh Macmillan writes on this period:

The question of Jewish immigration was debated in the Legislative Council and the country was compelled by the Colonial Office to consider the possibility of a large-scale German Jewish agricultural settlement scheme. Many of the refugees who reached Northern Rhodesia at this time were people with relatives in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia who could not get permits to stay in those countries. Although Northern Rhodesia provided a refuge of last resort to these people, anti-Semitic feeling was widespread within the settler population. When the British government was faced with the problem in June 1941 of evacuating about 600 Jews, 500 Poles and 400 British citizens from the Mediterranean island of Cyprus that was threatened by German invasion, all the east African territories were asked to help out. Northern Rhodesia’s acting Governor offered to take 500 people in the first instance. His telegram,

⁵⁴ Hugh Macmillan, “From Race to Ethnic Identity: South Central Africa, Social Anthropology and the Shadow of the Holocaust,” *Social Dynamics* 26, no. 2 (2000): 87-115; 99.

however, contained one significant reservation: “Owing to strong local antipathy to Jewish refugees I should be glad if Poles and Britishers only were allowed here.”⁵⁵

Like German Jewish refugees settling in South Africa during the 1930s, Artur probably counted himself fortunate to be allowed to stay in Northern Rhodesia. But it was only in the postwar period that he, like so many other German-Jews, would have experienced a sense of full incorporation into white colonial society.

Incorporation and Amnesia

As we have seen, numerous scholars have documented how Eastern European Jewish immigrants arriving in Cape Town were initially seen by the white colonial establishment as undesirable foreigners. This was still an age of imperialism in which Social Darwinist ideas about the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon, British “race” flourished. Although many of the more established, middle class Anglo-Jews had managed to insert themselves into the colonial social order some time earlier, it took longer for East European immigrants to be incorporated into English-speaking, middle-class white society. We have also seen how the rapid upward mobility of Jewish immigrants triggered deep resentment and anti-Semitism among poor white Afrikaners who had lost land and livelihoods during the economic crises of the 1920s. The resentment of Jewish control over commerce in the small rural towns and cities was mobilized in the 1930s and 1940s by the Nazi-supporting Afrikaner leadership, including National Party leaders such as D. F. Malan, H. F. Verwoerd, and B. J. Vorster, all of whom were to become prime ministers after the National Party came to power in 1948.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ These National Party leaders were also successful in lobbying for the 1937 Aliens Act that ultimately prevented German Jewish refugees from entering South Africa in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In 1936, a group of Professors at my university had organized large protests when *The Stuttgart*, a ship with more than 500 German Jewish refugees, tried to dock in Cape Town harbor. It was only after the National Party came to power in 1948 that Prime Minister D. F. Malan reaffirmed Jews’ status as “proper whites.”

Germany's defeat in 1945 changed everything. The exposure of the death camps, and international condemnation of what had happened to European Jews, convinced Malan's National Party to bury its earlier flirtations with Nazism and invite Jews into the white laager; the National Party now saw its task as enlisting all whites into a singular racial bloc in order to face the challenge of the "Native Question."⁵⁷ With this secure status came a sense amongst individual Jews and the leadership of communal institutions that memories of National Party anti-Semitism, anti-Jewish immigration laws, and pro-Nazi support during the 1930s and 1940s were no longer a "usable past." Incorporation for the German-Jewish refugees entailed amnesia and a wholesale embrace of the postwar narrative of "successful integration." It was only in the 1990s, at the start of the post-apartheid period, that German-Jewish refugee experiences from the 1930s and 1940s began to be foregrounded in public exhibitions and documentary films. In fact, it was during my visit to Myra Osrin, then director of the South African Holocaust & Genocide Centre, that it was proposed to have the first SAHGC exhibition on German-Jewish refugees entitled, *Seeking Refuge*. Yet, despite the post-apartheid attention to German-Jewish refugee experience in the scholarly literature and exhibitions, not much has been written about the psychological consequences of the emotional turmoil, trauma and anxieties of these refugees. The following account, based on my father's experiences during the 1930s and war years, is a very provisional attempt to engage with this shadow side of the "triumphalist" narratives of successful integration that have dominated accounts of German-Jewish refugees in South Africa.⁵⁸

Silence in my Father's House

Fragmentary anecdotal accounts of the experiences of my father, Herbert Robinski, in Port Elizabeth during the war years provide glimpses into what this

⁵⁷ This change in the National Party's approach facilitated Jews' stronger sense of citizenship and national belonging even though "complications" arose as a result of the disproportionate presence of radical Jews in the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the national liberation struggle. By the early late 1950s and 1960s, however, most Jewish communists were either in prison or in exile, and mainstream Jewry enjoyed their full membership within white fold.

⁵⁸ This section draws explicitly from my book *Letters of Stone*.

period of extreme crises must have been like for German-Jewish refugees in Southern Africa and elsewhere in the world. In 2013, a relative of my father, the late Judge Harold Levy, recalled to me how as a twelve-year-old he spent time in the company of bridge-playing German Jewish refugees in his mother's Port Elizabeth home. Harold told me that my father and his refugee friends would huddle around the radio to get news from the front. Harold mentioned that my father would become extremely agitated whenever one of Hitler's speeches was broadcast or a German military advance was reported. Harold also recalled that Ewald Nagel, a pessimistic man who was a relative of my father's and part of this small group of bridge-playing refugees, believed that Germany's military superiority would lead to their victory in the war; but my father still had hope that the Allies could win. I can only imagine how he must have felt each time he heard of the seemingly invincible German army's victories. It is hardly surprising that his health took a turn for the worse in 1940.

Harold's mother Hetty had worked tirelessly alongside my father to get his sister Edith out of Germany, and Harold vividly recalled the day my father told her that their efforts had been in vain and that Edith had been deported to Auschwitz. My father must have been devastated, but he probably felt he could not afford to dwell for too long on what had happened to his sister. On June 29, 1943, one month before Edith's deportation, Herbert had received a letter from Rudi Robinski, his cousin in Stockholm, in which Rudi described in an almost matter of fact manner that his family had been deported to the death camps. He then proceeded to propose a joint business venture:

Stockholm, 29.6.43
Bergsgatan 9 Stockholm

Dear Herbert,

You will perhaps be surprised to receive this letter from me. First of all, I can inform you that my sister Edith and my brother-in-law have also been deported a while ago, so I no longer correspond with Berlin. My parents have, as you perhaps already know, suffered the same fate. Should I, against all expectations, hear something about your relatives, I will inform you immediately.

The actual reason for this letter is of a business nature. I wished to request you to investigate, whether there are pelt firms (en gros or detail) over there who would wish to have a connection with Stockholm [...].

Rudi Robinski's letter to my father in 1943 offers a glimpse into the inner worlds of many German-Jews who escaped Nazi Europe but were unable to rescue family members. It hints at a sense of fatalism amongst those refugees who felt that they could not afford to dwell on their unspeakable losses and grief. I think my father probably responded in a similar way.

To the children and grandchildren of survivors who are seen to be part of the "postmemory generation" that Marianne Hirsch writes about,⁵⁹ or those Eva Hoffman calls the "hinge generation,"⁶⁰ positioned between experience and memory of the Holocaust, it may seem strange that survivors would "choose to forget" or remain silent about their traumatic experiences. From the perspective of survivors, however, strategic forgetting and silence were probably seen to be vital for repairing and rebuilding their lives from the ruins of the catastrophe. I have none of the letters my father sent to his family in Berlin, and he never spoke to me about psychic suffering during the 1930s and the postwar years—so, I have no direct access to his state of mind at the time. Neither do I know whether he chose to forget and retreated into silence as a defense mechanism or coping strategy. But there is a medical history, recorded in correspondence and documentation that my father submitted to Berlin's United Restitution Organization office at Helmstedter Strasse 5 in the 1960s, that testifies to the bodily consequences of the extreme pressure and anxiety he endured.

In an enclosure attached to a letter to a Mr H. Bergheim in Port Elizabeth on 24 February 1967, my father provides details about his medical history. This information was probably needed to complete the forms that Bergheim submitted

⁵⁹ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Id., *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁶⁰ Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

to Berlin's restitution office on his behalf. It summarizes a number of medical conditions that are to be listed in the form:

Catarrhal bronchitis in 1934 after release from prison in Erfurt; Tuberculosis in 1939 by extreme cough and haemorrhage; Hypertension in 1939 extreme nervousness & irritability; and Diabetes in 1942 [with] fainting spells.

This is followed by a short sentence: "The fear for life and the spell in prison." The document then provides a brief history of treatment: the bronchitis was treated in Erfurt in 1934 until he emigrated in 1936; TB treatment began in Port Elizabeth with a Dr Robertson, and in September 1944 my father was admitted to the TB sanatorium in Nelspoort in the Northern Cape. He spent the rest of the war years there and was eventually discharged in January 1947. Thereafter he was treated at the Donkin Hospital in Port Elizabeth until May 1950. In 1967, when this restitution documentation was being prepared, his general practitioner, Dr Aaron Gordon, was taking care of his health. In an undated letter, Dr Gordon testifies to my father's poor health in the 1940s:

Mr H.L. Robins has been a patient of mine for the past fifteen years. He was treated for pulmonary tuberculosis in Port Elizabeth and at Nelspoort Sanatorium from 1940 onwards. At first he was hospitalized and had complete bed-rest. He also had streptomycin paz and I.N.H. Tablets. He still has a great deal of catarrhal bronchitis. Mr. Robins also suffers from diabetes and hypertension. As a result of all these conditions Mr. Robins health and normal expectancy of life have in my opinion been considerably diminished. I estimated that impairment of his working capacity to be more than 50%.

In 2019, I was given access to my father's reparations files which are lodged in the Restitution Office in Berlin. I was able to read how in the 1960s German medical and legal officials had scrutinized and thrown doubt upon his claim that he had first acquired TB while in prison in Erfurt in 1933. Submitting the documentation for reparations meant that he had to provide exhaustive personal information on

his parents, David and Cecilie Robinski, and their children, Siegfried, Edith and Hildegard. Surely my father and his brother must have suffered psychologically by having to relive the trauma of their loss throughout this lengthy bureaucratic procedure of filling in forms about the minutiae of the lives of their deceased parents and siblings.



Fig. 4. My father's 1935/36 membership of the Jewish Cultural Organization in Erfurt,
Private Collection.

My grandmother never mentions my father's illnesses or state of mind in her letters, so I assume he never told her about it at the time. Given the profound concern and protectiveness she always displayed in her letters to her sons in Africa, I presume she would have been very worried about Herbert's health had she known. Herbert may have felt he had no grounds for complaint since he was safe in South Africa, and probably didn't want his family to worry about him. Like his mother, he too had to be silent and stoic. However, he did mention to his aunt Frieda Finkelstein, who had escaped to Bolivia in 1939, that his hair was falling out, to which she responded in a letter to him in early 1943: "Do not worry if you lose your hair; most importantly one should be in good health." My assumption is that his hair was falling out because of extreme stress. My father's poor health in the 1940s suggests to me that the relentless pressure he faced trying to get his family out of Germany was too great for his body to bear. When he was admitted to the

sanatorium in September 1944, less than two years after his family's deportation, he must have felt even more helpless and distressed. It would take him time to recover from these ordeals, and marriage and starting a family had to wait until a decade after the war ended.



Fig. 5. My father and mother on their wedding day in 1955, Private Collection.

Letters sent to my father from friends and relatives after the war suggest that what happened to him and his family in Berlin had left him shattered. The South African researcher on Lithuanian Jewry, Claudia Braude, found Jewish Board of Deputies documents and letters from 1944 and 1945 that reveal that South African Jews were crushed when they received the Red Cross telegrams informing them what happened to their relatives. Suicides and depression were commonplace. Most South African Jews had their roots in Lithuania, where 90 per cent of the country's Jews perished during the war. South African Jews also feared for their own future in a country where so many Afrikaner nationalists had supported Germany's wartime campaigns, before Prime Minister Malan began his friendly overtures to South African Jews.

In 1957, a Mr T. Schraml, a former work colleague of my father's from Erfurt, wrote to Herbert: "I want to ask you not to hate the Germans. You get the good and the bad, and he who hates is not a good person. And I know you as a good person who has been, however, a little unstable." I am not sure what Mr Schraml means by the word "unstable." But who would not have been deeply disturbed by what had happened to my father? Yet, he was also being called upon to forgive, forget and reconcile with Germans—a mere dozen years after the liberation of the camps. In another letter, a relative advises him that it would be good for his health if he were to start a family of his own; this would distract him from thinking about the past. It is perhaps not surprising then, that many German Jewish refugees like Rudi Robinski and my father felt that they had to put the past behind them, and rebuild their lives. What is perhaps more surprising, however, is that South African scholars and writers seem to have been relatively silent about the psychological impact of these traumatic and unsettling experiences. These silences have also been reproduced in Jewish public discourse, including in the German-Jewish refugees' own self-descriptions and narratives discussed by Sarah Schwab and others.⁶¹

Concluding Thoughts on Refugee Lives in the Shadow of the Shoah and Apartheid

In a chapter of Frieda Sichel's *From Refugee to Citizen* entitled "Final Reflections," the author discusses the "challenges" that German-Jewish refugees like herself had to confront, and how they managed to overcome these difficulties:

The elderly, particularly, find that they often wonder about the fate of other members of their former communities. One strange manner of re-discovering former friends and acquaintances in their dispersion all over the globe is revealed in the death notices of the American-German Newspaper *Der Aufbau* [...]. Another sad reflection on the fate which overtook German Jewry is the fact that the old Jewish cemeteries in

⁶¹ Schwab, " 'No Single Loyalty.' "

Germany today form a link between the scattered people all over the world. In the true sense of the word the cemetery has once more become the Beth Ha-Chayim—The House of Life, as the cemetery assistants have a wealth of information about immigrants in distant lands, who—true to Jewish tradition—still seek to tend the graves of their beloved ones in the far away homeland [...].⁶²

This brief account of death, displacement and loss is followed by Sachel's sociologically-grounded findings that most refugees adapted well to their new country despite initial financial difficulties, social dislocation and isolation, and lack of confidence in speaking a "strange language." Like my father and Artur, it seems that most German-Jewish refugees tried not to dwell on the psychological effects of devastating loss, alienation, and the anti-Semitism they encountered when they arrived in their new country. Like so many other South African Jews, they seemed to have "chosen amnesia" in the name of rapprochement and full integration into white South African society. As Frieda Sichel wrote in her book, refugees like herself were driven by the need for peace and security and a strong desire to become "integrated into the new country as inconspicuously and as quickly as possible." The painful memories of the 1930s and 1940s was part of an "unusable past"—one they chose to forget in order to move towards establishing a firm foothold and future in their new country:

Trials challenge and strengthen the power of resistance. The relentless pressure to become integrated into the new country as inconspicuously and as quickly as possible, is in fact a creative act, an organic growth into the new soil. It is a deep inner necessity, this longing for a permanent home, for peace and quiet, for security. It is inherent in each human being and it makes the acceptance of the culture of new surroundings more than an outward, protective gesture [...].⁶³

⁶² Ibid., 69.

⁶³ Ibid., 69.

It would seem that the National Party's acceptance of South African Jews, and strong support for Israel following Prime Minister Malan's visit to Israel in 1951, facilitated this integration; but it also contributed towards amnesia about the complicity of right-wing Afrikaner nationalism in supporting Nazi Germany. This "difficult past" was replaced by a more "usable past," one that dovetailed more neatly with this urgent need for integration. As we have seen, it is only relatively recently that South African scholars such as Sally Swartz have begun to explore the shadow histories of this positive integration narrative.

Claudia Braude has suggested that the restoration of memory of the unsettling time when Jews did not fit seamlessly into white South African society has the potential to interrogate taken-for-granted racial categories and binaries of whiteness and blackness and provide insights into the complicated workings of "race."⁶⁴ In other words, recollections of these "difficult pasts" of Jewish racial ambiguity "could also contribute towards deepening understanding of the history of South African racism."⁶⁵

In *The End of Jewish Modernity* (2016), Enzo Traverso writes that by the late 1950s Jews had acquired a strong militarized nation-state (Israel) that was strongly supported by the United States, and were able to create for themselves a secure position in both Israel and the diaspora.⁶⁶ Traverso also notes that the virtual destruction by the Nazis of European Jewry, including a sizable left-leaning and progressive intelligentsia, was followed by a shift whereby mainstream diasporic Jews became increasingly more politically and economically secure, as well as more conservative and Zionist. It was into this world that I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s in the affluent white middle-class suburb of Mill Park in Port Elizabeth.

⁶⁴ Bathsheba Braude, *Contemporary Jewish Writing in South Africa*.

⁶⁵ Ibid., xii.

⁶⁶ Enzo Traverso, *The End of Jewish Modernity* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).



Fig. 6. On the left is my mother and next to her is my father; on the far right is Elsa with her husband Artur sitting next to her. This photograph in a restaurant was probably taken in Port Elizabeth in the 1970s, Private Collection.

As a child and teenager, I was entirely unaware that Jews had not always been so secure in their white skins. Neither, I did not know about how Eastern European Jewish immigrants, including my mother's family from Lithuania, had once been regarded as unassimilable by the dominant English colonial establishment, and that they had to learn to "become white." Neither did I know much about the mobilization against German-Jewish immigration when my father had arrived in South Africa in 1936, a time when Jews were unwanted and deemed responsible by Afrikaner nationalists for the economic hardships of poor whites. Because of the loud silences in my father's house about the Shoah, I was also completely unaware of the quiet and invisible workings of a traumatic past on the inner life of my father. It was only by reading between the lines of family letters written to my father and his brother from Berlin between 1936 and 1942, and by reading between and beyond the lines of the dominant historical narratives and "usable pasts" of the successful integration of German-Jewish refugees in South Africa, that it became possible to see the faint contours of silenced stories of refugees living in the shadow of the Shoah and apartheid.

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