

## THE BRIXTON JEWISH CEMETERY

*Sarah Welham & Flo Bird*

The most interesting aspect of this cemetery is its revelation of the number of Jews who came out to South Africa with few possessions, looking for a new life. The immigrants had a strong sense of community, especially with those who came from the same village in Russia, Lithuania or Poland and, using entrepreneurial skill and very hard work, several ended up making enough money for the next generation to be well educated. As exiles fleeing pogroms and utterly miserable conditions, they showed courage and tenacity in what was a sanctuary from the persecution that they had suffered. Name changes often occurred by accident when the immigration officials misheard or couldn't spell their names correctly, or when, some years later, they found their foreign-sounding names were a disadvantage.

Although the gentile section of the Brixton cemetery opened earlier, in 1912, when Braamfontein was running out of space, the first burial in this cemetery took place in April 1921. This was that of SUSMAN ABRAHAMSON who died on April 3<sup>rd</sup> at the age of 49 years. Burials have continued to take place in this cemetery until recently, where there has been a site reserved for someone, but from the 1940's, most Jewish people were buried in the Westpark Cemetery. Brixton Jewish Cemetery has a large section for children, mostly without headstones as the children were stillborn, or had not been named when they died, and there is also a section for Reform Jews.

As one enters the gates, the Ochel is seen straight ahead, a once beautiful building, now somewhat neglected, with the warm red brick painted white while projecting bricks have been painted blue – a reference to the colours of the Israeli flag. Inside, the visitor may page through the burial register, which is in alphabetical order, or peruse the boards on the wall, naming the people who donated money to the Chevra Kadisha – all quoted in pounds.



The Ochel

Listed below are a few of the interesting people buried here:

**ZELDA KLASS:** Grave No: N/S 40

**SOLOMON KLASS:** Grave No: 3534

The Klases came from Lithuania in 1903/4, and their graves are especially interesting as they illustrate how immigrants who arrived with nothing could, through their own hard work and entrepreneurial skills, build a foundation from which to give the next generation an excellent education, thus contributing enormously to the society which had given them shelter, and which allowed them a chance to prove their abilities. It reminds us not to condemn the immigrants from all over Africa who are starting off as street vendors, not expecting handouts, but just the chance to work and earn a living.

The graves are very similar and very elaborate. Since Solomon died first, it seems likely that Zelda herself chose the design and probably asked that her stone match that of her husband. There is a slab with 4 columns and a slab above, and a headstone terminates the short side. Then on top are finials, but these are different for Solomon and Zelda.

The names of her children and her grandchildren are listed on the headstone and the slab.

Of the children, Max was born in Johannesburg and only Bella was born in Russia, so the family seems to have escaped the worst pogrom of 1907, but had suffered the earlier ones. Most non-Jews seem unaware of the pogroms which involved vandalism, theft, rape and murder. On arrival in Johannesburg, Solomon started out selling ginger beer from a handcart. He saved enough to buy a concession and ran a concession store at Crown Mines. From that he earned enough to send his son Max to the University of the Witwatersrand, where he qualified as a medical doctor, went on to London to specialize, fought in WW2 and, in 1941, came back from the Western Desert to run the psychiatric unit of the military hospital at Potchefstroom, which moved to Tara. He was given a military bursary to study psychiatric medicine in London and returned to Tara where he worked for the rest of his life.

Granny Janie Zelda Klass also went into business in a small way, owning property and running a shop called Young Agency - for maternity and baby wear.

KLASS is the original name and is found in Mecklenburg and in Sweden<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The information given here was supplied in a personal interview with Geoffrey Klass, a grandson of Zelda's, on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2010.



The Klass Grave

## **CHAIM SADOWSKY**

Buried in grave number N/S 31

Chaim Sadowsky was affectionately known as “The Loafer”. For nearly 30 years (1945 to 1963), he was a hospital visitor and for the majority of the sick he visited, he was simply known by this name. When the papers carried the notice of his being ill in hospital, most of Johannesburg didn’t recognise the name “Chaim Sadowsky”. Chaim would appear at hospitals, nursing homes and mental institutions every day, and go from ward to ward, helping the sick in whatever way he could – feeding them, running errands for them, standing in queues to get a patient’s prescription made up, doing small tasks to assist the staff. He was there from early morning to late at night, and was tireless in his efforts to alleviate the suffering of both Jew and Gentile in whatever small way he could. He was connected in some way with the Jewish Helping Hand and the committee which ran the Kosher kitchen at the Johannesburg General Hospital. He was given the freedom of this institution.

Chaim was born in Lithuania and came to South Africa in the 1930’s. He worked each day, only long enough to make enough money to support himself, and then went visiting the sick and needy. Merchants remembered him as the man who badgered them to make a donation to some needy cause. He remained a bachelor his whole life and died a poor man.

He died of cancer at the age of 58, on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1963.

## **PHILIP FERDINAND ROSETTENSTEIN**

Buried in grave number 4185

This unusual spherical marble gravestone records the burial of a member of one of the earliest families to settle in Johannesburg. Philip was born in Pretoria, and at the end of 1886, just a few months after Johannesburg had put down its roots, he is recorded as having opened a bar in the new sprawling town. Since he was born in 1877, he would only have been 9, so there seems some doubt about this fact; but elsewhere, he is recorded as having opened the bar at the age of 14. As part of the early Jewish community that arrived – generally virtually penniless – in Johannesburg in the late 1800's, there would have been pressure on him to contribute to the family finances. Later, he was to choose a career in law.

Philip married Hannah Goldinger, who died in 1969, and they had two sons, Leo and Max, not to be confused with Philip's father and uncle! A photograph of this good-looking family is in the possession of the PWHT Resource Centre.

Philip died in 1937 at a relatively young age.



The Rosettenstein Headstone

## **ANNIE SLOVO**

Buried in grave number 4785

Annie was the mother of one of the heroes of the Struggle, Joe Slovo. This is another story of one of the early Jewish immigrant families from Lithuania, who arrived penniless and settled in Doornfontein, when Joe was 10 years old. Fortune favoured the family for a while, and they were able to move to Yeoville where Annie (Chaya) opened a greengrocer's shop near a busy tram stop. She had to work 15 hour days in the shop, which left very little time for her family. Then tragedy struck – Annie died in childbirth in 1938. The shop failed and Joe's

father, Wolfus, had to resort to hawking fruit from the pavement. The family had to move to Hillbrow and then Doornfontein. Wolfus even spent time in the debtor's section of The Fort. Joe and his sister had to leave school and find work, and the baby was placed in an orphanage. Joe never had close relationships with either his father or his sisters. His father died in 1957.

### **HERMANN TOBIANSKY**

Buried in grave number 2884

Hermann Tobiansky married Sophia Miller, the daughter of the first Jew on the Witwatersrand, on 31 May 1893 in the "New Synagogue". In about 1897, he bought the ground on Waterval that would become the township of Sophiatown, named after his wife. Sophiatown developed into a vibrant black township, full of colour and noise, and which gave rise to a distinctive culture, until the forced removals of the 1950's. Thereafter, the suburb became known as Triomf. Hermann seems to have been a great family man since, apart from naming the township after his wife, he also named some of the streets after his children.

He died on 5 October 1933, aged 75. Sophia died two years later in 1935.

### **JACOB LEOPOLD (JACK) GINSBERG**

Buried in grave number 1821.

Jack was a Rand Pioneer. He was also an immigrant from Eastern Europe, having been born on 16 March 1865, in Kovno. He received his education at Russian, German and English schools in Kovno and finished his schooling in Sheffield, England. In 1881, he came to South Africa and tried his luck as a general dealer in Cape Town. He then opened up a store in Beaufort West. In 1887, he and 2 brothers came up to Johannesburg, where they operated a store while prospecting for gold. Jack discovered the Ginsberg Reef and floated the Ginsberg Gold Mining Company in 1889. The three brothers found another reef which became the property of the Great Britain Gold Mining Company. As a result of these successes, Jack forsook commercial trade, and became a stock broker, becoming a popular member of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.

He showed great community spirit, being a member of the Board of the Jewish School, and a member of the First Committee of the Witwatersrand Hebrew Congregation in 1888.

He married Bertha, who was born in 1877. They had 5 children – Sybil, Lilian, Ernest, Henry and Florence. Jack died in 1930 and Bertha in 1937. She is buried in the same cemetery in grave number 4437. They have matching gravestones but are separated by some distance in the cemetery.

## **JOE BLANKFIELD**

Joe was not buried in grave number 1964, for reasons which will become obvious; but he is remembered with a stone on the grave of Ada Blankfield, presumably his mother.

In March 1967, the Vickers Viscount plane, 'Rietbok', was approaching East London airport in bad weather, with 20 passengers and 5 crew members on board. While in the vicinity of Kaysers Beach, it crashed into the sea, killing all occupants on board. One of those passengers was Joe Blankfield, a 47 year old resident of Victory Park, a company director, a husband and father of 3 minor children, Mark, Robyn and Paul.

At the time, there was not enough evidence to give a cause of the accident and it was suggested that perhaps the pilot had had a heart attack. New evidence has come to light and there is speculation that the crash was the result of a deliberate act of the security police at the time, with the intention of killing an anti-apartheid activist on board.

## **SIR HARRY GRAUMANN**

Buried in grave number 4818.

Graumann was born in London in 1868 and came to South Africa in 1882. He wandered around Natal and Griqualand East, and then on up to the Eastern Transvaal goldfields in 1884, where he is listed as one of the pioneers of the Barberton district. Even at that age, he was very public spirited, a trend which continued once he came to Johannesburg, becoming the first Jewish mayor of the town in 1909/1910. By that time, he had brought out to South Africa his four sisters and a brother, Berryman. He possibly found that looking after all these siblings left no time for him to marry, and he remained a bachelor his whole life. There was one woman he was attracted to, Jane Sedgwick, in Cape Town. However, as she was a Gentile, he was unable to marry her and was heartbroken when she died of enteric fever in 1918, at the age of 21. Being a bachelor presented a slight problem as he had no wife to accompany him during mayoral engagements, so he asked his sister, Mrs D W Sims, to act as mayoress, and it is she that one sees in official photographs taken during his term of office. He was elected to Parliament in 1915, and was knighted in 1923.

Having led a very involved life in the community of Johannesburg, Sir Harry retired to Cape Town for health reasons. While convalescing from bronchitis in his Sea Point flat, he had a heart attack and died on 19 September 1938 at the age of 70. His body was brought back to Johannesburg and buried in the Brixton Jewish cemetery. Also buried in this cemetery, is his brother, Berryman.

## **RABBIS AND OTHERS SERVING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY**

There is a special section in this cemetery set aside for rabbis (although not all rabbis are buried in this section) and those who served on Jewish Community organizations, such as the Beth Din, the Witwatersrand Benevolent Association, the Chevra Kadisha and others.

The only grave which resembles a mausoleum in the entire cemetery, is that of Reb Moishel as he was known (RABBI MOSES FRIEDMAN). He is buried in grave number 3209, and was greatly beloved throughout the community of Johannesburg, so much so that approximately 10 000 people attended his funeral when he died in May 1925. He was a renowned scholar, the spiritual leader of the Beth Hamedrash congregation and a member of the first Beth Din, established in 1903. He was 63 when he died.

He had been born in Kros, Latvia, in 1862 and it is said that his most valuable possession was his library of some 500 Hebrew volumes.

**JOSEPH RATZKER** was a President and Honorary Life President of the Witwatersrand Hebrew Benevolent Association. He had arrived in Johannesburg in 1886 and was a land speculator. His first wife, Bloomah Esther, died in 1895 at the age of 25 and is buried in Braamfontein cemetery. His second wife, Bella, who he married in Oudtshoorn in 1904, is buried near Joseph.

**JACQUES KLISSER** was Vice President of the Chevra Kadisha in 1897, and President in 1898. He also worked for the Ambulance Corps during the Anglo Boer War. He was a Dutch Jew who emigrated from Holland in 1880 when he was 20. He came to join his brother, Bernard, a diamond dealer, in Kimberley, and moved from that town to Johannesburg in 1888. He established himself as a grocer and draper and later added a wine and spirit store to his activities on the Market Square. By 1894, he had disposed of those businesses and become a stockbroker. His first wife and family were killed in the Natal Railway disaster, and he then married Bertha who bore him 2 more children, Philip and Willie.

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The Parktown & Westcliff Heritage Trust undertakes on-going research into the older cemeteries in Johannesburg, and regularly offers tours. Contact the Trust's office for further details.